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Exploring Political Disappointment

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Across western democracies, citizens are held to expect much of politicians, yet governments are supposed to be ill-equipped to deliver against those expectations. The net result is said to be a widespread sense of political disappointment; a negative balance between what citizens expect of government and what they perceive governments to deliver. Yet little attention has hitherto been paid to which kinds of citizens are particularly disappointed with politics, and why. This paper offers one of the first empirical analyses of political disappointment. Drawing on a survey conducted in Britain, it quantifies political disappointment and explores which social groups are more prone to disappointment than others. The analysis considers whether certain groups are more disappointed with politics by virtue of expecting a lot of government or by virtue of perceiving government performance in a particularly poor light.

Keywords: Democratic discontent; Disappointment; Expectations; Government performance; Political trust.

The relationship of citizens to politicians and political institutions in modern times, it is sometimes said, is one characterised by disappointment. That is, citizens come to expect certain outputs from politics, yet perceive that governments and politicians fall short of these standards, resulting in feelings of let-down or disappointment. Political disappointment can be defined in terms of thwarted expectations; the discrepancy between what someone expects from politics and what they perceive they actually get. Many recent studies have identified a pervasive disappointment among citizens in western democracies, and attributed declining levels of political trust and democratic satisfaction to a sense of unfulfilled expectations among those citizens. Yet we know rather little about disappointment as a phenomenon. What does disappointment consist of and where does it derive from? Which groups within the population are more disappointed with politics than others? And why?

A number of studies have identified disappointment as a particular pathology of modern politics. Contemporary political systems, it is argued, encourage citizens to register multiple, and often conflicting, demands on governments, yet deny politicians many of the tools by which to respond to these demands (eg. Russell, 2005; Stoker, 2006; Flinders, 2009, 2012, 2014; Medvic, 2013; Sleat, 2013; Richards, 2014). The demands made by citizens may derive from a number of sources (eg. changing social structures, rising information and education levels, new technology and media messages), while the tools available to politicians may be constrained by a similar range of factors (eg. globalisation, the nature of the policy issues and depoliticisation of the policy process). At root, though, existing analyses of disappointment probe the changing nature of citizens' expectations of politics, alongside the capabilities of political actors to deliver on these demands.¹ What this study seeks to do is to build on the primarily conceptual basis of these studies by developing a more empirical focus in which political disappointment is explicitly measured and analysed. This enables us to identify more clearly which groups of citizens experience political disappointment, and for what reasons.

Why should we be interested in disappointment? First, because the presence in advanced democracies of disappointed citizens is troubling. Disappointment may be an inevitable consequence of a politics in which distinct social groups make different, and often conflicting, demands on the political system (Stoker, 2006: ch4; Sleat, 2013). Moreover, politicians may do well to ignore the expectations of some citizens, particularly where these expectations are ill-informed or biased (Hatier, 2012). Yet while recognising that some disappointment is probably inevitable, and that it is not desirable for politicians to pander to each and every popular whim, any evidence of a widespread belief among citizens that their political system is failing to deliver what is expected should be a cause for concern. The second reason for exploring

¹ The disjuncture between expectations and perceptions is just one 'gap' that may arise in citizens' minds when they think about the political system. A second gap reflects differences between people's perceptions of a public service and their actual experience of that service (Laycock, 2009). A third gap reflects differences between perceptions of service performance and objective indicators of performance (Flinders, 2009). There are therefore gaps relating to 'expectations', 'experience' and 'performance' (as well as others; see Flinders, 2012: 14-18), each of which might shape how favourably disposed citizens are towards politicians and politics. The focus of this article is on the expectations gap.

political disappointment is because it has been shown to generate various negative consequences. Unfulfilled expectations among citizens have been shown to contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent with the political system (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002: esp 44-48; Dalton, 2004: 143-54; Norris, 2011) as well as shaping evaluations of public services (Appleby and Alvarez Rosete, 2003; van Ryzin, 2004; James, 2009; Poister and Thomas, 2011; Heath and Curtice, 2012; although see Seyd, forthcoming). Moreover, as I show later on, disappointed citizens are less likely to participate in politics than their contented counterparts. For both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, then, there are solid grounds for seeking to measure political disappointment and for identifying which groups of citizens are particularly prone to disappointment and why.

1. Measuring political disappointment

Disappointment may be defined as a feeling that arises when an outcome or an event that is expected fails to materialise. Hence, disappointment is experienced whenever there is a disjuncture between the level or quality of an outcome that is expected and that which is experienced or perceived (Loomes and Sugden, 1986). The concept has been widely studied in fields such as economics, management and psychology, where it is associated with behavioural outcomes such as decisional choices, responses to service provision and patterns of social interaction (eg. Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999; Zeelenberg et al, 2000; Martinez et al, 2011). Disappointment has also been explored by political scientists where, as just noted, it is most frequently invoked as an explanation of growing levels of distrust and disengagement among citizens across western democracies.

