

Anti-politics after 23 June: How bad will the hangover be the morning after?

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Disaffection with politics and politicians has been on the rise since World War II. Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker discuss how this trend of negativity has fed in to the campaign to leave the EU, and write that while a remain victory may stem some of the immediate pressures on the British economy and state, it also has the potential to add to the mood of discontent.



Leave and Remain flotillas meeting during "Boat Leave" protest on 15 June 2016. Credit: Gerry Knight CC0 1.0

British politics has long been headed for troubled waters. Whatever the outcome of the vote on 23 June there seems little prospect of returning to some bygone golden age. In politics and in economics there are divisions that are getting sharper and more difficult to contain.

Disaffection with politics and politicians has been on the rise since the war. Survey data reveals that more and more citizens view British politicians negatively – out for themselves, not truthful, in the pay of special interests. The febrile climate of the campaign has seen such views exploited, and the tragic murder of Jo Cox has offered a powerful reminder of the threats faced by MPs serving their constituents and of how anti-political rhetoric has poisoned the well of democracy.

This trend of rising negativity is backed up by evidence from Mass Observation, the archive which holds the diaries of volunteer writers dating back to the 1940s. These show a rise in the prevalence of grievances with the way politics is conducted and rising intensity of ill-feeling towards the political class. During the 1945 election campaign, citizens tended to write in relatively measured terms about politicians and political parties. Now they express ‘hatred’ for politicians who make them ‘angry’, ‘incensed’, ‘outraged’, ‘disgusted’, and ‘sickened’. Politicians are described as arrogant, boorish, cheating contemptable, corrupt, creepy, deceitful, devious, disgraceful, fake, feeble, loathsome, lying, money-grabbing, parasitical, patronising, pompous, privileged, shameful, sleazy, slimy, slippery, smarmy, smooth, smug, spineless, timid, traitorous, weak, and wet.

This rise of anti-politics is explained in part by citizens’ changing images of the ‘good politician’. In the immediate

post-war period, politicians were judged against criteria of good character, principles, a mind of their own, self-control, strength, competency, vision, and personality. When diarists responded to a similar question just ahead of the 2015 general election, the criteria used to judge the political class had expanded: who should now be strong, intelligent, competent, principled, and trustworthy; but also sensible yet fun, hard-working yet cool and effortless, an exceptional personality yet normal and ordinary. The image of the good politician used to be multi-faceted but coherent and just about achievable for some politicians. It has become contradictory, and would be difficult to achieve under any circumstances.

The tail winds of anti-politics are behind the campaign to leave the EU. Distrust of politicians is one of the strongest predictors of support for Brexit – alongside Englishness, anxiety about immigration and economic pessimism. Outers tend also to be distrustful of ‘experts’, preferring to trust the man or woman in the street. This explains why the anti-establishment rhetoric of the Leave campaign, and its disregard for experts, has been so effective.

Economic division is reinforcing this political resentment. Geographical support for Brexit also tends to be concentrated in places that have suffered from the decline of light and heavy manufacturing – struggling to adapt to Britain’s knowledge- and service-based role in the global economy. Former mining terraces and dilapidated seaside piers are symbols of this economic stagnation, as proud heritages of industry and enterprise struggle to reinvent themselves for the 21st century. There is a rich seam of discontent in these areas that underpins distrust both of Brussels and Westminster.

But if anti-politics is one of the factors behind the recent surge in support for Leave, what will the post-referendum landscape look like? It seems unlikely that the feelings stoked up by the campaign will conveniently fade away. The genie is out of the bottle. Truthiness has become a weapon of political debate, which will ultimately further fuel distrust in politics, while the aspersions cast on ‘experts’ will not easily be withdrawn as words spoken in the heat of the moment. The campaign has created strange bedfellows on both sides, and trust may never be truly restored within some of the political parties.

But here economics kicks in again. Regardless of whether or not Britain leaves the EU, the winners and losers of the global economy will not change. Globalisation cannot be reversed, it can only be slowed. Taking power back from Brussels and restoring it to Westminster will not alter the fact that economic growth in the Britain is centred upon city regions – in the cosmopolitan settings where support for membership of the EU is strongest.

Devolution will favour wealthier, growing areas and do little to reduce inequalities within the UK’s economy. That is regardless of how the union of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland ends up splintering. Sink regions will find themselves left out of devolution deals and local leaders will be left to take the blame for managed decline. The residents of those areas, many whom will have voted for Brexit, will initially be surprised when their situation does not improve after a Leave vote and find that they are still faced with an elite in Westminster whom they distrust and dislike. As public services falter, under pressures of an aging population, weakened staff and a state that has been hollowed out in Whitehall, citizens will become more disillusioned with the capacity of government to deliver public services.

While a victory for Remain may stem some of the immediate pressures on the British economy and state, it also has the potential to fuel the mood of discontent out in the country. The stark warnings of the government about economic Armageddon will be framed as lies by sore losers, the outcome will be said to have been rigged, an establishment stich-up. Immigration will continue to be an issue where the expectations of many people will inevitably be disappointed. Public services will continue to face similar, if somewhat less acute, pressures of disinvestment, an aging population and failures to address long-term problems such as housing.

Leave or stay, the roots of anti-politics sentiment are deep, and will continue to pose a sequence of hard choices for policy-makers.

Note: This article draws on University of Southampton research on the Rise of Anti-Politics in Britain. Read more [here](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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