

How parliaments can better understand the value of narratives for political engagement

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Abstract

This paper outlines a PhD research project exploring the usefulness of narrative and storytelling not only as a means for framing and contextualising political engagement, but actively strengthening it. The research focuses on the UK Parliament as an institution; what it represents, how it facilitates engagement, and how citizens relate personally to it. Both the UK Parliament and the UK citizenry are studied as co-constituents of a citizen-institution dynamic that characterises formal political engagement. The author proposes an original definition of political engagement based on meaningful citizen-institution dialogue, underpinned by a theoretical framework that utilises narrative theory, symbolic representation and interpretivism. An overview of the project focus is provided in Section 1, followed by the key tenets of the theoretical framework in Section 2. Section 3 outlines the project's methodological framework (based on Stoker, Hay and Barr's application of Kahneman's 'fast/slow thinking' model). Section 4 discusses the preliminary findings from the ongoing fieldwork.

1 – Research focus

This research project investigates the relevance of narrative to political engagement in a twofold manner: as an explicatory model and as a motivational device. Engagement literature typically utilises the term 'narrative' in order to frame, or simply describe, normative interpretations; either citizen perceptions of the political sphere, or broad trends within academic literature. The reason why narratives underpin these perceptions in the first place has been lacking as an area of focus within political science. Narratives underpin perceptions because *narratives make sense*. They 'make sense' in that they are personally intuitive, and they 'make sense' in that they serve to impose (or suggest) structure when addressing disparate information. The UK Parliament, and its efforts to strengthen political engagement, is the especial focus of this project. Parliament's role, with respect to political engagement, is a complex one. Its responsibilities are simultaneously historical and contemporary, both non-partisan and political. It is a site of narratives (of ritual, ceremony and tradition) and a means for relaying narratives, through its use of storytelling in public engagement campaigns. It is a site of symbolic representation (a

key tenet of this project's theoretical framework), and a physical public space. It is acknowledged to be intrinsic to democracy and representation, yet its actual role in public participation is extremely contested; both by citizens and parliamentary staff. Through a case study of Parliament we can discern some of the fundamental complexities, norms and paradoxes that underpin political engagement in the UK.

Contextualising this project involves highlighting two primary threads, or 'narratives', within modern political engagement literature. Firstly, the *disaffected citizenship narrative* (Bird, 2017) – itself conducive to the emergence of an 'anti-politics' literature (Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Jennings et al., 2016; Flinders, 2012) – postulates that citizens' unprecedented distaste for politics has dissuaded meaningful engagement. The *cultural displacement narrative* (Bird, 2017), by contrast, highlights legitimate yet non-traditional forms of engagement. It is certainly important to distinguish a critical citizenry from a pessimistic citizenry, and avoid inferring a shift in values simply by consulting quantitative data, such as voter turnout and party membership (Norris, 2011). Moreover, recent quantitative observations would appear to undermine the premise (and terminology) of 'anti-politics'. Examples include a 72.2% turnout for the EU Referendum¹, 68.7% for the 2017 General Election² – as well as an increase in youth turnout (Ipsos MORI, 2017) – and reported growth in the membership of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The two aforementioned narratives (*disaffected citizenship* and *cultural displacement*) represent a dichotomy of *decline* and *change* respectively. This project aligns with the latter; politics has changed and continues to change, generating engagement that is nuanced, emotionally-felt and horizontalised (Manning, 2015; Manning, 2013; Manning and Holmes, 2013). Socio-political evolution entails changing characteristics of engagement – and politics generally (Manning, 2013). It appears logical to update our quantifiers accordingly, lest underpinning definitions of 'politics' (based on antiquated understandings) cement dissatisfaction with present incarnations and project bleak future predictions.

