

Voters today are much less interested in party politics than ten years ago



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A passion for politics

With the first coalition government since the Second World War, has British politics changed forever? Nick Stevens talks to Professor Paul Whiteley

THE 2010 ELECTION result, hung parliament and eventual Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition said a lot about public disaffection with the Labour government. But it said more about how British politics has changed.

For one thing it shows how over recent years there has been a significant weakening of people's identification with political parties in Britain. In the first British Election Study survey conducted in 1963 about half the participants felt they were strongly affiliated with a particular political party; today it's roughly ten per cent.

According to Paul Whiteley, Professor of Politics at the University of Essex and Co-Director of the ESRC British Election Study, weakening partisanship increases the

likelihood of parties winning elections but forming minority governments. "The story of the 2010 election is not only a story of Labour losing its advantage on the economy but also of the Conservatives not winning enough confidence from the public that they could do better. Regardless of changes in the electoral system, because the electorate is more fickle we're going to see more coalition governments in the future."

But does this weakening of partisanship mean we are less passionate about politics than a decade ago? Professor Whiteley thinks not. "We've got historic research that measures the public's interest in politics and the evidence shows that there's actually been a small increase. But by politics they don't mean party politics, they mean politics in general," he says.

Part of this increase may be fuelled by the increase in media coverage devoted to politics. Significantly, the 2010 general election was the first time the British electorate saw live televised debates between the major leaders. Many cite this further extension of political debate in the media as proof that politics is now more about style than substance.

Professor Whiteley doesn't necessarily agree: "I'm not sure there is a big trade-off between presentation and ability. Historically, the most effective



If the Liberal Democrats lose the referendum, one of the key reasons for being in government will be gone

The coalition united for the camera

prime ministers were the ones who communicated most effectively – Winston Churchill being the classic example. Lloyd George was also a very effective communicator through mass meetings and speeches in the House of Commons,” he says.

But there were some exceptions. Professor Whiteley points out that although Clement Attlee was a poor communicator and not particularly televisual, he was very good at detail and administration and getting the best from the people around him. “The best Prime Ministers are not necessarily the most televisual but I do think that in the televisual age, while passion and ability are important, looks and communication skills matter too,” he says. “David Cameron and Nick Clegg show how a good performance on television can make a difference. And Gordon Brown shows how not being televisual can help damage your prospects.”

Now that we have a coalition government will it have a long future or will the inevitable cracks between parties and leaders widen? Professor Whiteley believes that coalition governments can be successful, pointing to continental

Europe where coalitions are common. There have been long and successful coalition governments in countries such as Germany where the Liberals and Social Democrats – and later the Liberals and Christian Democrats – joined forces to govern. Long stable coalitions can exist but he thinks they are less likely in Britain because of our electoral system.

The main reason is that continental European coalitions differ from the UK in the closeness of the partners’ politics. In Germany, the Christian Democrats are a centre right party and the Liberals, the FDP, are a centre party. “This meshes together much better than the Conservatives – a centre right party – and the Liberal Democrats – a centre left party. So far it’s worked by compromise and deals like the Lib Dems abstaining on key votes but the strains caused by bigger differences in ideology are there and that will be the pressure point,” he says.

One of the concessions won from the Conservatives by the Liberal Democrats is the 2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote electoral system. Professor Whiteley thinks it unlikely that the referendum can be won.

He refers to research by Larry LeDuc, a Professor of politics at the University

of Toronto. Professor LeDuc specialises in researching referenda throughout the world and his work shows that in almost all referenda over electoral reform the end result is a no vote. If an issue is complicated and doesn’t relate to everyday experience the result is apathy and a low turn-out.

Moreover, if people don’t understand an issue and are not convinced by the arguments the best strategy for those who do vote is to say no and stick with the status quo. It’s a psychological mechanism for dealing with uncertainty and lack of knowledge.

If the Liberal Democrats lose the referendum, one of the key reasons for being in government and making compromises – to win electoral reform – will be gone. What should they do then? “They could stay in coalition even if they’re unpopular so as not to precipitate an election. On the other hand you can see some Liberal Democrats thinking that if things are already bad but are going to get worse probably the best course of action is to get out. What’s certain is that if we’re correct and the referendum next year is lost a principal reason for the Liberal Democrats to remain in the coalition goes away. That’s going to place even greater strains on the government after May 2011.” ■

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Strains caused by bigger differences in ideology are there and that will be the pressure point

Out of touch with British society?

Is improved social mobility an impossible dream?

IS SOCIAL MOBILITY dead? That was the question foreign journalists repeatedly asked when the coalition government was formed in May. Viewed from abroad, this was an obvious angle to take. David Cameron was the first prime minister in 50 years to come from Eton College, the most famous, elite public school in the world. Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, was educated at Westminster School, probably the second most renowned private school in Britain.