Disappointment can be measured in a variety of ways. One, direct, measure involves asking people about incidents whose outcomes failed to match prior expectations or allocating participants to a scenario in which a disappointing result is explicitly laid out (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 1999). A second, more indirect, measure – as used here – involves asking fieldwork participants about their expectations of some service or outcome followed by a measure tapping their perceptions of that service or outcome (Oliver, 1997, ch4; Spreng and Page, 2003). Disappointment can then be measured by relating the perceptions score to the expectations score. If perceptions fall below expectations, then disappointment is inferred, while if perceptions exceed expectations, then elation is inferred. Assuming that expectations and perceptions are measured on some ordinal scale, then we can also compute various degrees of disappointment. Disappointment will be greatest among people who combine high expectations of an outcome with low perceptions of that outcome. Correspondingly, high elation will arise from a combination of low expectations and high perceptions of delivery.

To date, empirical research on the twin components of disappointment has, unsurprisingly, been devoted to perceptions of performance or delivery. Less effort has been devoted to considering the role of expectations. Granted, some studies have explored public expectations of politicians and their behaviour (in Britain: Graham et al, 2002; Birch and Allen, 2010; Allen and Birch, forthcoming; in the US: Medvic, 2013) and of the democratic system (Butt and

Fitzgerald, 2014). Other studies have examined the impact on expectations of information about service provision (James, 2011). And, as noted, other studies have examined how expectations and perceptions shape levels of trust in, and satisfaction with, public services. But few other studies have sought to measure what citizens expect of politicians. In part, of course, this reflects the paucity of appropriate data; relatively few surveys ask respondents what they expect of public services and political actors. Yet in the absence of such data, the analysis of expectations rests more on supposition than on empirical evidence.

To enable political disappointment to be measured, I draw on one of the few British surveys that cover not only how people perceive government but also what they expect of it. The annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has, since 1985, fielded questions that ask respondents whether they think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to deliver various public goods. These questions couch expectations in normative form, in terms of what government *should* do, not in anticipatory form, in terms of what they *will* do. Many previous studies in Britain and elsewhere (eg. Kimball and Patterson, 1997; James, 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2010; Poister and Thomas, 2011) have operationalised expectations in normative terms, asking citizens to identify a set of ideal outcomes or qualities. Other studies (such as MORI's 'Delivery Index') have measured expectations in anticipatory form. Since desired outcomes are not always identical to anticipated outcomes, we should note that measured levels of disappointment may be affected by the form in which expectations are assessed. Yet disappointment may arise through outcomes that fail to match what is desired as much as outcomes that fall short of what is anticipated. The indicators of expectations fielded on the BSA survey are thus appropriate to the task of measuring political disappointment.

Alongside questions on expectations of government, the BSA survey posed – in 2000, 2002 and 2006 – follow up questions asking respondents how far they perceived governments to have delivered these public goods. Expectations and perceptions were tested across the widest range of public goods in the 2002 BSA survey, and thus it is this survey that is drawn on here.² In what follows, I first set out what people expect of government, how they judge government performance and, hence, levels of political disappointment. Having established this basic picture, I then identify various explanations for political disappointment and put these explanations to empirical test.

2. Quantifying political disappointment

² The BSA 2002 survey employed a multi-stage stratified random sample of people aged 18 and over across Great Britain. The fieldwork was conducted between June and September 2002, with interviews conducted face to face. The total number of respondents to the main survey was 3435 (a response rate of 60.9%); the questions on government responsibility and performance were fielded on two of the self-completion questionnaires, to which 1911 people responded.

I begin by examining what British people expect of government, and how they perceive the government to perform.³ Expectations are measured by survey items that ask whether it should or should not be the government's responsibility to deliver various public goods: providing a job for everyone who wants one, keeping prices under control, providing healthcare for the sick and providing a decent standard of living for the elderly. The responses to these questions show that, while not all aspects of policy performance are equally prioritised by citizens, overall Britons place great store on government responsibility for public goods (Table 1). Measured on a scale where 1 equates to a belief that governments are not responsible for the public good and 4 equates to a belief that governments are responsible for the good, mean expectations all score 3 or above.

TABLE 1

Performance is measured by survey items that ask how successful governments are in delivering these public goods. Here, the results show just how negatively performance is assessed; only in relation to one policy outcome – providing adequate employment – do as many people judge government to have been successful as unsuccessful; on all the other policy outcomes, the aggregate judgement is that government performance has been unsuccessful (Table 2).

TABLE 2

So citizens in Britain, in 2002 at least, appear to expect a lot of their governments, but at the same time believe those governments largely fail to deliver these desired outcomes. Thus, when it comes to disappointment – which involves subtracting respondents' scores for government performance from their expectations scores – we find high levels of disappointment, albeit that these levels vary somewhat between policy areas. Disappointment is high on some policy areas (notably providing a decent standard of living for the elderly, with a mean disappointment score of 1.38) although rather lower on others (notably providing a job for all, with a mean disappointment score of 0.06).