The existence of these academic narratives serves to validate the necessity of this project, since it indicates a fundamental terminological quandary. Put simply, there is no coherent, translatable definition of political engagement within academia, within the citizenry, or even within Parliament. The problem is particularly acute when attempting to communicate across these different groups. Political engagement, within this research project, is defined as *a consistent and meaningful dialogue between an institution and individual(s)*. Interactions between citizens and institutions – and the co-constitutive meaning that these interactions foster – is therefore a key area of inquiry. Contemporary academic accounts of political engagement typically characterise citizens as observers or spectators, rather than active interpreters (van Wessel, 2016). Van Wessel ascribes much more assertiveness to citizens,

¹Based on Electoral Commission data: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/upcoming-elections-and-referendums/eu-referendum/electorate-and-count-information>

² BBC data: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2017/results>

describing them as ‘sense-makers’, actively engaged in the narratives that underpin their cultural environment (2016). It is therefore necessary to examine why certain narratives hold a cultural appeal in the first place, for citizens and academics alike. This can be done by disassembling them into stories; what we hear and what we tell each other, repeated until certain stories become culturally entrenched narratives. In unpacking the appeal of existing narratives, both academics and practitioners can potentialise new narratives (or ‘counter-narratives’) as a means of re-connecting citizens to the political sphere. Narratives, then, present a means for diagnosing *and* treating the contemporary landscape of political engagement.

The theoretical and methodological framework for this study – which will be outlined in the following sections – explores citizens’ understandings of politics, engagement and Parliament. Through an interpretivist approach, citizens will be studied in terms of their capacity to understand, engage with, and ultimately reshape their own relationship to Parliament. The fieldwork encompasses both quantitative and qualitative aspects – using questionnaires and focus groups respectively – reflecting the need to both *quantify* and *understand* engagement. A focus on Parliament necessitates drawing a distinction between political engagement and parliamentary engagement, both of which constitute specific (albeit partially overlapping) objectives. Parliament was described and understood in myriad ways by fieldwork participants; as a political institution, but also a key site of mediation between and citizens and ‘the political’. This reflects a key distinction between formal, institutional ‘Politics’ and informal, localised, and personal ‘politics’ (Dalton, 2008). Another notable distinction was drawn (by fieldwork participants) between Parliament *per se* and the Members of Parliament. It is notable for two reasons; firstly, it reflects a similar distinction invoked within engagement literature, usually to illustrate that citizens often hold more nuanced and positive views towards a specific MP than of MPs as an abstract group (Norton, 2013, pp.149-50; Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons, 2004, p.9). Secondly, distinguishing MPs from Parliament also illustrates the notion that Parliament has an identity and a persona in its own right, distinct from that of MPs.

2 – Theoretical framework

Narrative underpins the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis. The former is based on a recognition of the influence of narrative in both a cognitive and political sense. In the case of the latter, the fieldwork involves a discussion of narrative in its own right. Beyond the *decline/change* narratives mentioned previously, narratives are invoked and explored in a wide variety of disciplines, to fulfil myriad functions. Outside of political science, the manner of their employment can be broadly divided into two forms:

1. *Context* – using ‘narratives’ as a shorthand for circumstances, socially-entrenched norms and popularly-held assumptions

2. *Motivation* – studying ‘narratives’ (and storytelling) as a direct appeal to act, as invocations that work through relatability and self-recognition

The first permutation of narrative – a means of conveying context – is a long-standing device in political science and almost every other academic discipline. In the context of electoral participation, narratives are understood as a way “to frame the experience and meaning of voting”, for example (Coleman, 2013, p.36). Familiarity with existing cultural narratives, moreover, is described as a key determiner in public reception of an event or a political act (Fielding, 2011; Abbott, 2002). This project builds further on this notion, positing that narrative are indeed a means of contextualisation, but also provide an impetus for engaging with context. The usefulness of stories is not limited to their explication of engagement; on the contrary; stories are a means of engagement.

