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Understanding and Challenging Populist Negativity towards Politics: The Perspectives of British Citizens

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Abstract:	This article adapts and develops the idea of a "stealth" understanding of politics to explore how citizen's estrangement from formal politics is processed cognitively through a populist lens. Earlier work has shown the widespread presence of stealth attitudes in the USA and Finland. We show that stealth attitudes are well established in Britain, demonstrate their populist character and reveal that age, newspaper readership and concerns about governing practices help predict their adoption by individuals. Yet our survey findings also reveal a larger body of positive attitudes towards the practice of democracy suggesting that there is scope for challenging populist angst. We explore these so-called "sunshine" attitudes and connect them to the reform options favoured by citizens; concluding that improving the operation of representative politics is a factor key to challenging populist negativity

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Introduction

Evidence of mounting negativity towards politics in established democracies predates the economic downturn prompted by the global financial crisis – and it is likely to prove more enduring (Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004; Stoker, 2006; Torcal and Montero, 2006; Hay, 2007; Norris, 2011). To contribute meaningfully to the debate about disenchantment with the practice of politics and what might be done to alleviate it; political scientists need to provide answers to three questions. What is the form and structure of popular disenchantment? What is the extent of the stranglehold that it now exerts on the body politic? And what reform mechanisms might help to promote a more positive engagement with politics by citizens?

Drawing on evidence from Britain set in a broader comparative context this article tries to answer all three questions. We use established yet innovative survey measures tested in several countries to explore what British citizens think about politics and how it should work. We add additional evidence from focus groups in which citizens were given the opportunity to explore and propose reform measures that might improve politics and we test those ideas in the context of a wider and more representative sample of British citizens.

In answer to the first question we argue that the expression of what irks many citizens about politics takes a modern populist form that we label 'stealth populism'. We draw on the idea of stealth democracy originally proposed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) but reframe the understanding of stealth attitudes. This mind-set we see less as the expression of a commitment to a particular and preferred vision of democracy and more as an expression of populist angst about the current practice of politics. Stealth populists think

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that in a democracy the political system should deliver what the people want without them having to pay continual attention to it. From such a perspective, the perceived failings of the current political system are a product of too much politicking. Politicians talk rather than act, make too many compromises to special interests and do not take sufficient cognizance of expertise to come to sensible decisions. Both the construction of expressed negativity towards politics and its drivers support our argument that stealth populism is a perspective with a populist character and origins.

Our response to the second question about the depth of stealth populism is to argue that its grip is strong, but far from unbreakable. Public attitudes towards institutions such as the political system, which are rarely at the forefront of their attention, are always layered, regularly ambivalent and sometimes loosely formed. In particular, though citizens may well hold stealth values they typically do so alongside other more positive views about the operation of democratic politics and the potential role they might have in it (Neblo et al, 2010a). Our empirical evidence confirms the presence of these more positive understandings. We label them, following the work of Neblo et al (2010a), 'sunshine' views of democratic politics. Their presence indicates an enduring capacity of citizens to see politics as operating in a manner close to long-established and familiar principles of liberal representative democracy. But, in contrast to Neblo et al and Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, we do not see 'stealth' and 'sunshine' views as mutually exclusive, such that evidence of one might disconfirm the presence of the other. Rather, we see them as alternative understandings (pre-formed vernaculars, in effect) in and through which citizens make sense of different (and/or ambivalent) political cues (and which are typically triggered by those cues). Citizens, we suggest, have the capacity to view the politics they witness in

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more optimistic or more pessimistic terms. The key question is how our politics might be reformed so as more consistently to trigger or cue their more positive disposition (or, indeed, to lead them to resolve the ambiguity or ambivalence inherent in many political cues in a more forgiving way).

The final contribution of the article tackles this directly, by considering what might be done to reform politics. What kind of political reforms would incline citizens more to express a 'sunshine' disposition as opposed to passing an increasingly stealthy populist and cynical judgment of contemporary democratic practice? Our approach is to ask citizens themselves about their reform preferences by giving them the opportunity to reflect and deliberate collectively on the question. Using focus groups alongside new survey evidence we show that the reforms most favoured by British citizens are about restoring representative politics rather than necessarily grabbing new opportunities for participation. Populist negativity towards politics might be challenged so that stealth populism could be trumped by popular endorsement of the nuanced practice of liberal representative democracy providing that the behaviour of politicians changed and the context of the exchange between representatives and citizens was less dominated by spin and playing to the media gallery.