To many observers, it confirmed their suspicion that beneath its modern veneer, Britain remains a class-ridden society. Was it any wonder that the country languishes at the bottom of the international league tables for social mobility?

The Sutton Trust's analysis of the school and university backgrounds of the 650 new Members of Parliament revealed that the class of 2010 was highly privileged. Over a third of MPs are from fee-paying schools, which educate just seven per cent of the school population. This was a slightly higher proportion than those serving in the previous 2005 Parliament – bucking a trend during recent decades that has seen the proportion of privately-schooled MPs fall. Among the new MPs 20 are Etonians.

Those holding high office are even more socially elite. Just under two thirds of the newly formed Cabinet went to independent, fee-paying schools. The Prime Minister restored another academic tradition: every former PM since the war (apart from his predecessor Gordon Brown) who went to university, attended one institution: Oxford. Labour's new leader, Ed Miliband is needless to say also an Oxonian.

Our political masters are, it seems, more than ever from a tiny swathe of society – highly unrepresentative of the wider population they serve. This is the new breed of professional politician, who has experienced life almost entirely within the confines of the Westminster village. As Andy Burnham, another Oxbridge contender for the Labour leadership race, observed: "Politics in our country is lacking leaders that people can relate to and identify with. A sense has built over time of a political elite with no real connection to the reality of most people's lives."

Yet 100 days after the coalition came into being, the Deputy Prime Minister announced that the government's social policy aim is to improve social mobility. While inevitably shy on detail, Clegg's speech was important in setting out the government's stall on this important issue.

For one, it established clear blue water between the coalition's emphasis on improving



Will a large number of MPs still be private school-educated by 2040?

equality of opportunity (and subsequently mobility) and the political left's re-emerging insistence that society's in-built immobility will only be tackled through greater equality of outcomes. But it also distanced the government's position from those on the extreme right. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, their depressing claim is that actually there is nothing to worry about: unequal life prospects are simply a reflection of the higher IQs of those at the top of the social ladder, after successive generations of good breeding.

Underpinning Clegg's speech is the conviction that Britain's Got Wasted Talent – literally millions of people whose potential has been left unfulfilled. Public school boys they may be, but Cameron and Clegg are united in the belief that the Government can do something about this.

Much has been spoken about the 'Big Society' agenda. But this social mobility challenge might be termed 'the Big Ask'. It is a battle that will need to be fought on several fronts. Iain Duncan Smith has thoughtful proposals to remove the shackles of worklessness, for example, while Michael Gove's bold Pupil Premium aims to provide extra cash to boost the results of poor school pupils. But as the last government found out to its chagrin, the much harder task is delivery: translating such policies into action that works. The stark social class achievement gap that blights education from birth to graduation has to now seemed impervious to all government attempts to narrow it.

Mr Clegg, with help from his new social mobility czar Alan Milburn, will also have to ensure

joined-up thinking among several 'big beasts' in the cabinet.

Drastic cuts to public sector funding to reduce the national deficit have made all this an even tougher job. Yet tighter budgeting can be a spur for more targeted policies that genuinely improve life chances. It is not true that you need lots of money to improve social mobility. Getting parents to read regularly to their children, or ensuring children are advised properly, and fulfil their future potential, are difficult, but not expensive challenges.

Perhaps the most tricky task for ministers will be to address what academics term the extreme 'stickiness' at the top of society in Britain: there is very little downward mobility to make way for any talent to rise. And nowhere is this more apparent than in Parliament itself, which still operates an effectively closed shop of work experience opportunities, an exclusive breeding ground for those from privileged backgrounds. If the coalition is credited with improving social mobility it will have pulled off one of the biggest political achievements the country has known. It will be all the more impressive if the MPs of 2040 are less privileged and more representative of society than they are now. ■

www.suttontrust.com



DR LEE ELLIOT MAJOR
Research and
Policy Director,
the Sutton Trust



Many Muslims differ on the definition of jihad

The Muslim debate over violence

From the rules of jihad to the stoning of adulterers, Islamic thinkers are clashing over the subject of justifiable violence

WHEN DO MUSLIMS believe that violence is justified? Research by Professor Rob Gleave, lead researcher on the project Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Islamic Thought, part of the Research Councils UK Global Uncertainties Programme, finds that while there is little evidence of pacifism within the Muslim intellectual tradition, the violence which is justified is, generally speaking, highly controlled. Medieval Muslim legal scholars argued long and hard about the ethical legitimacy of particular weapons to be used in warfare. The use of boiling oil, for example, was fiercely debated.

Tactics were also much discussed, including the targeting of non-combatants and whether the conquering Muslim army had the right to destroy trees and crops.

