The Good Politician

Surveys show a lack of trust in political actors and institutions across much of the democratic world. Populist politicians and parties attempt to capitalise on this political disaffection. Commentators worry about our current 'age of anti-politics'. Focusing on the United Kingdom, using responses to public opinion surveys alongside diaries and letters collected by Mass Observation, this book takes a long view of anti-politics going back to the 1940s. This historical perspective reveals how anti-politics has grown in scope and intensity over the last half-century. Such growth is explained by citizens' changing images of 'the good politician' and changing modes of political interaction between politicians and citizens. Current efforts to reform and improve democracy will benefit greatly from the new evidence and conceptual framework set out in this important study.

Nick Clarke is Associate Professor of Human Geography at the University of Southampton.

Will Jennings is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton.

Jonathan Moss is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sussex.

Gerry Stoker is Centenary Professor of Governance at the University of Canberra and Professor of Governance at the University of Southampton.

The Good Politician

Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics

Nick Clarke
University of Southampton

Will Jennings
University of Southampton

Jonathan Moss
University of Sussex

Gerry Stoker
University of Southampton and University of Canberra

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Contents

Figures

Tables

Preface: The Long Road to 2016, Brexit, and Trump

We began the research project behind this book in 2014, focused on the period since 1945 – a widely recognised milestone for British politics. We were especially interested in what we call 'anti-politics': citizens' negative sentiment regarding formal politics, with 'formal politics' describing that set of activities and institutions required for collective and binding decision-making in plural societies (i.e. tolerating, canvassing, negotiating, compromising, and their institutionalisation in politicians, parties, elections, parliaments, governments). We were interested in the claim, often made, that political disaffection has grown over time in many democracies, such that – compared to the period following the Second World War – we are now living through an 'age of anti-politics'. We were interested in testing this claim using the case of the United Kingdom (UK), for which good evidence is perhaps uniquely available in the form of public opinion surveys but also letters and diaries collected by Mass Observation (MO), all dating back to the late 1930s.

As our project continued, we realised that another milestone for British politics may have been reached in 2016. Brexit – British exit from the European Union (EU), decided by a referendum in June 2016 – marks a turning point in the process of European institution-building that began soon after the Second World War. Across the Atlantic, a milestone for American politics may also have been reached in 2016. Donald Trump became the first US President with no experience of military service or government, whether elected or appointed. Also worth noting here is the rise of populism across Europe. By 2015, parties aligning themselves with 'the people' against 'the political class' had gained at least 10 per cent of the vote in twenty European countries. In five of these countries – Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Switzerland – such parties had become the largest party. Also worth noting here is the electoral success of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in Australia, where Hanson and three colleagues became Senators in the federal election of 2016. In short, this book may draw on British evidence, for the most part, but its themes are

relevant to the dynamic of democracies across much of the contemporary world.

Let us consider some of these recent events in a little more detail. There are many ways to interpret Brexit, but one way is to view it as a consequence of the long-term increase in citizens' political disaffection we describe and explain in this book. 'Leave' advocates campaigned against the need for politics at the European scale. The campaign against the EU was closely associated with the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which over the years has campaigned against much of politics at the national scale too. Here is Nigel Farage, then leader of UKIP, speaking on the morning of the referendum result (24 June 2016):

> Dare to dream that the dawn is breaking on an independent United Kingdom . . . this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people. We have fought against the multinationals. We have fought against the big merchant banks. We have fought against big politics. We have fought against lies, corruption, and deceit. And today, honesty, decency, and belief in nation, I think now is going to win. And we will have done it without having to fight, without a single bullet being fired.

The anti-politics themes in this extract are clear. Brexit is a 'victory' for the people ('real people', 'ordinary people', 'decent people') against a 'big politics' associated with 'lies, corruption, and deceit'.