TABLE 3

Having set out the basic distributions, we can now combine the scores across the four policy areas to generate separate summative scales measuring expectations, performance perceptions and disappointment.⁴ The distribution of these scales confirms the skew of opinion towards high expectations, low performance perceptions and, combining these two, towards high rates

³ The descriptive data reported in Tables 1-3 are weighted to take account of unequal probabilities in the chances of individuals being selected for interview.

⁴ The scales for expectations, performance perceptions and disappointment each comprise four items, which principal components analyses show to load onto single dimensions with correlations generally at 0.7 or above. Reliability measures for the scales are: expectations $\alpha=0.61$; performance perceptions $\alpha=0.77$; disappointment $\alpha=0.75$.

of political disappointment. Thus, over nine in ten of the sample indicated they thought government “definitely” or “probably” had a responsibility to deliver across the four public goods. Yet almost one half felt that governments were “very” or “fairly” unsuccessful in delivering on these goods; only one tenth perceived governments to be successful (the remaining four in ten being neutral). This translates into high rates of disappointment: almost three quarters of the sample manifested various degrees of disappointment, with only one quarter being either elated or neutral. The very disappointed (those scoring 2 and 3 on a disappointment scale running from -4 [content/elation] to +3 [maximally disappointed]) amount to almost one in six of the entire sample.

3. Explaining political disappointment

So far, I have offered one way of measuring and quantifying political disappointment and, using this measure, have shown just how prevalent disappointment appears to be among the citizens of one particular advanced democracy. There may be other ways in which disappointment might be measured, and if a different set of government activities or public goods was tested our quantification of disappointment might look rather different. But while the indicators presented so far may not exhaust the ways of measuring political disappointment, they at least offer a plausible starting point.

The paper now moves on to explore the possible reasons for political disappointment. This is not a straightforward task. For a start, many potential explanations for disappointment rest on factors relating to how well governments are seen to perform (in terms of economic outcomes or the state of public services, say). Yet in this paper’s operationalisation of disappointment, performance is already included as one of the core components, and thus cannot also appear as a potential predictor variable. Instead, we must seek to explain disappointment by reference to a less proximate set of factors, based on citizens’ broad values and social positions. A second complicating issue is that the wider literature provides few clues as to why particular citizens should be prone to feelings of political disappointment.⁵ These citizens will – at least as disappointment has been defined here – be those who expect much of government but who perceive its performance to fall below these standards. Yet it is not clear which citizens might fall into this category; it is difficult to pinpoint particular social groups whose members are likely to hold consistently high expectations of government yet to judge its performance in consistently negative terms, yielding an end-state of political disappointment.

⁵ While various authors have identified the existence of a gap between what citizens expect of the political system and their perceptions of what that system actually delivers, analyses of the drivers of this ‘expectations gap’ are sparse. Recent empirical studies that seek to explain the gap between what citizens expect of the political system and what they perceive they receive from it – in relation to factors such as presidential performance, democratic performance and the balance between representative and direct forms of decision making – include Jenkins Smith et al (2005), Waterman et al (2014) and Allen and Birch (forthcoming).

It is, however, rather easier to pinpoint likely variations among social groups in the twin components of disappointment, namely expectations and performance perceptions. Taking expectations first, we might anticipate systematic variations in what citizens desire of government depending on their level of political knowledge, the regard in which they hold politicians and the degree to which they rely on government. Citizens who are politically informed and knowledgeable should be more aware of the constraints under which political actors operate, and thus less prone to inflated and unrealistic expectations of what governments might deliver (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2005; Waterman et al, 2014). We should therefore find lower expectations – and thus lower levels of political disappointment – among people who are politically knowledgeable than among those who lack political knowledge. Expectations might be similarly low among people manifesting distrust in politicians and government (Morgeson, 2013). Among this group, distrust is likely to reflect a belief that public officials lack the competence to deliver appropriate policy outcomes or are little concerned with citizens' interests. Citizens who accept one or both of these positions are hardly likely to expect much of public officials. So we should anticipate that expectations of government will be lower among distrusting citizens than among their trusting counterparts. The corollary is that, unless distrusting citizens also assess government performance in negative terms, their level of disappointment should be lower than that among trusting citizens.⁶

On the other hand, certain social groups may be particularly prone to 'look to' government as the provider of various goods and services (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2005; Waterman et al, 2014). Among such dependent groups, expectations about the role of government are likely to exceed those among less dependent groups. We might therefore anticipate higher expectations of government among citizens within lower socio-economic groups than among those within higher socio-economic groups. We might also anticipate higher expectations among elderly cohorts within the population, who tend to be heavily reliant on the state, than among younger cohorts. However, expectations may also be high among the youngest age cohort. Members of this group are, relative to older age cohorts, likely to have less political experience and fewer well-formed political judgements. Those people in the youngest age cohort might therefore be supposed to be more idealistic of what political actors should achieve, manifested in higher expectations of governments. In each case, higher expectations – among social groups dependent on the state, and among the young – should translate into higher rates of disappointment.⁷

⁶ Indeed, one reason for the prevalence of distrust among citizens might be precisely a concern to limit positive expectations of politics, expectations that politicians are either unlikely to meet or are incapable of meeting.