So how did the writers argue for their particular positions?

Theoretically, the ethical reasoning process is the same for Muslim thinkers whatever the moral or legal topic they are discussing. The process involved first arguing from what God says in the Qur'an and the actions of Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632. Neither of these, the Qur'an and the Prophet's actions, are simple texts in which clear answers are given.

Neither the Qur'an nor Muhammad's actions offer clear answers to ethical questions

If all the scholars at a particular time agree that a particular interpretation is valid, then there emerges a consensus, which subsequent scholars should respect. This, at least in the pre-modern period, was the usual method of legal reasoning amongst jurists.

In the modern period, Muslim thinkers appear more willing to go against a previous consensus. In the area of justifying violence, arguments have been intense. Nearly all Muslim thinkers agree that there are specific rules for ethical behaviour in a jihad, but they differ over what constitutes a jihad.

More radical thinkers – inspired perhaps by al-Qaeda ideologues like Ayman al-Zawahiri – view jihad as a perpetual state in the current political context, and so actions which would be normally prohibited, such as suicide attacks, become permitted.

Others see jihad as referring to a specific type of warfare with highly restricted conditions, such as the existence of a perfect Islamic state, which are not currently satisfied in the global context, and hence the jihad rules are currently suspended. There are, of course, intermediate positions.

The legal reasoning here does not only apply to debated topics such as so-called acts of terrorism. The Muslim punishment of stoning for adultery, one of the hudud, is subjected to the same moral analysis. Some, such as the British-based scholar Tariq Ramadan, say that stoning for adultery can only be carried out by a legitimate Islamic state when a demanding set of evidence rules have been justified. This makes it impossible, in his view, to implement the penalty – and so there should be a world-wide moratorium on hudud, he argues.

Others argue, on a 'public interest' basis, that the evidence rules for adultery should be relaxed, so it is easier to prosecute. The threat to a truly Islamic society by adultery is so serious that prosecution should be easier, not more difficult. This is the default position of the Iranian judiciary. There is an interesting parallel with the justifications for certain elements of anti-terrorism legislation in some non-Muslim states.

What is not clear is which arguments will gain traction within British, European or worldwide Muslim populations in the long run. What is clear is that today's Muslim thinkers are working in a long tradition of debate and dispute. ■

www.livitproject.net

Political parties in post-war Europe

How the political parties moved from being a threat to democracy to being its saviour

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to imagine a modern democracy without political parties. But how do the national constitutions of modern democracies in Europe describe or prescribe their functions and responsibilities?

ESRC-funded research led by Professor Ingrid Van Biezen of the University of Leiden finds that political parties have primarily been understood as private and voluntary associations. As a consequence, the state would not intervene in the regulation of their activities, behaviour or organisation. Political parties have also been seen as incompatible with, or even hostile to, democracy because it was thought their partisan character posed a threat to supposedly neutral public interest.

But ideas about parties and democracy have changed radically over the course of the 20th century. As political parties have grown into necessary and desirable institutions for democracy, they are also increasingly recognised as such. This is demonstrated by the increased availability of public subsidies to political parties, often justified with a view to ensuring the continued existence of party democracy. The increased relevance attributed to political parties can also be seen in their formal codification in the national constitutions.

Significant differences exist between West-European and post-communist democracies in Eastern Europe

The constitutionalisation of parties in Europe effectively began in the immediate post-war period, with the establishment of the independence of Iceland and the restoration of democracy in Austria, Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany. Iceland and Austria were the first post-war European democracies to acknowledge the institutional necessity of parties for modern representative democracies.

Italy and Germany were the first to recognise that political parties can make a positive contribution to democracy. Party constitutionalisation has since followed in constitutional revisions in other polities, to the point that virtually all European democracies acknowledge the relevance of political parties for healthy democracy: 28 out of the 32 European democracies with written constitutions formally recognise the existence of political parties.

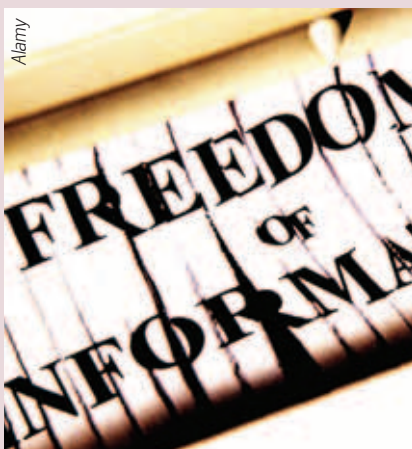
Only in four countries – Belgium, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands – does the national constitution make no mention of political parties at all. The ultimate constitutional codification of political parties has strengthened their position within the political system. It not only justifies state support, but also effectively gives them an official status as part of the state.