The influence of interpretivism within this project is twofold. The first contribution of interpretivism is its emphasis on understanding how meanings (rather than facts) serve to shape political actions and institutions (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). We have already discussed the importance of acknowledging citizens’ capacity for interpretation and sense-making, when accounting for the current landscape of political engagement (van Wessel, 2016). This hints at a broader point; the importance of not only examining the facts within political engagement (turnout figures, membership data etc.) but understanding *meanings*, i.e. what these facts mean to the people who learn them (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). The second contribution of interpretivism is the notion that social contexts, though in a sense inescapable, do not deny individuals a capacity for agency; thus, social contexts – though constraining – can be identified and adapted to with creativity and reflexivity (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p.32). These contexts are referred to by Bevir and Rhodes as *traditions*, in that they “[allow] for the possibility of subjects adapting, developing and even rejecting much of their heritage” (2003, p.32). This is a particularly important consideration for legislatures (especially an ancient legislature such as the UK Parliament), in which staff continually contextualise their engagement activities and responsibilities against factors such as tradition, heritage and convention.

The theoretical framework for this research project aims to examine why certain narratives hold a strong appeal at a personal level; the value of this scholarly approach is twofold. Firstly, rather than simply indicating the presence of narratives (within scholarly debate, for example, or among the opinions of the populace), this project investigates why the narratives are existent, appealing and sustainable. Secondly, suggestions can be drawn as to how political engagement could be strengthened through narrative; the effectiveness and resonance of certain stories, and the potential for certain counter-narratives as a foundation for understanding Parliament in a different way. This research presents Parliament as a site of storytelling, ritual, symbolism and performance, placing just as much emphasis on what Parliament *means* as what Parliament *does*. Tradition, ceremony and ritual are key to understanding this sense of meaningfulness (Crewe, 2010; Waylen, 2010; Rai,

2010). The academic literature on (particularly symbolic) representation sheds light on legislatures' generation of meaningfulness and identity, relevant in an abstract sense but also visible in nation-building, for example (Loewenberg, 2011, pp.33-34). What Parliament represents, moreover, is dependent on a connection with the populace; on citizens feeling represented and efficacious. Parliamentary representation depends both on a parliamentary identity and citizens identifying *with* that identity (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). In this way, the very notion of representation becomes co-constitutive and dialogic.

Symbolic representation – as a means of open-ended interpretation, rather than direct correspondence with a finite set of information – is a concept for which Hanna Pitkin laid the theoretical groundwork (1967, pp.98-99). The contribution of Saward – with respect to this project – was to emphasise representation as co-constitutive (2010; 2006), a performative act that requires an audience, *and validation from that audience*, in order to be considered existent (2010). This theory has contributed much to the interpretation of engagement outlined in this research project, and it also links with the more overtly performative readings of politics that the project also draws on. Performance-based studies of political engagement are useful in their focus on context and background; on *means* rather than ends. Research recently commissioned by the Liaison Committee shows an awareness of this, citing “[t]he building, language and even the costumes of the House” as significant to political engagement (Flinders et al., 2015, p.46).³ Narrative has, in its own right, an explicitly performative basis, reliant on the dynamic between a narrator and an audience. Shirin Rai (2015) draws on Saward for an overtly performative reading of politics, distilling the art of politics into a dynamic between a performance and a legitimising reception. This serves to reflect the theory of co-constitutive dialogue that underpins this project, specifically the proposition that there is no such thing as ‘one-way engagement’. Engagement is dialogic, or else it is not engagement at all.⁴

Discussions of the quality of representative democracy encompasses a discussion of the capacity of legislatures to not only represent (Severs et al., 2015), but to instil a feeling of *being represented* (Cowley, 2013; Fox, 2009). John Parkinson reinforces this point through his discussion of legislative buildings as physical sites of representative encounter (2013; 2009). In this way, citizens – through visiting Parliament – interpret Parliament's identity and are confronted with their own. The crucial point here is that these interpretations are reflected in dominant cultural narratives. Interpretations are key to unpacking socially-perceived realities (Daigle, 2016; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), but the very notion of ‘interpretation’ also entails grappling with these realities (van Wessel, 2016). This sense-making was visible in participants' (both staff and public) problematisation of certain narratives and

³ In this case, engagement is specific to Select Committee witnesses, which – as highlighted during the research focus groups – should be understood as different to more general ‘public engagement’ in terms of both means and desired outcomes.