⁷ We might also anticipate expectations being shaped by citizens' formative political experiences. In particular, citizens coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s are likely to have been socialised into holding higher expectations of government than among more recent generations, growing up with more obvious examples – and claims – of government failure (see, for example, Hay, 2007). Unfortunately, since we have no measures of political disappointment over an extended period of time, it is impossible to disentangle generational effects from lifecycle ones.

A different set of factors may serve to depress perceptions of political performance, and thus – without necessarily affecting people’s expectations of politics – to increase levels of popular disappointment. Those citizens who are exposed to critical information and commentary on politicians’ performance may well reduce their evaluations of government delivery. In Britain, the widespread reach of tabloid and middle-market newspapers, and the critical coverage adopted by many of these newspapers, suggest that evaluations of government performance will be lower among readers of these newspapers than among readers of the ‘quality press’ (ie. broadsheet newspapers) and among those exposed to no newspaper at all. A second factor likely to affect performance perceptions is partisanship. We would expect supporters of parties within government to judge policy performance more positively than supporters of parties outside government. However, incumbent party supporters may also hold higher expectations of government, while non-incumbent party supporters may expect less. Hence, the net effect of partisanship on disappointment is not clear, although by virtue of the strong hypothesised effects on performance ratings, we might expect disappointment to be higher among supporters of non-governing parties than among supporters of governing parties.

We therefore have a set of general factors that we expect to be associated with political disappointment. In particular, disappointment is likely to be higher among citizens with a limited understanding of politics, among those who trust politicians, among those dependent on government services, among those exposed to critical media messages and among supporters of parties outside government. But these characteristics are expected to affect disappointment via different routes (see summary of anticipated relationships in Table 4). In particular, citizens with low levels of political understanding (including the young), high rates of trust and dependence on government services should manifest greater rates of disappointment primarily on account of their higher expectations of government. Citizens exposed to critical media messages and supporters of parties not in government should similarly manifest high rates of disappointment, but this time primarily on account of their negative evaluations of government performance.

TABLE 4

To measure political information, I use indicators tapping survey respondents’ level of education and an indicator of political knowledge in the form of a four item factual quiz on the European Union. Political trust is measured by a question on whether government is trusted to place national interests before party interests. Dependence on government is assumed to be highest among those located in the lower socio-economic groups and among the elderly, and so social class and age variables are drawn on. Media exposure is measured through responses to a question on newspaper readership, with distinctions drawn between those reading tabloid and middle-market⁸ newspapers (assumed to contain more negative coverage of government

⁸ Middle market refers to readers of two newspapers (the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*) with high circulations, whose coverage and tone falls somewhere between the low quality tabloid press and the high quality broadsheet press. The tabloid category does not include the *Daily Mirror*, which is usually a

performance), broadsheet newspapers and no newspaper at all. Partisanship is measured by a question on party identification. (Question wordings, codings and descriptive statistics for all the variables are contained in the Appendix.)

Since the BSA measure of expectations asks about what public goods are desired of government, this indicator might also tap views on the role of the state. To control for the possibility that the indicator might engage respondents' political values as much as their expectations of government, the model includes a variable designed to assess left-right ideological position.⁹ Finally, since previous research has shown that expectations vary between men and women (James, 2011; Waterman et al, 2014: 148), I also include a measure of respondents' gender.

As the dependent variables – three separate scales of expectations, performance perceptions and disappointment – are measured on scales that are broadly linear in form, the empirical analysis is conducted using linear (OLS) regression modelling.¹⁰ The results, set out in Table 5, show that disappointment is shaped by various features of individuals' personal characteristics, their social positions and their political inclinations. As hypothesised, levels of disappointment are lower among people who are politically informed, namely those educated to university level and above and those manifesting high levels of political knowledge. The reason for these lower levels of disappointment is as anticipated, namely less elevated expectations of what governments should do. The well-educated and politically knowledgeable do not hold lower expectations by virtue of depending on, or 'looking to', government less than their more poorly educated and informed counterparts, nor by virtue of trusting government less, or of holding more anti-statist attitudes. These alternative explanations are all controlled for in the model (in the separate terms for social class, age, political trust and ideology). Instead, it looks more plausible that the lower expectations among the well-educated and knowledgeable derive from a better understanding of what government today is – and is not – capable of delivering. In other words, the expectations among politically knowledgeable citizens may be better informed and more realistic than among the less knowledgeable, thus contributing to lower rates of disappointment.