To examine the differences in the intensity and nature of party constitutionalisation between countries, researchers analysed the frequency, range and magnitude of party constitutionalisation. Within modern democratic constitutions, they found different, and competing concepts of party democracy.

Significant differences exist between West-European and post-communist democracies in Eastern Europe, between established and recently created democracies, and between countries with a continuous democratic history and those without – or with an interrupted – democratic experience.

Democracies with a previous totalitarian past are more inclined to introduce special rules to prevent a possible breakdown of democracy. These generally fall under prohibitive modes of regulation, underlining that the parties' goals, activities, behaviour and organisation may not contradict the democratic



Local press stories about councillors' travel expenses have eroded trust

A question of freedom

The Freedom of Information (FOI) Act was meant to increase trust in local government. But has it done the opposite?

THE FREEDOM OF Information Act (FOI) has opened up town, city and county halls to much greater scrutiny, allowing members of the public to ask for information and receive a response within 20 working days.

Local authorities are receiving 70,000 requests a year, and halfway into a two-year ESRC-funded study by Dr Benjamin Worthy of the UCL Constitution Unit, preliminary findings are that FOI has made a difference. The public now knows more about what local authorities do across a range of areas from officials' salaries to staff sick

days, and from potholes to parking. FOI has also encouraged authorities to publish more information.

As a result of the Act, it was hoped that the public would trust local government more. But trust does not appear to have increased. Councils have been damaged by the MPs' expenses controversy. Stories in the local press about councillors' travel 'junkets' are unlikely to increase public trust, and the secretive behaviour of some authorities will make councils appear worse rather than better.

Some authorities have felt overwhelmed by requests, claiming requests have increased by



Germany was one of the first European countries to recognise that parties can contribute to democracy

order, and may not challenge national sovereignty or the territorial integrity of the country. Such countries are also more likely to seek to mould the organisational structure of political parties to correspond to a certain ideal.

Over time, it was clear that the nature of party constitutionalisation in the post-war period had shifted from a predominance of attention to parliamentary and electoral dimensions of party activity, towards greater intervention in the extra-parliamentary organisational structures and activities of the parties. Overall, the constitutional codification of parties has consolidated the belief that parties are indispensable for democracy. ■

www.socialsciences.leiden.edu/politicalscience/organisation/faculty/biezen.html

100 per cent since 2005. Numbers keep increasing as more people learn about FOI, and businesses and journalists are making increasing use of it.

Spending cuts mean local authorities may have less time and money to deal with requests. The coalition government has asked local authorities to publish details of spending over £500. While some have welcomed the move, others fear that it will mean extra administrative work and may encourage even further requests.

The study involves interviewing local government officials and politicians as well as journalists and other members of the public. It is also looking at the national and local press for stories using FOI. ■

www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/people/ben-worthy

Should voting be compulsory?

Low turnouts threaten government legitimacy

PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS is declining in Britain, with lower rates of turnout associated with increasing social disparities in the backgrounds of voters. The gap in voting rates between manual and non-manual workers has doubled in recent years, as has the difference in voting rates between the top and bottom income groups.

These trends, taken together, have led some people to suggest that Britain should follow the example of democracies such as Belgium, Italy and Australia and make voting legally compulsory.

Dr Annabelle Lever is a member of the Institute of Science, Ethics and Innovation at the University of Manchester School of Law and an expert on democratic theory. She recently completed the Democracy, Deliberation and Public Service Reform report for a joint ESRC-Public Services Trust project on Citizenship and Society. Her research finds that low turnout appears to threaten the legitimacy of a country's government and electoral system. As political commentator Ferdinand Mount said of the report of the Power Inquiry, in Britain, "when little more than 20 per cent of the electorate has voted for the winning party, as in the United Kingdom general election of May 2005, legitimacy begins to drain away." He added: "If just over half of us bother to vote at all in national elections and scarcely a third in local elections, the bureaucracy begins to think of elections as an increasingly insignificant interruption in its continuous exercise of power. What develops is... 'executive

democracy' and... more rudely described... 'elective dictatorship'."

Moreover, because lower rates of turnout seem to exacerbate social differences in voting rates, democracies that rely on voluntary voting appear to face a vicious circle in which the least well-off in society are least likely to vote and, therefore, least likely to attract sympathetic attention from politicians eager to get elected or re-elected. Compulsory voting is one of the few means available rapidly to turn around both low and unequal rates of voting.

The trouble, however, is that legal requirements to vote do not increase people's affection for their political parties, or trust in their political system. So forcing people to participate in elections does not increase political legitimacy. Nor is it clear that non-voting is always morally wrong.

