

To cite this output:

Stoker, G, et al (2012) Anti-Politics: Characterising and Accounting for Political Disaffection  
ESRC End of Award Report, RES-000-22-4441. Swindon: ESRC.



## ESRC End of Award Report

For awards ending on or after 1 November 2009

This End of Award Report should be completed and submitted using the **grant reference** as the email subject, to **reportsofficer@esrc.ac.uk** on or before the due date.

The final instalment of the grant will not be paid until an End of Award Report is completed in full and accepted by ESRC.

Grant holders whose End of Award Report is overdue or incomplete will not be eligible for further ESRC funding until the Report is accepted. We reserve the right to recover a sum of the expenditure incurred on the grant if the End of Award Report is overdue. (Please see Section 5 of the ESRC Research Funding Guide for details.)

Please refer to the Guidance notes when completing this End of Award Report.

<b>Grant Reference</b>	<b>RES-000-22-4441</b>		
<b>Grant Title</b>	Anti-Politics: Characterising and Accounting for Political Disaffection		
<b>Grant Start Date</b>	<b>01/04/2011</b>	<b>Total Amount Expended:</b>	
	<b>30/06/2012</b>		
	University of Southampton		
<b>Grant Holder's Contact Details</b>	<b>Address</b>	<b>Email</b>	
		<b>Telephone</b>	
<b>Co-Investigators (as per project application):</b>		<b>Institution</b>	
<b>Colin Hay</b>		<b>University of Sheffield</b>	
<b>Ruth Fox</b>		<b>Hansard Society</b>	
<b>Andy Williamson</b>		<b>Hansard Society</b>	

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## 1. Non-technical summary

Please provide below a project summary written in non-technical language. The summary may be used by us to publicise your work and should explain the aims and findings of the project. *[Max 250 words]*

We explore what citizens think about politics. Our focus groups and survey showed as expected plenty of negative attitudes. But as people talked for longer in the focus groups we found evidence of positive attitudes towards politics and appreciation of its vital role in our society. Survey questions confirmed that alongside strong negative assessments of politics you could also find a positive commitment especially to the role that representative institutions and processes could play in making collective decisions. Indeed we found that citizens could hold contrasting theories of how politics works. The more negative interpretation came to the fore when they reflected on the how politics can be dominated by self-serving politicians and special interests and was particularly prominent among those who consumed their politics by way of tabloid readership. Yet interest in politics increased for half of all citizens in our survey work particularly if they could be guaranteed a more positive politics, devoted to serving the public interest. Moreover our focus group discussions revealed plenty of ideas for reform that could not be described as wildly utopian but were more about how to make the dynamic in the relationship between citizens and politicians in a representative democracy more positive, open and responsive. The blockage to reforming our politics is not in the inflexible negativity of citizens but perhaps lies in a failure to take their concerns seriously. We hope that our research helps to redress that balance by giving voice to the subtlety and complexity of people's perspectives.

## 2. Project overview

### a) Objectives

Please state the aims and objectives of your project as outlined in your proposal to the us. *[Max 200 words]*

- To build on existing data sets to expand our knowledge of the sources of citizens' disaffection and disillusion with politics
- To feed into the construction a further iteration of the 'Audit' and in particular to identify questions that will be tested on a broader representative sample drawing on the findings from the focus group study
- To provide a testing ground for existing explanations of political disaffection
- To allow for the emergence of unexplored and unidentified factors in the explanation of political disaffection by providing an open analysis of the carefully recorded proceedings of the focus groups
- To make an immediate impact on the policy and practitioner debate about anti-politics and the open policy arena for political reform measures and to provide a more detailed understanding of the factors behind anti-politics against which the appropriateness of various solutions can be gauged
- To advance academic scholarship in understanding and explaining what politics means to citizens at the beginning of the 21st century. We provide the empirical effort to find out what our fellow citizens understand by the practice of politics and in so doing hope to drive academic study of political disaffection in new directions.