TABLE 5

strong supporter of the Labour Party (the incumbent administration in 2002) and whose readers might therefore be expected to take a more positive view of government performance.

⁹ This variable comprises a scale ($\alpha=0.82$) formed from summing the responses to five statements designed to gauge economic left-right positions (Evans and Heath, 1995): "Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off", "Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers", "Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth", "There is one law for the rich and one for the poor" and "Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance".

¹⁰ Since the scales are formed from individual survey questions whose response categories are ordinal, I also analysed the data using an ordered logit form; the results are almost identical to those obtained from the linear regression model.

Disappointment also arises among females in large part due to expectations, although here expectations are higher – than among males – and consequently levels of disappointment are greater. But disappointment arises among citizens who distrust government via a different route. The hypothesis was that political distrust would depress what citizens expect of government, in turn reducing their tendency to be disappointed. In fact, distrustful citizens do not expect less of politicians than do their trusting counterparts; but they do evaluate government performance in more negative terms, and this contributes to higher, not lower, rates of political disappointment.

Political disappointment only partly reflects patterns of social deprivation. With the partial exception of expectations, no clear distinctions emerge among people in different social class groups (and even on expectations, it is not people in the lowest social group that are most inclined to ‘look to’ government, but those in slightly higher groups).¹¹ When it comes to age, there is some evidence, as anticipated, of the elderly expecting more of government than do younger age groups (although there is no such evidence for the youngest age cohort). Yet the most significant effect of age seems to lie in rosier evaluations of government performance.¹² These positive perceptions of government performance outweigh elderly people’s higher expectations of government, meaning that levels of disappointment are lower among this age group than among younger age groups.

The results provide only partial support for the hypothesis that political disappointment will be higher among readers of tabloid and mid-market newspapers, on account of the more negative performance evaluations contained in these media. Readers of these newspapers are more likely than broadsheet readers to be politically disappointed. But, particularly in the case of mid-market newspaper readers, this disappointment springs as much from high expectations of government as from negative ratings of government performance. Nor is political disappointment strongly distributed on partisan lines. As noted earlier, supporters of opposition parties may evaluate government performance negatively (and the results in Table 5 suggest they do), but unless they also hold high expectations of government (and Conservative supporters unsurprisingly expect less of government than do Labour supporters), the impact on disappointment will be negligible. Finally people’s left-right ideological values have a strong impact, particularly on expectations. The magnitude of this effect is not surprising, since left-right values are likely to overlap with attitudes towards the desired role of government.¹³

¹¹ Testing the impact of being in a highly marginalised group – the unemployed – showed no significant impact on disappointment. Reinforcing the findings presented here, previous research has shown that, except in particularly deprived neighbourhoods, there are minimal differences between social classes in levels of thwarted expectations concerning public services (Duffy, 2000: 31-32).

¹² A finding mirrored in previous research, which shows that evaluations of public service performance are much higher among the elderly than among younger age groups (Duffy, 2000: 28-31).

¹³ Dropping the left-right ideological measure from the models yields little substantive changes in the other coefficients.

We can therefore identify some of the social groupings and individual characteristics associated with higher or lower levels of political disappointment. People do not appear to be disappointed because of social deprivation and a tendency to 'look to' government for support. People in lower social class groups are no more disappointed than their higher social class counterparts, while the elderly are less, not more, disappointed, largely on account of their more positive perceptions of government performance. Nor is disappointment shaped by the nature of information received by citizens or by partisan considerations. Instead, disappointment appears more strongly shaped by people's understanding of the political system. There are fewer disappointed people among the well-educated and politically knowledgeable groups, not because these people are less critical of government performance, but because they hold lower expectations of what governments should achieve.

Thus, some of the factors anticipated to shape disappointment appear, in practice, to have little or no effect. And, overall, the full set of factors identified as likely to shape disappointment performs only a partial role, since they enable us to account for just one fifth of the total variance in disappointment, and rather less of the variance in expectations and performance perceptions. Among the factors that do shape people's attitudes towards government we can glean the relative size of their effects by computing the degree of change in disappointment, expectations and performance perceptions caused by shifting the values of each explanatory variable individually, while holding constant the values of all other explanatory variables. The relevant figures are shown in the final column of each model in Table 5, headed by the delta sign.¹⁴ Here, we see that the variable with the greater effect on disappointment is trust; moving from trusting government the most to trusting it the least increases mean levels of disappointment by more than one full point. Disappointment is also strongly affected by people's ideological values; holding left-wing values markedly increases levels of disappointment, largely due to the higher expectations of government these values engender. The effects on disappointment of political values and assessments of the political system are far stronger than any demographic effects. Yet certain social groupings are associated with distinct patterns of political disappointment, in particular education and age. The effects of newspaper readership and partisanship turn out to be very weak; levels of disappointment are only marginally affected by which paper a person reads or which party they support.