What voters can do with their votes depends, importantly, on how other voters vote, on the political parties and candidates on offer, and on the domestic and international challenges facing their country. People do not have to be selfish, ignorant or misguided to doubt that voting will make much difference to their lives, or to the lives of other people. Hence, it is unlikely that voters have a moral duty to vote at all in elections, and the complexity and uncertainty of elections mean that some voters may feel morally obliged to abstain.

Democratic government is justified because people are entitled to participate in the decisions that shape their lives, and the lives of those for whom they are responsible. But this does not mean that they are morally required to vote, or that voting must make a great difference to their lives. So, compulsory voting provides no easy solution to political alienation and apathy, and no substitute for a long hard look at the reasons why so many potential voters believe that there is no point in voting. ■

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Voting is already compulsory in Belgium, Italy and Australia



Nick Clegg is hoping for more Liberal Democrats in Parliament under the proposed system

An alternative take on the 2010 General Election

How the political landscape of Britain may have altered under the proposed Alternative Voting system

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT is to hold a referendum on the possible introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV) for future elections to the Commons. But how much would it have helped the Liberal Democrats in 2010 if AV had already been introduced?

Research by the ESRC-funded British Election Study (BES) at the University of Essex suggests AV would have given the Conservatives 283 Commons seats (down 22 from 305), Labour 248 (down ten) and the Liberal Democrats 89 (up 32).

The Liberal Democrats would in effect have been able to form a majority coalition with either Labour or the Conservatives.

The BES research is based on responses to a representative survey of the British electorate conducted after the General Election. Respondents were asked both how they voted in the actual election and, using a simulated ballot form, how they would have voted in a comparable AV election.

Under AV, voters' second and third party preferences are used to determine the election outcome. The large size of the BES survey – over 14,000 people were interviewed by YouGov – enables plausible estimates to be made of the way in which people's second and third voting preferences would have affected

the outcome of the election across different constituencies.

The 'replay' of the 2010 election under AV works like this: voters in England, Scotland and Wales were asked to complete a simulated AV ballot form. The form varied across the countries, to reflect the distinctive party systems that now exist.

In each case, voters were asked to rank up to seven party candidates. In each country over three quarters of all respondents completed the AV ballot form, reflecting the fact that not all respondents to the survey actually voted in the general election. Most of those who expressed a first preference also indicated a second preference. This information was used to produce second preference distribution ratios for each party in each country.

For Labour voters in England, the study showed that, in general, seven per cent identified the Conservatives as their second preference, 16 per cent chose the Greens, nine per cent UKIP, three per cent the BNP and 66 per cent the Lib Dems. The equivalent figure for Lib Dem voters choosing Labour as their second preference was only 40 per cent. Researchers explored the possibility that these distribution ratios varied across English regions or across different types of constituency, but found that the ratios were very similar regardless of these different contexts.

Finally they simulated the AV procedure, applying these distribution ratios to the actual numbers of votes that the different parties received in the General Election. This enabled them to calculate an 'AV winner' in each constituency, apart from in Northern Ireland, and to compare it with the actual 'First Past the Post winner'.

The results are shown in the charts. Under AV, the Lib Dems would have obtained 32 additional seats, at the expense of the Conservatives (down 22) and Labour (ten). The other parties' seat numbers would have been unaffected. The actual numbers would have meant, however, that the

Alternative voting explained

UNDER AV, VOTERS provide a rank ordering of the candidates in a given constituency up to the point where they are indifferent between candidates. For example, if candidates A, B, C and D are standing for election, voter X might rank them D = 1, B = 2, A = 3 and C = 4, while voter Y might rank B = 1 and A = 2, making no judgement between C and D because s/he is indifferent between them.

If a given candidate is ranked first by more than 50 per cent of

voters, then that candidate is elected. However, if no candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the votes in this 'first round', the votes of the 'losing' candidate or candidates are subsequently redistributed according to the second preferences of those voters who supported the losing candidate(s).

Where voters have indicated a second preference, their votes are allocated to their second preference candidate – they are simply added

to the 'first round' votes for the other candidates. Suppose, for example, that there are 100 voters and that 40 of them rank A first, 35 rank B first and 25 rank C first. A would win a first-past-the-post election but s/he has not reached the 50 per cent necessary to win under AV. Accordingly, the second preferences of those who first-ranked C would now be redistributed between A and B.

Suppose that among these 25 voters, three second-rank A, 20 second-rank B, and two are indifferent. The two 'indifferent' preferences are ignored and the

others are redistributed to A and B. A receives three more votes giving A $40 + 3 = 43$ votes. B receives an another 20 votes, yielding a total of $35 + 20 = 55$ votes. This produces more than 50 per cent of the now $100 - 2 = 98$ 'valid votes', and B is elected.

