Why do we hate politics?

A third of the electorate (34%) did not vote in the 2015 general election. Voter dissatisfaction with the main parties led to a rise in votes for ‘challenger parties’ (Green, SNP and UKIP), with only a quarter of the electorate voting for the Conservatives. This reflects a long-term trend of falling turnout, low trust in politicians and dissatisfaction with the political system. This is a concern for representative democracy: governments tend to favour people who vote for them, alienating those who don’t vote, and creating a downward spiral. Some people have argued that lower turnout therefore means governments have lower levels of legitimacy.

1. Public attitudes to politics and politicians since 1945:

Data from opinion polling shows a trend of falling approval and rising disapproval of governments since 1945.

![Government Approval](image)

![Government Disapproval](image)

Opinion of prime ministers, party leaders and trust in politicians show similar trends. A close study of evidence from surveys and citizen voices recorded by the Mass Observation Archive and British Social Attitudes Survey by Jennings et al suggest that while public scepticism about politicians is not new, and there may not have been a ‘golden age’ of democratic politics, there has been a significant fall in trust in government and a parallel rise in alienation from the political system itself. Even in 1944, when Britain was at war, over a third (35%) thought politicians were mainly ‘out for themselves’, with only 1% more (36%) thinking they wanted ‘to do the best for their country’. By 2014, however, almost half (48%) thought politicians were ‘out for themselves’, and less than a third (30%) thought they wanted ‘to do the best for their country’. The biggest rise was in those who thought politicians were mainly interested in their party, up from 22% in 1944 to 30% in 2014.

### Trust in Government (from British Social Attitudes survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Out for Themselves</th>
<th>Out for Their Party</th>
<th>Out for Their Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Trust in Government](image)
2. Explanations for anti-politics

Political scientists have suggested many different reasons for the fall in support for politics:

1) People are not interested in politics.
2) Citizens think that politicians are basically corrupt.
3) People are keen to reject the political establishment, and seek alternative ways of “doing politics” such as pressure groups or social movements.
4) Politics makes little sense to citizens and they don’t understand the system.
5) People used to identify with a particular social class and associated party, but social structures have changed and deciding who to vote for is now a more complex choice.
6) Individuals today are more consumerist and self-interested, and therefore feel alienated from the collective nature of democratic citizenship.
7) Politicians constantly attack each other, and in the process discredit all politicians.
8) Governments don’t deliver.
9) Politicians focus on party politics and media coverage.
10) Politics operates in the interests of the powerful and citizens cannot influence decisions.
11) The two-party system doesn’t reflect the range of public opinion.
12) Party political campaigning has become highly professional, targeting swing voters in the middle ground and reducing the difference between parties.
13) Politics are shown through media frames which don’t address issues properly.
14) Globalisation, deregulation, privatisation and contracting out means politicians have little power anyway.
15) Citizens are content and therefore do not feel the need to engage with politics.

As these different explanations show, the causes and symptoms of political disengagement are complex—and often contradictory. The Hansard Society 2014 Audit of Political Engagement, for example, reports that whilst half of adults say they are interested in politics, just 30% consider themselves ‘fairly strong’ supporters of a political party, down from 2004. Similarly, although 67% agree that Parliament is ‘essential to our democracy’ just 34% agree it ‘holds government to account’, the lowest level in five years. Two-thirds (67%) say politicians ‘don’t understand the daily lives of people like me’ and just a third think that the system of governing Britain is working well.

3. Possible responses

Professor Pippa Norris analyses many factors contributing to political disenchantment and identifies democratic deficits at three key points in the system, which need to be addressed:

1) Demand side: raising public aspirations for democratic participation and growing civic skills;
2) Intermediate: addressing negative media coverage of government and public affairs;
3) Supply side: improving performance of democracy to match public expectations.

The most popular reform identified in focus groups for the Hansard study was ‘to make politics more transparent so that it is easier to follow’, supported by 48%, followed by ‘politicians should be made more accountable for their performance between elections’ (39%).

Useful sources
- Hay, Colin (2007) Why We Hate Politics, Polity

More information
- The Crick Centre blog http://www.crickcentre.org/blog/
- The Hansard Society http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/