⁴ Shirin Rai provides an excellent analogy for this point, in the following passage: “There is an old saying in Hindi: ‘The peacock danced in the forest? Who saw him?’ If there is no audience then can there be a performance?” (2015, p.1187)

counter-narratives; not only their potential for strengthening political engagement, but also in terms of their legitimacy. The basis for this problematisation was strongly contextualised, questioning the identity and motives of the storyteller. This legitimisation of narrative through the narrator-audience dynamic is a cornerstone of narrative theory (Langellier, 1999; Bennett and Edelman, 1985; Barthes, 1975) and a theory of representation based on claim-making (Saward, 2010). Illustrative extracts from the focus group participants will be provided in Section 4. However it is important to note at this point that these problematisations – based on *who* is telling the story – serve to reinforce the theoretical framework of this project.

3 – Methodological framework

The majority of the fieldwork for this project was conducted during a work placement for the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) at the House of Commons. The fieldwork utilises a mixed-methods approach, encompassing questionnaires as well as focus groups. Stoker, Hay and Barr's research on the dynamic between 'fast' and 'slow' thinking within democratic politics (2016), itself an application of Kahneman's cognitive model (2012), was extremely influential. The structure of the project was largely based on Kahneman's thesis that intuitive ('fast') thinking yields broader, more stereotypical responses, while more deliberative ('slow') thinking scenarios typically provide more nuanced, considered contributions (2012). Stoker et al. apply this framework to democratic politics, finding that knee-jerk negative responses were common during individualised, instinctive exercises (such as word association). By contrast, discussive surroundings were less negative and drew on personal experience rather than 'readymade' cultural frames (Stoker et al., 2016). Consistent with the *change* narrative mentioned earlier, as well as the aforementioned terminological quandaries of 'political engagement', the methodological framework aims to highlight (and subsequently problematise) two factors:

- *Synecdoche*: characterising an *element* of political engagement as *encompassing*, or being synonymous with, political engagement (e.g. parliamentary or electoral engagement).
- *Symptom/condition conflation*: proposing a quantitative or qualitative *factor* of political engagement as being a self-evident indicator of the 'wellbeing' of political engagement (e.g. electoral turnout, party membership or trust).

Political engagement sessions (organised by Parliament's Participation Team) constituted the body of public participants. Questionnaires were handed out before and after the session; the pre-session questionnaire (Q1) was designed to clarify attendants' preconceptions, whereas the post-session questionnaire (Q2) examined what they felt they had taken away from the experience. An additional benefit of using two questionnaires was to shed light on the effectiveness of the engagement sessions from the viewpoint of the public participants. Most of the questions were closed, apart from the following question (used in Q1 & Q2): "what words or phrases

come to mind when you think about the word ‘politics’?” Responses could then be sorted into word association categories (Stoker et al., 2016, pp.7-9). The closed questions in both questionnaires were kept almost identical. For example, Q1 and Q2 proposed the following statements respectively: “this session will help increase my interest in politics”, and “this session has helped to increase my interest in politics”. Public participants were asked to mark their response using a Lickert Scale, from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Other statements, such as “I would describe myself as a political person” and “I do not feel represented”, were used in both questionnaires with no change in wording. Responses have been coded using SPSS.