If no candidate reaches the 50 per cent threshold, this process continues iteratively until one candidate has overtaken it, at which point s/he becomes the AV winner. In certain circumstances, it is necessary to take account of some voters' third and fourth preferences for the threshold to be reached.

Lib Dems would have been in a very strong bargaining position after the election. With these results, they could have combined in coalition with either Labour or the Conservatives to form a majority government.

If the referendum result is 'Yes', both the political parties and voters will need to think about how they maximise their interests under the new AV system. ■

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Constituencies that would have changed hands as a result of AV ballot

Labour to Conservative - 1 seat:

Dudley North

Labour to Liberal Democrat - 19 seats:

Aberdeen South

Edinburgh North and Leith

Edinburgh South

Newport East

Swansea West

Ashfield

Birmingham Hall Green

Bristol South

Chesterfield

Durham City

Hull North

Islington South and Finsbury

Lewisham West and Penge

Newcastle upon Tyne North

Oldham East and Saddleworth

Oxford East

Rochdale

Sheffield Central

Streatham

Conservative to Labour - 10 seats:

Aberconwy

Cardiff North

Brentford and Isleworth

Broxtowe

Hendon

Hove

Lancaster and Fleetwood

Sherwood

Stockton South

Warrington South

Conservative to Liberal Democrat - 13 seats:

Montgomeryshire

Bristol North West

Camborne and Redruth

Colne Valley

Harrogate and Knaresborough

Newton Abbot

Oxford West and Abingdon

Reading East

St Albans

Truro and Falmouth

Watford

Weston-super-Mare

York Outer



Diane Abbott has campaigned on women's issues in the Commons for over 20 years

What women want

Female politicians make a considerable difference to the relevance of policy to women

WOMEN POLITICIANS make a difference. They are much more likely than men to ensure that policies are relevant to women and that gender is taken into account in policy development, shows ESRC-funded research by Nickie Charles, Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender in the Sociology Department at the University of Warwick, and Stephanie Jones and Charlotte Davies, both of Swansea University.

In the National Assembly for Wales there are almost equal numbers of women and men and research has found that women prioritise issues such as domestic violence, equal pay and family-related questions. In the Assembly's strategy on domestic violence women ministers initiated policy development, facilitated the inclusion of voluntary sector organisations in the development of the strategy, and maintained a high profile for the topic in both the Assembly and media.

The high priority given to such issues is also due to the influence of voluntary sector organisations and equality and feminist activists. In the case of equal pay, links between feminist activists outside the Assembly and strategic women within the Assembly were critical to take the equal pay agenda forward. The 'Close the Pay Gap' campaign was initiated by the director of what was then the Equal Opportunities Commission Wales and was taken up by supportive women Assembly Members (AMs) and the Wales Trades Union Congress. Successive equalities ministers, male and female, have been committed to this campaign and equalities

policies are high on the political agenda. This focus has made a real difference to the situation of low-paid women in local authorities in Wales.

Although policies are being developed which are making a difference to women's lives, policy issues vary in how they incorporate considerations of gender. The research explored three policy areas: child poverty, equal pay and domestic violence. It found that child poverty is rarely seen as a gendered issue and is more

likely to be defined in relation to class inequalities; equal pay is by definition a gendered issue as it addresses pay inequalities between women and men; and there are conflicts over the extent to which domestic violence is defined in terms of gender.

These variations in how gender is incorporated into policy have practical implications for how effective policies are in combating gender-based inequalities.

Locally-based voluntary organisations report a high level of contact with individual women AMs and express the view that women AMs are more likely than men AMs to understand the issues with which they are engaged, such as domestic violence, family and child poverty, and sexual abuse. There is clearly a view that having women political representatives makes a difference to the issues that are prioritised within government and to the relevance of policy development to women. ■

Women political representatives make a difference to the issues prioritised

www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/rsw/research_centres/gender/gppcd



The expenses scandal amplified an already strained relationship between the public and politicians

A question of trust

How and why have relations soured between the British public and its politicians?

THE GENERAL ELECTION was fought amid a growing disconnect between members of the British public and those who govern them. The high profile MPs' expenses scandal was but one of a number of events that highlighted the gap in perceptions, values and behaviour between British citizens and their elected representatives.

Gaps such as this matter when it comes to building trust, and they matter even more in the current age of austerity when common consensus on, and commitment to belt-tightening measures is imperative. Yet it remains unclear how the disconnect has come about, why it is growing, and what its precise implications are.