The preceding quotation finishes with the line 'without a single bullet being fired'. But a number of bullets *were* fired in June 2016. Jo Cox, Member of Parliament (MP) for Batley and Spen, was stabbed and shot during the EU referendum campaign. Like the result of the referendum, there are many ways to interpret the murder of Jo Cox. It was a particular act: the murder of an MP just prior to a constituency surgery during a referendum campaign. She was a particular politician: a young woman, a Labour MP, a 'Remain' supporter with interests in Syria and Islamophobia – to give just a couple of examples. The attacker was also a particular citizen, of course, to whom the judge said when sentencing him (23 November 2016): 'It is clear from your Internet and other researches that your inspiration is . . . an admiration for Nazism and similar anti-democratic white supremacist creeds, where democracy and political persuasion are supplanted by violence towards and intimidation of opponents and those who, in whatever way, are thought to be different and, for that reason, open to persecution.' Our point, here, is that Jo Cox's murder – a particular event – happened against a background of rising anti-political sentiment. In recent years, one expression of this development appears to have been increasing levels of abuse and threat faced by politicians of all parties, and especially women. It was in this

context, in July 2017, that Parliament's Committee on Standards in Public Life launched a review of 'Abuse and intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates during elections'.

Crossing the Atlantic, among the many ways to interpret the election of Trump, one way again is to view it as a consequence of a long-term rise in citizens' political disaffection. Consider this extract from Trump's inauguration speech (20 January 2017):

> Every four years, we gather on these steps to carry out the orderly and peaceful transfer of power ... Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today, we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington DC and giving it back to you, the American People. For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government, while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes – starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you ... What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. January 20th 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.

Trump campaigned against politics. He campaigned against the institutions of formal politics: 'Washington DC' (as opposed to 'the American people'); 'politicians' (as opposed to 'struggling families'); 'the establishment' (as opposed to 'the citizens of our country'); political parties (as opposed to 'the people'). He also campaigned against the activities of politics, addressed later in the same inauguration speech: 'We will no longer accept politicians who are all talk and no action – constantly complaining but never doing anything about it. The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action.' Trump campaigned against the tolerating, canvassing, negotiating, and compromising that may sound like 'empty talk' and may delay or limit 'action' but are necessary for democracy to be more than Alexis de Tocqueville's 'tyranny of the majority'. And, campaigning against politics, Trump won!

As we researched and wrote this book, Trump was elected US President, the UK began the process of leaving the EU, and populism was being discussed across Europe and beyond. There were also two general elections in the UK. We cover the general election of 2015 in the rest of the book. The 2017 election happened just as we completed

the manuscript, so we finish this preface with a few comments on that most recent of political events. Anti-political themes were clearly present during much of the 2017 campaign. On 18 April, when Prime Minister Theresa May announced there would be an early election – just two years after the last general election and one year after the EU referendum – a television news reporter asked citizens in Bristol for their reaction. One reaction from a woman called Brenda went viral (as 'Brenda from Bristol') – presumably because of how it resonated with citizens around the UK and, apparently, much of the Anglophone world: 'You're joking! Not another one! Oh for God's sake! I can't, honestly, I can't stand this. There's too much politics going on at the moment.' Once the campaign was under way, Theresa May, Leader of the Conservative Party, sought to present herself as above and beyond politics. Listen to this from a speech she gave when launching her party's manifesto (18 May 2017):

> [M]ost important of all, the Government I lead will provide strong and stable leadership to see us through Brexit and beyond: tackling the long-term challenges we face, and ensuring everyone in our country has the chance to get on in life. We need that strong and stable leadership now more than ever. For the next five years will be among the most challenging of our lifetime … it is why in this election – more than in any before – it is time to put the old, tribal politics behind us and to come together in the national interest: united in our desire to make a success of Brexit. United in our desire to get the right result for Britain. Because every vote for me and my team in this election will strengthen my hand in the negotiations to come.

If May dismissed party politics as 'old, tribal politics' and denied the reality of multiple interests in the UK after the EU referendum (hence, we might say, the continuing need for a vibrant party politics), then Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of the Labour Party, took a different line. Consider this from his first speech after May's initial announcement (20 April 2017):

> Much of the media and establishment are saying that this election is a foregone conclusion. They think there are rules in politics, which if you don't follow by doffing your cap to powerful people, accepting that things can't really change, then you can't win. But of course, they do not want us to win. Because when we win it is the people, not the powerful, who win.