The paper begins with a review of the scope and limitations of our various data sources. Thereafter we connect stealth attitudes to our understanding of populist negativity. We then test empirically that connection using original survey data from 2011/12 before exploring the presence of more positive sunshine attitudes using the same data set. Finally

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we report on citizens' reform preferences using material from focus groups conducted in 2011/12 and additional survey work conducted late in 2012.

Populist Angst in Contemporary Democracy: Beyond Stealth versus Sunshine views

Most contemporary commentators agree that, at its core, populism is an anti-phenomenon (Mudde, 2004; Mény and Surel, 2002). It relies on the distinction between a pure and sovereign people, on the one hand, and corrupt political elite on the other – and, of course, the (moral) supremacy of the former over the latter (Deiwiks, 2009 and Akkerman, 2003). A further distinction can be drawn between populism as a zeitgeist, a way of thinking about contemporary politics (Mudde, 2004; Mair, 2005), and populism as a political movement or form of political mobilization (whether of right or left) (Taggart, 2002; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Deiwiks, 2009). In what follows we focus on populism as set of ideas that is prevalent in the judgement of contemporary democracies by citizens. The challenge is to find a way of encapsulating and measuring this populist zeitgeist.

The literature on populism helps us towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The rise of populism as a prevalent framing for contemporary politics rests on an ambiguity at the heart of democracy, as Margaret Canovan (1999) explains. Populism is a bi-product of the interplay between the 'two faces of democracy', one 'redemptive', the other 'pragmatic'. The former views democracy 'as rule by the people'. Accordingly, it regards politics as legitimate when it delivers unambiguously 'what the people want'. By contrast, the latter more pragmatic view is more focused on the compromises, deals and institutional devices that enable different interests to be reconciled without resort to violence. Regular failures to deliver on the redemptive vision and the murky realties of

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pragmatic democratic politics provide the breeding ground for populist attitudes. The palpable tension between these two understandings provides the space in which populism flourishes. Populism picks at the gap between a democracy seen through the narrow lens of rule by the people and that seen through the image of the complexities of liberal democratic governance.

Trends in the long-term conduct of politics in contemporary democracies (including ostensibly benign processes such as the rise of multiculturalism) have arguably made the gap between rule by the people and liberal representative politics loom larger. The increased professionalization of politics has created a fertile breeding-ground for 'us' versus 'them' populist stealth angst. As Mair (2005 p. 20) puts it, 'traditional politics is seen less and less as something that belongs to the citizens or to the society, and is instead seen as something that is done by politicians'. Parties, lobbyists, think tankers and political advisors are professionals and operate increasingly within their own world of rules and norms divorced from standards of pecuniary and discursive honesty favoured by citizens in general (Allen and Birch, 2014).

Moreover, the breakdown of traditional political platforms has encouraged political elites to adopt populist rhetoric to counter these trends and to take up, at times, anti-political stances themselves. It is elites rather than citizens that have led debates about the 'democratic deficit' in the European Union and politicians have not been slow to run negative campaigns and accuse their opponents of incompetence, dishonesty, sleaze or corruption; moreover, it is again political elites who have led the move to the sub-contracting of their decision-making powers to unelected experts, such as independent

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central banks (Hay, 2007). These practices have effects. As Mudde (2004, p. 562) comments, 'after years of reading and hearing about dysfunctional national and supranational democracies, more and more people have become both sensitised to the problem, and convinced that things can and should be better'.