ESRC-funded research by Dr Sarah Birch of the University of Essex and Dr Nicholas

Allen of Royal Holloway, University of London addressed the public's perceptions of politicians. The Ethics and Integrity project employed a three-wave survey of the British public to explore why people evaluate politicians and what implications their views have for leaders' ability to carry out their functions. The timing of the surveys – before and after the recent expenses scandal – affords an opportunity to investigate how people go about evaluating the actions of their leaders, and what impact this has.

People value ethical integrity in their leaders very highly, and are often disappointed by what they see going on in political life. At the same time, the investigation also discovered that British citizens are not blindly critical of their leaders. Most people attribute

the perceived decline in standards to the way politics works, rather than to any change in the types of people who now enter politics.

The intuition of the public in this matter receives validation by another part of the research, which finds that the way in which elites are socialised into politics, and particularly the socialising effects of office, account to a large extent for the differences observed between the ethical tolerance of political elites and the mass public.

The research also explores differences among sections of the British public in how they evaluate and respond to their leaders' behaviour. It concludes that while attentiveness or interest in public affairs leads to greater familiarity with scandals in public life, attentiveness does not by itself lead to a greater concern with misbehaviour. If anything, attentiveness seems to condition citizens into being more relaxed about reported misconduct.

Those who are highly attentive to politics use information in ways that differ systematically from those of their less attentive counterparts when forming ethical judgements: the legality of a politician's act is more likely to shape the evaluations of the sophisticated, whereas the impact of that act on society appears to weigh more heavily for the less sophisticated.

When it comes to trends over time, the research unveils some unexpected patterns.

The fact remains that the British public is highly sceptical of the moral credentials of its representatives

The first survey was carried out in April 2009, shortly before the MPs' expenses scandal broke in *The Daily Telegraph*. Follow-up surveys were then conducted in September 2009 and in April/May 2010, immediately before the General Election. The number of people demonstrating confidence in the ethical conduct of Britain's political elites actually increased in the wake of the expenses scandal. And whereas the proportion of survey respondents who rated standards in British political life 'somewhat low' or 'very low' increased slightly between April and September 2009, it then decreased in April/May 2010 in the run-up to polling day.

Likewise, the proportion of people who said they thought standards in politics were declining actually shrank between April and September 2009 and remained stable in April/May 2010, while the number saying standards had improved showed a small increase over this period. But though the revelations of politicians pilfering taxpayers' money do not seem to have resulted in an increase in popular disaffection with their profession, this is undoubtedly due to the fact that the public already held politicians in such low regard at the start of the research.

The election campaign appears to have temporarily restored faith in political leaders, but only slightly. The fact remains that the British public remains highly sceptical of the moral credentials of its representatives. This could well have serious implications for the ability of elected leaders to carry out their functions in future.

As the research also shows, those who hold politicians in high regard are more likely to believe it important to obey the law, whereas among those who hold politicians in low regard, nearly twice as many disagree that obedience to the law is an absolute duty. If politicians are to implement their policies successfully, they may well have to consider ways to increase the public's confidence in their personal integrity. ■

www.essex.ac.uk/government/ethicsandintegrity

Is environmental justice being served?

Why insurmountable cost barriers are stopping the judicial review system in its tracks



EVERYONE IS ENTITLED to a safe and healthy place to live, work and play but can everyone afford legal solutions when things go wrong?

A study conducted at the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) shows that significant numbers of people with promising cases encounter cost barriers.

Problems with the local environment are a key trigger for individuals and communities to contemplate legal action. Dealing with nuisance hedges, pollution by factories, over-development or threats to beauty spots can galvanize citizens to seek justice. In Britain this is governed by the UN Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in decision-making and Access to Justice in environmental matters (known as the Aarhus Convention) which guarantees a civil right of access to justice concerning environmental issues.

Radoslaw Stech from BRASS analysed 717 cases referred to environmental law specialists over a four-and-a-half year period. The research, for the UK Environmental Law Foundation, found that the majority of cases came from those earning £15,000 or less.

More than half the cases required advice on dealing with consultation processes, filing complaints or preparing for a public inquiry. Some 210 cases potentially involved the more significant step of pursuing a judicial review through the courts. Of these, just over half were advised instead to pursue

Most legal cases dealing with environmental issues came from those earning £15,000 or less

alternative avenues, such as complaining to an Ombudsman or petitioning the decision-makers directly. This left 89 serious cases where the enquirer was encouraged to pursue legal action, but in practice only 35 of these cases were taken further.

Amongst the 54 abandoned cases, half were judged by legal advisors as highly likely to succeed at judicial review. So why did so many give up? It was largely due to the perceived costs involved.

The Aarhus Convention says that the judicial review procedure must not be prohibitively expensive. Research showed that significant numbers of people with promising cases encountered insurmountable cost barriers. The findings were published in a report launched at the House of Lords before being sent to the Aarhus Convention's Compliance Committee.