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## **b) Project Changes**

Please describe any changes made to the original aims and objectives, and confirm that these were agreed with us. Please also detail any changes to the grant holder's institutional affiliation, project staffing or funding. *[Max 200 words]*

Andy Williamson a co-investigator left the employment of the Hansard Society in the summer of 2011. However the Hansard Society remained committed in a period of staff transition to find replacement staff of suitable quality. In order to allow time for this process it was agreed with the ESRC that we would have a three month extension on finishing the project. The delay meant it only became possible to start the focus groups in mid-November 2011. They were all completed by March 2012. However the idea of feeding insights from the focus groups into the Hansard Society Annual Audit survey to go into the field in December 2011 had to be shelved. In order not to lose access to the survey some new questions were added to the Audit; devised from some interesting work on attitudes to political engagement developed in the USA and they revealed valuable findings that are reported in our research outputs. It is our intention to use the focus groups to help us construct a further tranche of new questions for the Audit that will go into the field in December 2012, thereby fulfilling one of the original intentions of the research.

## **c) Methodology**

Please describe the methodology that you employed in the project. Please also note any ethical issues that arose during the course of the work, the effects of this and any action taken. *[Max 500 words]*

The focus groups were conducted between November 2011 and March 2012 in range of locations in England, Wales and Scotland. A commercial company recruited the participants using demographic requirements provided by the research team but struggled to get members of the public in social class A to attend. The groups lasted a minimum of 90 minutes. The facilitator for the group was always a member of the research team with Stoker or Fox taking most sessions but with others led by Hay and Morris. We always had at least two members of the research team present at the focus group and were helped at most by PhD students from Sheffield and Southampton who took notes, made observations and helped with the organisation.

A pilot to test out timings and the value of the focus group guidance document was conducted with University of Southampton students in the summer of 2011. For the focus groups proper a full guide document was provided and accompanied by detailed organisational framework to ensure that as far as possible the focus groups were conducted on a similar and effective basis. All of the focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Some of the transcription was initially undertaken by research team members and an intern of the Hansard Society but later all sessions were transcribed using a commercial company.

The attendance and engagement at the focus groups was generally excellent. After the first four focus groups we reviewed the format but the only change was to the cartoons used to stimulate discussion just to ensure they were topical. We started out asking people to record their first political experience and identify words to describe politics. We then discussed what were the features of politics they could identify, and the factors relating to their engagement. We used

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cartoons to stimulate a discussion about how politics is understood in our society before moving on to issues of possible reforms to political practice and a written exercise at the end that required participants to identify their three favoured reforms.

The focus group discussions were transcribed using a coding framework first developed in a research team discussion in spring 2012 and then developed in subsequent discussion. The coding was undertaken by four PhD students from the university of Southampton in May and June of 2012 using NVivo9.2 under direct guidance of Stoker.

The survey questions developed by the team were replicated from studies in the USA and placed at the end of the annual audit of political engagement questionnaire constructed by the Hansard society. Because of a minor error in the presentation of one of the standard audit questions to respondents the survey company choose to repeat the entire survey instrument in January 2012 after an initial field survey in December 2011. As a result the sample size for the questions initiated by the ESRC research team reached 1038 for the stealth and sunshine questions and a maximum of 2193 for all others.

#### **d) Project Findings**

Please summarise the findings of the project, referring where appropriate to outputs recorded on the ESRC website. Any future research plans should also be identified. *[Max 500 words]*

We were able to address the first two objectives of our research by developing analysis from existing data and adding new dimensions to the Audit annually undertaken by the Hansard Society. This activity is reflected in Part One and Part Two of the audits of political engagement published in April and July ( see also Parliamentary Affairs article Vol 65, No 4, October 2012). The first revealed a scale of disenchantment with politics that surpassed that measured in previous audits and second dwelt on the role of the media in creating a positive or negative context for understanding politics, and revealed that although the media plays a vital role, as perceived by the public, in connecting citizens to politics in its tabloid form it appears particularly prone to offering and sustaining a negative perspective on politics.