At the end of each session, volunteers were requested for a focus group, so that political standpoints and attitudes could be explored in further detail. The focus group discussions was designed to elicit slow-thinking responses (Stoker et al., 2016, pp.6-7) and to contribute towards understanding political attitudes, rather than simply measuring them (Luntz, 1994). These focus groups allowed the participants to draw on experiential knowledge – a key component in connecting abstract concepts to personally-held attitudes – in order to illustrate their positions (Gamson, 1992, p.176). Another benefit of using focus groups relates to the aforementioned *change* narrative, which would have been incompatible with an exclusively quantitative approach composed only of closed questions. Exploring participant interpretations, and allowing them to frame their responses, is a particularly conducive approach when considering an increasingly complex, atomised and volatile political landscape. We can thus link the methodological framework back to the contextualisation provided in Section 1. Significantly, this landscape was a factor that the participants also highlighted themselves. The value of qualitative research in avoiding binary research design is, in this context, particularly apparent (Luntz, 1994).

Many parliamentary staff members expressed interest in the project during the work placement, therefore they were included as research participants, in the form of three separate focus groups. Each group comprised a broad range of parliamentary responsibilities and experience. This was an explicit aim of the author, in order to allow staff members from different departments to discuss political engagement in depth and at length. In doing so, the research participants were given the opportunity to frame and contextualise their own input. All focus groups were recorded by the author, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo for analysis. The first steps of this process have involved word frequency analysis. Since direct observation of parliamentary staff members’ work processes was not possible, the focus group setting did shed valuable light on how different departments related to each other; what Rhodes and Tiernan refer to as “another way of “being there”” (2015, p.210). An additional benefit of staff involvement was its being consistent with this project’s definition of engagement. In other words, if engagement is indeed a dialogue between institutions and individuals, then this project has gained insight from both sides of this dynamic.

4 – Initial fieldwork observations

The initial research findings would appear to confirm the rationale of fast/slow thinking analysis. For example, the use of phrases like ‘House of Cards’ in the questionnaires – i.e. a ‘fast-thinking’ tendency to cite pre-existing fictions that are “worth a thousand statistics” to the contrary (Stoker et al., 2016, p.14) – gave way to anecdotes and experiential knowledge in the focus groups. These were typically used to illustrate staff and public participants’ positions on contentious topics. An example of this was the aforementioned dissonance between citizen views of *MPs as a group* and of *specific MPs*. Two different observations, taken from two different focus groups, effectively illustrate this dissonance:

P2 ...my grandad hates bankers, he was like “ah they took my money, they took my mortgage, then they took my house”, and then when, I think when his friend pointed out that he knew a banker, who lived down the road, he said “ah, lovely guy...” (Public Participant 2)

P2: But it’s like the NHS, people say “oh the NHS is in a terrible state” and you think, “well what was it like the last time you went”, “oh it was great, oh my GP’s marvellous”. (Public Participant 2)

Both staff and public participants emphasised *change over decline*, referring back to the narrative dichotomy mentioned earlier. One participant (in a semi-structured interview rather than a focus group) provided the following summary:

P1: ...there’s no doubt that historically voter turnout at general elections is lower than it was in the 20th century, in the mid-20th century. On the other hand, I would argue political engagement in those days was pretty basic. Most people would vote, but they wouldn’t very often participate very widely in a political party, and in fact if you look at the nature of people’s involvement with parties in those days, it was very class based, and it was very socially based...And I think that attitude towards politics has gone, and that’s probably not a bad thing... (Staff Participant 1)

This observation – particularly in regards to the fundamentally changed nature of political engagement – was echoed throughout all of the focus group discussions. Disagreement was visible as to what Parliament’s role was within this changed political landscape; whether it had a direct responsibility to update its own means of facilitating political engagement accordingly, or whether this was outside of its remit. However, the prevalence of issue-based politics, particularly among younger generations, was an area of broad agreement.