A UN tribunal, acknowledging the report, delivered an influential draft judgement declaring that Britain had failed to comply with its Aarhus obligations. This judgement may now force Britain to overhaul its rules as early as 2011 to make access to the courts easier for those facing environmental problems. ■

www.brass.cf.ac.uk/projects/keywords/environmental-regulation
www.elflaw.org

The coalition and the European Union

Simon Bulmer looks at Britain's troubled political relationship with Europe

BRITAIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH the EU has always been a troubled one. Party divisions within government over membership go back to the Macmillan government. Terms such as 'an awkward partner' have been used to refer to the relationship, while a BBC television programme on successive governments' European policy travails was called 'the poisoned chalice'.

What then of the prospects for the coalition? The Conservative party in Parliament became more Euro-sceptic than under John Major. It had been critical of the EU's Lisbon Treaty for vesting new powers in the Union and sought to encourage Czech President Vaclav Klaus's delay to the ratification process. This tactic failed and the Treaty was put into effect in December 2009. However, the leaked letter to Klaus threatened relations with potential EU allies.

The Conservatives also abandoned their commitment to a referendum on the Treaty since it was already in force, drawing criticism from the party's Euro-sceptics. A further challenge derived from the decision to quit the alliance with the key Christian democratic centre-right parties in the European Parliament. In June 2009 a new grouping was created, known as the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR). Allies in the ECR were largely on the political fringes and not likely to assist an incoming government to build alliances with its counterparts.

Ahead of the election, the Conservatives had sought to either bury the European issue or to take symbolic Euro-sceptic steps which chimed with public opinion and with Euro-sceptic members of the party. However, these tactics were less likely in government. Governments cannot avoid the European issue as so many policies, from asylum to world trade, engage with the EU. In addition, the experience of the Major government's last years had shown that attentiveness to Euro-sceptic opinion within the party could result in a serious deterioration in relations with EU partners. Could a balance be found between satisfying Conservative Euro-sceptics and maintaining good working relations with EU partners? Or was it to be 'back to the future' for a Conservative government?

The first months suggested that a satisfactory balance was achievable. Within the EU itself, the discussion of institutional reform – from Constitutional Convention to the eventual Lisbon Treaty – had drained enthusiasm for deeper integration. Even pro-integrationist Germany was forthright in pushing its national interests in stipulating the conditions for the bail-out of Greek public finances within the Euro-zone.

The traditional Franco-German motor of integration has lost traction due to diverging



The coalition government has compromised on both sides in relation to Europe

interests and a strained relationship between Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy. Moreover, the 2010 Euro-zone crisis itself had given the EU a more introspective character.

A major contribution came from the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition at home. Bringing together the most Euro-sceptic and the most Europhile of the British parties in Westminster, the coalition agreement made interesting reading. It scaled back commitments which were attuned to opposition politics rather than to holding office.

Moreover, it began by emphasising that the government would be 'a positive participant in the European Union, playing a strong and positive role with our partners.' It committed to legislating to require a referendum on future transfers of power to the EU and to not joining the Euro. However, it played down commitments to repatriating powers on social legislation and criminal justice, preferring a pragmatic approach. Repatriating powers would have risked a further round of treaty reform that was not desired by EU partners and may have led to the transfer of new powers to the EU: precisely what the Conservatives did not want.

The coalition's platform carefully balanced party interests with what could be achieved in Brussels. The EU's rationale is to offer an opportunity structure for joint action where the nation state lacks authority in a globalised world. Objectives such as tackling global competitiveness, energy security, global warming and world poverty are shared by all main parties and are unlikely to be achieved without EU partners' support.

Furthermore, British governments can be

successful in shaping the EU's agenda when they are not hamstrung by domestic party constraints. Mrs Thatcher's government was a major force behind the EU's adoption of the single market programme. Tony Blair's government joined with the French to launch the European Security and Defence Policy, whose potential relevance is arguably heightened in an era of defence cuts.

This isn't to say that it will be easy for the coalition. EU budget negotiations for 2014-19 are taking place in a tough climate; the 'British rebate' may come under scrutiny. The government is at odds with French and German counterparts in supporting Turkey's EU membership.

The charm offensive with EU partners launched by William Hague and Nick Clegg has retrieved relations with a key ally. The test for 2011 is to carry along Britain's Euro-sceptic public opinion, while maximising the EU's potential for achieving the wider goals of coalition policy. ■

www.shef.ac.uk/politics/research/centres/cipol.html



PROFESSOR SIMON BULMER

Director of Postgraduate Research and of the Centre for International Policy Research at the University of Sheffield. He is co-author (with Martin Burch) of

The Europeanisation of Whitehall, Manchester University Press, 2009, based on ESRC-funded research.