Hence, although levels of political disappointment do vary across groups within the population, these variations are not substantial. The distribution of disappointment cuts across, as much as reflecting, the social groupings considered here. This is perhaps unsurprising, since as was shown earlier, political disappointment is widespread across the population. And the picture does not change greatly if we restrict our focus to people who are particularly disappointed with government (roughly one in six of the population) or to people who hold particularly high

¹⁴ The figures represent the changes in the expected level of the dependent variables that follow from changing each independent variable from one value to another (for categorical variables) or from their lowest to their highest values (for continuous variables), while holding the values of all the other variables constant at their means. These substantive effects – calculated using the Clarify programme (Tomz et al, 2003) – are only shown for variables that achieve statistical significance in the models.

expectations or particularly lowly performance evaluations. Indeed, when we focus on these groups, we find rather fewer factors emerging as significant predictors from the models.¹⁵ Disappointment is better thought of as a graduated scale than as a binary 'either/or' condition.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Political disappointment has been identified as one of the most serious 'pathologies' of modern politics. It also has potentially important effects on political outcomes. Several recent studies have suggested that political performance that falls below citizens' expectations serves to depress a willingness to trust government. The effects of unfulfilled expectations are not limited to attitudes, but also extend to the way citizens behave. Disappointment is often found to trigger feelings of powerlessness and apathy (Zeelenberg et al, 2000). People who are disappointed with politics may retreat from engagement, on the grounds that they feel unable to shape outcomes in the desired manner. This disengagement is manifested in politics as much as in other walks of life. Thus, when using the same BSA survey, but drawing on measures of political engagement, we find that disappointment exerts a depressive impact on participation. Thus, among our sample, turnout at the 2001 British general election among the politically content was reported to be 78%, while rather lower among the disappointed, at 68%. The impact on other forms of conventional participation is even starker: faced with a law of which they disapproved, 66% of the politically content indicated they would contact their Member of Parliament, against just 47% of the most disappointed. Political disappointment is thus consequential, both for how benignly citizens view political actors and for their propensity to engage with the political system.

The analysis presented here is one of the first attempts to shed some empirical light on political disappointment. To be sure, the findings are suggestive rather than definitive. For a start, the analysis of disappointment draws on citizens from a single country and from a single point in time. Moreover, disappointment is gauged by reference to a particular set of government policy functions. The nature, and correlates, of disappointment might well differ in other national contexts, at other time periods and by using other policy functions as referents to measure expectations and perceptions of performance. Another reason for caution is that the measure of disappointment used in this analysis involves expectations of what governments should do, rather than of what they are likely to do. While previous studies have measured expectations in their desired form (ie. what governments should do), it might make more sense to measure expectations in their anticipated form (ie. what government is likely to do). Disappointment in politics is arguably more likely to arise from a sense that political outcomes fail to match those that were *anticipated* than from those that were *desired*. While disappointment may reflect a sense that perceived outcomes fail to meet desired outcomes, if we are interested in probing disappointment more fully, it would be helpful to gather data on what citizens anticipate from politics, as well as what they desire from it.

¹⁵ The modelling here uses a binary logit form, contrasting groups manifesting particularly high levels of disappointment or expectations, or particularly low levels of performance perceptions, with all others.

Notwithstanding these caveats, the results set out here suggest that disappointment may be considered a pathology of politics today; getting on for three quarters of British citizens manifest some form of political disappointment. Yet while disappointment appears to be fairly widespread, its distribution is not wholly even across the population, and the variations uncovered provide us with some clues as to its causes. The guiding assumption was that disappointment would be higher among groups prone to inflated expectations and among groups primed to perceive political performance in negative terms. The results show that these assumptions are partially correct. Disappointment is lower among better informed citizens, since these individuals tend to set more modest expectations of what politicians should deliver. Yet expectations are not particularly inflated among social groups dependent on government, or if they are – as is the case with the elderly – these expectations are matched by more positive assessments of government delivery. And, while perceptions of government performance are shaped by partisanship, this doesn't translate into feelings of disappointment. Instead, the effect of low performance perceptions in stimulating disappointment is most evident among people who distrust government.

What do these findings suggest might be done to overcome, or at least to reduce, feelings of disappointment among citizens? In truth, the results outlined here do not yield a clear and precise set of guidelines for policy makers. For a start, there are no stark variations in disappointment among social groups, and so few clear demographic targets for policy makers to focus on. Since the results suggest that levels of disappointment are lower among the well-educated and informed sections of the population, one strategy might be to boost levels of political knowledge; the more that people understand about politics, the lower their expectations appear to be and thus the less likely they are to experience disappointment. However, raising levels of political awareness and understanding across a population is a difficult and long-run task. What other strategies might be adopted to counter political disappointment?