And consider this from the speech he used to launch his campaign (9 May 2017): 'We have to convince the sceptical and undecided. They are not sure which way to turn. And who can blame them? People are alienated from politics and politicians. Our Westminster system is broken and our economy is rigged. Both are run in the interests of the few.' This

line from Corbyn was different from May's but still incorporated anti-political themes in its own way. 'The people' were positioned against 'the establishment'. A 'Westminster system' that is 'broken' was positioned as responsible for citizens' alienation from 'politics and politicians' (in general). We discuss the relationship between political disaffection and the supply of politics in later chapters of the book. What we can say here is that both leaders of the UK's two main parties campaigned in 2017 *against politics* – against plurality, parties, negotiation, and compromise in the case of May and against 'the Westminster system' in the case of Corbyn – at least as much as they campaigned against each other or (perish the thought!) *for* politics. They did this, presumably, because they sensed the broad scope and high intensity of anti-political feeling in twenty-first-century British society.

As a team, at the time of writing these final words, we are still not quite in agreement about how to interpret the general election of 2017. One conclusion we do share is that our framework developed in the rest of this book brings into sharp focus themes that are central to most if not all contemporary democracies. How is anti-politics to be defined? What explains its growth? What features of politics make it susceptible to anti-political sentiment on the part of citizens? These are questions to which many would say we urgently need answers. In this book, we provide some of these answers in the form of a new analytical framework backed by a unique, rich, long-term view of the issues – drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data.

Since one of us calls geography their disciplinary home, let us finish by mobilising the language of climate science and distinguishing between the political *weather* and the political *climate*. This book is about a long-term change in the political climate. Knowledge of such a change may help us to interpret certain short-term (political) weather events – such as Brexit or Trump or the UK general election of 2017. But just as one cold winter does not undermine the case for climate change in the natural world, so we should be careful of making too much from one campaign or its outcome. The year 2016 may well prove to be another milestone in the history of British politics (and perhaps democratic politics more broadly). But if that is the case, then we are now at the beginning of a new period. Initial signs of this new period are not promising. It looks to be characterised by a resurgent nationalism, populist politicians and parties, the Internet, fake news, social media bubbles, and so on. But actually, as with all periods, the characteristics of this new period are still to be made. By helping us to understand the challenges, this book also aims to shape the future along

more desirable paths. Democracy and the politics associated with it were far from perfect in the twentieth century, as our evidence shows, but its changing character, potential, and flaws need to be understood better if we are to avoid a democratic collapse in the twenty-first century.

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The book also rests on survey data collected over the years by various research projects and polling organisations. Individual-level survey data from the British Election Study and the British Social Attitudes survey proved invaluable for taking the long view, as did poll data from Gallup, Ipsos MORI, YouGov, and Populus. We are particularly grateful to Joe Twyman and Laurence Janta-Lipinski at YouGov and Laurence Stellings at Populus for their assistance in conducting new survey research used in the book.

We organised three workshops in Southampton to discuss anti-politics with academic and other colleagues from around the country in October 2014, January 2016, and September 2016. We learned a huge amount from these workshops and thank all the participants for their time and critical engagement. We are especially grateful to Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, who, after the second of these workshops, invited us to write a piece on anti-politics for *Renewal* (see Clarke et al. 2016). We also thank Oliver Escobar, Andrew Gamble, and Gavin Shuker MP for thoughtful written responses to that piece in the same journal.

In May 2016, we organised a public event on 'The Rise of Anti-Politics in the UK' at Portcullis House, Westminster. Again, we are very grateful to all those who participated – especially Isabel Hardman and Tristram Hunt, who participated formally as panellists and contributed their distinct experience and insight to the discussion.

Between 2014 and 2017, we presented the research at numerous conferences, workshops, and seminars organised by others – both in the UK and overseas. We also wrote up elements of the research for papers now published in *Parliamentary Affairs*, *The Political Quarterly*, *Contemporary British History*, *Political Geography*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Through all of these engagements, we think we improved our understanding and refined our arguments. For this, we thank all of those involved: organisers, audience members, reviewers, and editors.

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