We were also able to offer an advanced framing of issues around concerns about anti-politics attitudes and strategies for reform in a pamphlet published by the British Academy in November 2011. The paper explores two understandings of reform framed by a normative commitment to either a more modest or extensive role for direct citizen participation in a modern democracy. Contrasting reform strategies are identified and a critical assessment of the UK coalition reform plans is provided. The literature review that underlay the initial research application is reflected in a chapter published in *Development in British Politics 9*.

The focus groups have all been transcribed and coded and await further detailed analysis. Thus far the group material has been used in a paper to the PSA, evidence to the Leveson inquiry and in the two Audit publications to sometimes confirm the thinking behind survey response but also to reveal the complexity of citizens understanding of politics. We found plenty of negative attitudes but also a positive understanding of the role of politics in a democracy and a strong range of reform ideas reported at the launch of part one of the audit in April 2012 and captured in a paper on the Hansard society's website. We discovered that citizens had a strong sense that if representative politics could be made to work more effectively such a development would be embraced by many. Citizens had their own ideas, if not detailed measures, about how such a

positive change could be brought about. See:

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament\\_and\\_government/archive/2012/04/27/audit-of-political-engagement-9-part-one.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament_and_government/archive/2012/04/27/audit-of-political-engagement-9-part-one.aspx)

New evidence on the negative impact of tabloid readership and the contingent nature of citizens' attitudes to politics are noted above. A paper for the SPERI conference looked at the implications for long-term policymaking given the nature of politics. A PSA paper explores the concept of folk theories to capture how citizens reason about politics but can also sustain several vantage points on its practice at the same time. Alongside strong negative perspectives captured in the language of stealth democracy there are also more positive sunshine understandings. This work also opens up interesting avenues for comparison given our replication of survey questions already undertaken in studies in the USA and Finland.

### e) Contributions to wider ESRC initiatives (eg Research Programmes or Networks)

If your project was part of a wider ESRC initiative, please describe your contributions to the initiative's objectives and activities and note any effect on your project resulting from participation. [Max. 200 words]

Not applicable

## 3. Early and anticipated impacts

### a) Summary of Impacts to date

Please summarise any impacts of the project to date, referring where appropriate to associated outputs recorded on the Research Outcomes System (ROS). This should include both scientific impacts (relevant to the academic community) and economic and societal impacts (relevant to broader society). The impact can be relevant to any organisation, community or individual. [Max. 400 words]

Our academic impact is reflected in the publications mentioned in the findings section. We have encouraged our work to have social impact. The London based launches of the Audits part one and two, which received extensive media coverage. Audios and details of these presentations are available on the Hansard society web site. *Presentation organised by Hansard Society on media and politics, Audit 9 part 2, 12<sup>th</sup> July, 2012*

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent\\_events/archive/2012/07/13/3427.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent_events/archive/2012/07/13/3427.aspx)

*Presentation at Hansard Society at launch of Audit 9 Part 1, 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2012*

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent\\_events/archive/2012/04/26/3350.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent_events/archive/2012/04/26/3350.aspx)

Ruth Fox did a BBC Parliament interview and talked about the Focus Groups in April 2012 (arising from Audit Part 1 launch); and wrote an article for Public Servant on the Audit Part 2 findings: <http://www.publicserviceeurope.com/article/2317/media-losing-its-truth-seeking-status-leveson-must-act>

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We used data on shifting attitudes towards interest in politics to present the idea that young citizens may be particularly prone to shift their response to politics depending on the political practice on offer. Presentation at Hansard Society, London, event on young people and politics, *Growing Pains? Young People's Attitudes to Politics*, 13<sup>th</sup> June, 2012

[http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent\\_events/archive/2012/06/19/3381.aspx](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/recent_events/archive/2012/06/19/3381.aspx)

We have provided a blog for the British academy web site on same theme. "*A better politics could lead to more interest from citizens*" <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policyperspectives/A-better-politics-could-lead-to-more-interest.cfm> .These findings also provide the basis for an article to be published in the ESRC's annual newsstand magazine *Britain in 2013*, which celebrates the diversity of ESRC-funded research and offers a readable, concise analysis of current issues concerning Britain today.