Since disappointment has been defined as the gap between a perceived outcome and an expected outcome, one obvious strategy is to improve levels of perceived performance while limiting what citizens expect government to deliver. However, as countless governments have discovered, it is difficult to raise performance levels, and even if this can be achieved, citizens' perceptions of performance often lag behind objective improvements (the 'performance gap' identified earlier, in fn1; see also Paldam and Nannestad, 2000). It might be thought easier to tackle disappointment by reducing what citizens expect of government. Indeed, studies within social psychology have suggested that individuals may feel less of a discrepancy between what they expect from an outcome and what they actually experience if prior expectations are minimised (Van Dijk et al, 2003). Yet limiting public expectations may not be straightforward. In a recent analysis of public expectations about public services, James (2011) showed that normative expectations of government are only weakly sensitive to actual levels of government performance. While high performance tends to stimulate what citizens expect of government, poor performance does little to dampen those expectations. Thus, as James notes, it is unlikely

that policy makers will be able to restrict popular expectations by pointing to low levels of government performance.

Perhaps a broader approach is needed. If analysts such as Stoker (2006) and Flinders (2012) are right, that disappointment arises in large part because citizens impose numerous, often conflicting, demands and expectations on government – expectations that governments struggle to meet – then political actors surely have a redemptive role in conveying to citizens just what is involved in decision making, particularly by highlighting the compromises and trade-offs that are often required. As Stoker forcefully argues, the political realm is not akin to the personal realm; the citizen is not equivalent to the consumer. Instead, politics involves adjudicating between demands, and sometimes sacrificing some citizens' goals in order to meet others'. Perhaps one way to limit levels of disappointment is to educate the public on the complexities of decision making in a large and diverse polity such as Britain. This, of course, runs up against the incentives that politicians face to promise the earth in the hope of attracting votes. This 'collective action problem' will only be overcome if politicians can agree among themselves about the benefits they are all likely to reap from being more open and honest about what governments can, and more importantly, cannot, deliver.

Appendix: Question details and descriptive statistics

Label	Wording	Min	Max	Mean	SD	N
Expectations of government						
On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to ... provide a job for everyone who wants one/keep prices under control/provide healthcare for the sick/provide a decent standard of living for the elderly?						
Summed six point scale (4 items, $\alpha=0.61$) running from 1=low expectations to 4=high expectations		+1	+4	3.56	0.42	1725
Perceptions of government performance						
Irrespective of whether you think it ought to be the government's responsibility, how successful do you think governments have been in recent years at ensuring that ... everyone who wants a job has one/prices are kept under control/everyone has good access to adequate healthcare/all elderly people have a decent standard of living?						
Summed 14 point scale (4 items, $\alpha=0.77$) running from 1=very unsuccessful to 5=very successful		+1	+5	2.80	0.83	1757
Disappointment						
Sum of expectations scale minus performance scale						
Seventeen point scale ($\alpha=0.75$) running from -4 (content/elation) to +3 (disappointment)		-4	+3	0.78	0.98	1656
Explanatory variables						
Education: completed education 0=below university, 1=university and above		0	1	0.30	0.46	3411
Political knowledge: correct answers to four item factual knowledge quiz on the EU, 0= ≤ 2 correct answers, 1= ≥ 3 correct answers		0	1	0.44	0.50	3435
Distrust: 1=high trust, 4=low trust		1	4	2.98	0.77	2235
Social class: five categories comprising professional (reference), intermediate, small employers, technical and routine occupations		1	5	-	-	3337
Age: six age categories comprising 45-54 (reference) up to 65+		1	6	-	-	3431
Gender: 0=male, 1=female		0	1	0.56	0.50	3435
Newspaper readership: six categories comprising broadsheet (reference), no paper, tabloid, mid-market, other and Daily Mirror.		1	6	-	-	3435
Party identification: five categories comprising Labour (reference), Conservative, Liberal Democrat, other party and no party		1	5	-	-	3435
Left-right ideology: summed 30 point scale (five items, $\alpha=0.82$), running from 1=right wing to 5=left wing		1	5	3.50	0.77	2816

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Table 1: Expectations of government

Government responsibility:	Level of expectation (%)				Mean*	N ⁺
	Should not be		Should be			
	Definitely	Probably	Probably	Definitely		
Provide healthcare for the sick	0	1	12	87	3.86	1860
Provide decent standard of living for elderly	0	1	17	82	3.80	1850
Keep prices under control	1	4	40	56	3.51	1815
Provide a job for everyone who wants one	7	15	43	36	3.07	1767

* Mean score: 1=definitely should not be, and 4=definitely should be

⁺ Excludes those who did not answer the question or who answered 'cannot choose'.

Question wording: "On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to ...?"