Recent research conducted by Cristina Leston-Bandeira into the relationship between public engagement and symbolic representation utilised elite interviews with parliamentary officials, one of whom cited an “obligation to posterity” as a key complexity in the running of Parliament (2016, p.18). In other words, the maintenance of a simultaneously historical and active institution meant that *past*

concerns were *present* concerns. This links back to the ‘traditions’ cited earlier (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003), as well as the concept of ‘institutional memory’ (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2015); the notion of heritage exerting an influence that, though not entirely prescriptive, is both an item of constant consideration and an element within a resultingly complex identity. Two observations from the same staff focus group serve to illustrate this point. The first is taken from a description of the Welsh Assembly:

P6: ...they’re quite a young institution so they don’t have, you know, the tradition and the precedents refraining them from being a bit more creative...
(Staff Participant 6)

This is only one of several direct links made (in all three staff focus groups) between the institutional memory of Parliament and the restriction felt by its staff in terms of public engagement. The second observation was made after discussing the myriad ways in which ‘engagement’ was understood within Parliament (according to different departments and remits), which led to a broader problematisation of inter-departmental understanding:

P2: It’s a really interesting question then as to what kind of institution is it, if it’s not self-consciously existing as a central thing that does this, but actually it’s pieced together by a load of people who don’t understand it? [Laughs] it’s quite funny. (Staff Participant 2)

A unanimous response of “no” from staff focus group mentioned above, to the question “Do you think that we all talk in the same language about engagement?” speaks volumes. This point will be considered alongside findings from the public focus groups, which found a similar level of variety in terms of how political engagement could be applied and defined.

Political and parliamentary narratives were a key topic of discussion within the focus groups. Political narratives were typically explored in connection with political campaigning, and the value of a ‘good story’ to electoral success. The literature on campaign narratives sheds valuable light on their galvanising effect (Escobar, 2011), and is a literature from which non-partisan institutions can also learn lessons. Political and electoral representation, democratic heritage, and the impact of legislation on individuals’ experiences (UK Parliament, 2016a; UK Parliament, 2016b; UK Parliament, 2014) were acknowledged by the staff and public participants as nebulous, but largely successful, applications of parliamentary narratives. The Communities and Local Government Committee’s inquiry into public parks (2017), and the Petitions Committee’s inquiry into brain tumour research funding (2016), were also emphasised as examples of exerting political influence through storytelling. In the case of the latter, one parliamentary staff member involved in the inquiry confirmed that the submission of personal stories by the public – i.e. engagement with parliament through narrative – was a major factor in the decision to set up a governmental working group.

The potential effectiveness and legitimacy of certain parliamentary narratives was also subject to problematisation by the participants. The extract has been included below, as it is a good indication of the depth of discussion and the level of thematic problematisation that was possible through the focus group medium:

P3: I think the Suffragettes is really good for that as well, because I mean, I'm not a woman [laughs] but I mean coming from an organisation that represented young women I felt like there was a real personal connection among the membership there, and that was a really big thing that has, even though it was a hundred years ago, it's, you know, I'm connected to that.

P5: ...I find it interesting that Parliament as a body celebrates that, because at the time and if that happened now, we'd be very, you know, the MPs would be very anti-that, if there were women blowing up houses, throwing bricks through windows, that kind of thing it wouldn't be celebrated, but because you have that, that space of time, because it was a hundred years ago it's like "ah yeah, they were all amazing"...

P2: ...I had somebody lecturing me about the importance of feeling proud of all the wonderful parliamentary achievements over the years, and was citing things like abolishing slavery, and it did occur to me "what about all the years when Parliament didn't abolish slavery? What about all the slavers that actually were here, and were Members themselves?" And I think you, one has to be a little bit careful about the idea that... things change, if laws change with that...does that necessarily mean that Parliament was an engine of progressive change? (Staff Participants 2; 3 & 5)

What Staff Participant 3 observes is one of the key strengths of narrative; the conduciveness of narrative to empathy (Verovšek, 2016; Benjamin, 2006; Nussbaum, 2001; Arendt, 1958), or what Walter Benjamin describes (rather beautifully) as the "reader see[ing] himself living this written life" (2006, p.372). What this extract also demonstrates is the fallacy of approaching a narrative as if it were a broadcast device; as we have discussed, narratives are dialogic, dynamic and contextualised. This serves to reinforce the theoretical framework of the project, as well as validating the use of focus groups to pick apart these concepts. It also provides the basis of recommendations that may be passed forward to Parliament through this research project; namely that stories do not 'speak for themselves'. They require a speaker and a listener, both of whom understand the position of the other.