We also presented evidence to the Leveson Inquiry on the role of the media and its impact on politics. The evidence was published on the Inquiry web site on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2012

<http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/evidence/?witness=hansard-society> . Our findings drawing on the survey and focus group undertaken as part of the research establish clearly the negative impact of tabloid readership on attitudes towards politics among citizens.

Presentations using the findings have been made to audiences of public officials and politicians at Communities and Local Government event in March 2012 and a local government conference in July 2012 (Presentation to South East Employers Network, Local government House, Conference on Enhancing Local Democracy, 13<sup>th</sup> July , 2012

<http://www.seemp.co.uk/index/eventsnet/eld2012.htm> .

In September a presentation using the material were made under the auspices of the Australian and New Zealand School of Government in Auckland and the audio of that presentation is available on their web site. <http://www.anzsog.edu.au/events/events-calendar/2012/09/16/ssc-new-zealand-partnership-program-event/362/gerry-stoker-citizen-empowerment-and-civic-participation-auckland>

## **b) Anticipated/Potential Future Impacts**

Please outline any anticipated or potential impacts (scientific or economic and societal) that you believe your project might have in future. [Max. 200 words]

Future impact plans involve developing academic article outputs based on the PSA and SPERI papers and evidence to the Leveson inquiry. A number of other articles drawing on the focus group work will also be developed. During 2013 Hay and Stoker will develop a book proposal based on the project, although any work on that is unlikely to start until 2014.

Further presentations based on the research are planned if the agreements of the Welsh assembly and Scottish parliament can be obtained in respectively Cardiff and Edinburgh. We will draw in a number of other researchers working on similar themes for a practitioner oriented event in London in 2013.

Stoker has agreed to do presentations about the research at a seminar to mark the launch of the

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citizen constitutional deliberation in the Republic of Ireland , Dublin, in November 2012 and at an event planned by Invitation to speak at the Dukakis Center for Public Service, Thessaloniki, Greece in April 2013. Stoker has also agreed to a join a panel of academics and journalists to discuss the question: *Is Politics Doomed?* ; organised by The Political Quarterly and the Department of Politics at Birkbeck College 10<sup>th</sup> November 2012.

You will be asked to complete an ESRC Impact Report 12 months after the end date of your award. The Impact Report will ask for details of any impacts that have arisen since the completion of the End of Award Report.

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#### 4. Declarations

Please ensure that sections A, B and C below are completed and signed by the appropriate individuals. The End of Award Report will not be accepted unless all sections are signed.

Please note hard copies are **not** required; electronic signatures are accepted and should be used.

##### A: To be completed by Grant Holder

Please read the following statements. Tick **one** statement under ii) and iii), then sign with an electronic signature at the end of the section (this should be an image of your actual signature).

##### i) The Project

This Report is an accurate overview of the project, its findings and impacts. All co-investigators named in the proposal to ESRC or appointed subsequently have seen and approved the Report.	x
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##### ii) Submissions to the Research Outcomes System (ROS)

Output and impact information has been submitted to the Research Outcomes System. Details of any future outputs and impacts will be submitted as soon as they become available.	x
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**or**

This grant has not yet produced any outputs or impacts. Details of any future outputs and impacts will be submitted to the Research Outcomes System as soon as they become available.	
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##### iii) Submission of Datasets

Datasets arising from this grant have been offered for deposit with the Economic and Social Data Service.	x
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**or**

Datasets that were anticipated in the grant proposal have not been produced and the Economic and Social Data Service has been notified.	
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**or**

No datasets were proposed or produced from this grant.	
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