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2002*

Table 2: Assessed performance of government

Table 2: Assessed performance of government							
Government performance:	Degree of government success (%)					Mean*	N ⁺
	Unsuccessful		Neither	Successful			
	Very	Fairly		Fairly	Very		
Everyone who wants a job has one	8	24	30	36	2	3.01	1827
Prices are kept under control	11	28	24	33	4	2.92	1828
Everyone has good access to adequate healthcare	15	28	21	34	2	2.80	1847
All elderly people have a decent standard of living	23	34	22	19	2	2.42	1850

* Mean score: 1=very unsuccessful, and 5=very successful

⁺ Excludes those who did not answer the question or who answered 'cannot choose'.

Question wording: "Irrespective of whether you think it ought to be the government's responsibility, how successful do you think governments have been in recent years at ensuring that ...?"

Source: *British Social Attitudes 2002*

Table 3: Levels of disappointment across different policy areas

	Disappointment (%)								Mean*	N
	Low				High					
	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3		
Provide decent standard of living for elderly	0	0	1	7	21	20	30	22	1.38	1827
Provide healthcare for the sick	0	0	0	7	33	20	26	14	1.07	1826
Keep prices under control	0	0	3	20	27	21	19	9	0.59	1785
Provide a job for everyone who wants one	0	2	9	23	31	18	12	4	0.06	1742

* Mean score: -4=low disappointment to +3=high disappointment

Table 4: Summary of hypothesised relationships

	Expectations	Performance	Disappointment
High political information and knowledge	Low	-	Low
Low political trust	Low	-	Low
Social groups dependent on government	High	-	High
Exposure to critical media	-	Low	High
Non-incumbent government partisanship	-	Low	High

Table 5: The determinants of disappointment, expectations and performance perceptions

	Disappointment			Expectations			Performance		
	Coef	se	Δ	Coef	se	Δ	Coef	se	Δ
Higher education and above (below higher education)	-0.14	0.06*	<u>-.20</u>	-0.27	0.09**	<u>-.35</u>	0.07	0.05	
High political knowledge	-0.12	0.05*	<u>-.12</u>	-0.25	0.07**	<u>-.28</u>	0.05	0.04	
Social class (manager/professional)									
Intermediate	0.06	0.08		0.26	0.12*	<u>.05</u>	0.02	0.06	
Small employers	0.10	0.09		0.21	0.15		-0.04	0.08	
Technical	0.10	0.08		0.44	0.12**	<u>.14</u>	0.01	0.07	
Routine	0.03	0.06		0.16	0.10		0.00	0.05	
Age (45-54)									
18-24	0.05	0.10		0.16	0.16		-0.03	0.08	
25-34	-0.05	0.08		0.00	0.12		0.03	0.06	
35-44	-0.07	0.07		0.12	0.11		0.08	0.06	
55-64	-0.22	0.08**	<u>-.28</u>	0.11	0.12		0.21	0.06**	<u>.29</u>
65+	-0.36	0.07**	<u>-.35</u>	0.23	0.12*	<u>.14</u>	0.41	0.06**	<u>.37</u>
Female (male)	0.15	0.05**	<u>.14</u>	0.17	0.07*	<u>.18</u>	-0.10	0.04*	<u>-.09</u>
Distrust	0.31	0.03**	<u>1.04</u>	0.07	0.05		-0.29	0.03**	<u>-.97</u>
Newspaper read (broadsheet)									
No paper	0.19	0.08*	<u>.04</u>	0.43	0.12**	<u>.07</u>	-0.08	0.06	
Tabloid	0.27	0.10**	<u>.07</u>	0.26	0.15		-0.21	0.08**	<u>-.03</u>
Mid-market	0.36	0.09**	<u>.11</u>	0.48	0.14**	<u>.22</u>	-0.24	0.08**	<u>-.04</u>
Other	0.21	0.11		0.40	0.18*	<u>.29</u>	-0.13	0.09	
Party identification (Labour)									
Conservative	0.21	0.06**	<u>.04</u>	-0.21	0.10*	<u>-.03</u>	-0.29	0.05**	<u>-.04</u>
Liberal Democrat	0.11	0.07		-0.09	0.12		-0.15	0.06*	<u>-.08</u>
Green/Other	0.16	0.11		-0.24	0.18		-0.22	0.09*	<u>-.12</u>
No party	0.13	0.07		-0.13	0.10		-0.14	0.05*	<u>-.16</u>
Left ideology	0.25	0.03**	<u>.85</u>	0.45	0.05**	<u>1.95</u>	-0.14	0.03**	<u>-.36</u>
Constant	-1.37	0.18**		1.92	0.29**		4.35	0.15**	
Prob > F	0.0000			0.0000			0.0000		
R ²	0.20			0.16			0.18		
N	1593			1654			1690		

For categorical variables, the reference category is given in brackets.

Δ shows the change in the expected value of the dependent variables caused by moving the value of the independent variable from its base or lowest value, while holding constant the mean values of all other variables.

** $p \leq 0.01$ * $p \leq 0.05$; two-tailed tests.