One of the most intriguing elements of the focus group sessions was the appearance of what we will refer to here as 'rhetorical conversation'. This took the form of turn-taking, with more than one participant channelling the opinion of a sector of the public, but with no one 'breaking character'. An example is provided below, from a Public Participant group:

P4: I think a lot of feedback tends to be "is there any point in this?"

P2: "Where's it going?"

P4: “Where’s this going?”, you know, “is this going to be another 20 minutes out of my day?”

P2: “Shoved in a drawer, nothing will happen”. (Public Participants 2 & 4)

Another example is provided from a Staff Participant group:

P3: ...don’t make the connection or they think it’ll make no difference, you know, “politicians are all the same”.

P1: “Doesn’t matter who gets in, in power”. But you would then lobby them through a petition... (Staff Participants 1 & 3)

As well as being intriguing from a performative political studies point of view – essentially demonstrating the potential for spontaneous role-play within focus groups – looking at the broader trends of this mode of communication reveals another notable point. When this mode of communication is employed, the imagined dialogue that is relayed to the focus group is almost universally negative, even in groups that raised a number of positive themes relating to engagement. This sub-set of qualitative data will be analysed in greater depth to better understand this tendency.

Preliminary quantitative and qualitative analysis appears to support Norris’ ‘critical citizens’ thesis, which describes a widespread divergence between *democratic aspirations* and (perceived) *democratic performance* (2011; 1999). In other words, citizens of advanced western democracies remain largely attached to democratic principles, but express wide dissatisfaction as to how these principles are applied through political institutions (Norris, 2011). This sentiment was effectively captured during one of the focus group sessions, when a staff participant observed that “people want more democracy but they want less politics” (Staff Participant 4). This was reflected in responses to the last three questions put forward in the questionnaires, proposing statements based on satisfaction with UK politics, global politics and democracy more generally. Responses to the first two statements were overwhelmingly negative, while the introduction of the term ‘democracy’ rather than ‘politics’ precipitated much more balanced feedback. Early findings highlight the necessity of establishing exactly what we mean when we discuss politics and political engagement. The sheer number of definitions, factors and interpretations gained, even at this early stage, reinforces the risk of subjectivity and selectiveness that we take when diagnosing political (dis)engagement. The difference between the ‘pre-session’ and ‘post-session’ data would suggest that the sessions do relatively little to change basic political attitudes, aside from a perceived understanding of the respective functions of Parliament and Government. It appears that the focus group setting – reflexive communication, relating to others, and drawing on experiential knowledge – is much more influential in this regard.

More quantitative data is expected for this project in order to strengthen the basis of its conclusions. As discussed, almost all research participants were drawn either from engagement sessions or from parliamentary staff. Caveats must be applied in terms of the representativity of the sample; however the main focus of the research

is to understand engagement through those who are engaged, in order to learn lessons for engaging sectors of society that thus far remain elusive. It is also worth stating that, in response to the question “did you vote in the last general election?”, 69.2% confirmed that they had and 30.8% stated that they had not, which broadly reflects recent national turnout figures.⁵ 27.5% of respondents, moreover, said that they were a member of a political party, with 72.5% indicating they were not. Though the sample is somewhat self-selecting, it is on the basis of being sufficiently interested in the engagement session to attend, rather than being ‘engaged’ in every sense of the term. Care was taken to ensure that the engagement sessions studied by the author were not all Westminster-centric; the sessions attended in Finsbury Park, Darlington, York and Newcastle reflected this point. It is also the intention of the author to attend more engagement sessions run by non-parliamentary organisations, in order to better understand how public participants may relate differently to organisers and attendees alike.

⁵ This research was conducted prior to the 2017 general election, therefore respondents were indicating whether or not they had voted in the 2015 general election (which gained a turnout of 66.2% based on BBC data: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results>).

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