Another trend credibly reinforcing the proliferation of populist attitudes is the 'mediatisation' of politics and the role of tabloid coverage in promoting a populist negativity towards politics – in effect, a populist anti-politics which pits the people (and 'the will of the people') against those who claim to represent them. The core role of the media in presenting contemporary politics is widely acknowledged (Mair, 2005; Street, 2011). Moreover, our own work shows it to be widely understood by citizens themselves (Authors, 2015). As Mazzoleni (2008, p. 50) notes, 'if we examine the processes of media-driven representation and the symbolic construction of favourable opinion climates ... we find a significant degree of support for the rise of populist phenomena'. The impact of the media is complex in that mainstream media can play a crucial role in challenging populism and certainly in scrutinising populist political movements. The breeding ground for populist sentiment is, then, more likely to come from the tabloid or popular news media – and they have often been keen to present themselves in precisely such terms. Under commercial (or, indeed, proprietorial) pressure to maximise audience figures, such media sources typically present what is regarded as a simplified (more pejoratively, 'dumbed down') version of the news and perhaps also a more sensational and sensationalised view of what the 'news' is (Crick, 2005). The result is a characteristic tendency towards sensationalist accounts focused on scandals and personalities, presenting complex problems in terms of stark choices (Mazzoleni, 2008). Such news media typically present

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themselves as guardians and guarantors of the people's interest in a context in which such interests are in danger of being thwarted by political elites and the machinations of political power.

The economic downturn experienced by many contemporary democracies and scandals over politicians expenses or allegations of corruption have added to the negative mood music surrounding politics. But it is the longer term factors identified above in the construction and reportage of politics that provide the bedrock to populist angst about democratic practice. The evidence relating to political disenchantment points to its considerable and sustained presence prior to the crisis, both in the UK (Stoker, 2006; Hay 2007) and beyond (Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004).

Our argument is that a populist vernacular about politics has been consolidated over recent years, sourcing the negative commentary on its practices with a repertoire of discursive resources and an array of florid images and allusions. This picks at the gap between the ideal of 'rule by the people' and the complexities of modern representative politics. But how can that gap in public attitudes be operationlised and measured? Our solution is to turn to the debate about two putative and contrasting visions of democracy, labelled 'stealth' and 'sunshine' perspectives by their advocates. The stealth view captures (as it characterises) the populist angst at the failure to deliver rule by the people and the sunshine view similarly seeks to capture (and characterise) citizens' comprehension of the nuanced practices of liberal democracy. In what follows, we develop concepts originally developed for other purposes into frameworks for demonstrating the extent of populist

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angst in contemporary democracies and the reserve pool of public understanding of the intricacies of democracy.

The stealth framing was originally devised by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) as an attempt empirically to refute the expectations of some normative democratic theorists who emphasized the important of citizen participation to effective democracy. As such, their work makes them the present day inheritors of the perspective on democracy so powerfully articulated, in its modern form, by Schumpeter (1942). This perspective argues the most citizens want to ensure the protection of their interests and rights yet wish also to be disengaged from daily politics, as voting gives them the crucial power to select their leaders. The critics of the stealth model, most prominently Neblo et al (2010), use their own empirical work to rework the case for seeing unconditional participation as central to democracy. They seek to show that citizens exhibit a more positive orientation to the political engagement available to them. This they summarize as a 'sunshine' attitude to democratic practice, an understanding that recognizes both the opportunities afforded by contemporary democracy and its complexities.

As the above discussion suggests, the debate between proponents of the stealth and sunshine theses replays, in a more contemporary context, a long-established debate, both empirical and normative, between elite and participative understandings of democracy (Held, 2006). Our aim is to move the debate on, by seeing stealth and sunshine perspective not as mutually exclusive but as contending vernaculars in and through which citizens might and do make sense of different political experiences. The stealth perspective, we contend, represents less a theory of elite democracy and more a populist expression of

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angst, a framework in and through which to rail against the perceived failing of democratic politics. The sunshine perspective represents the other side of the democratic gap picked at by populism, a more nuanced understanding of the nature and limits of liberal representative democracy. Most citizens, we suggest, retain the capacity to understand and make sense of the politics they experience in and through either system of thinking. As such, the presence of one cannot be taken as evidence of the absence of the other. Similarly, evidence of the presence of both cannot be taken as indicative of irrationality in citizens' understandings of politics.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) frame their discussion within the context of a strong awareness of popular understandings of the ills of contemporary democracy. Yet they use the term populism, as they put it, 'loosely, to refer to those who want to give the people more power' (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002:52). This rather perverse definition of populism (in contrast to the theoretical landscape laid out above) blinds them to the rather obvious populist features of the stealth democracy that they argue most (US) citizens want. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's starting point is that most citizens do not want to engage in the detail of politics in part because they assume that most people agree with them and in part because they dislike debate and messy compromise. Politics, for them, should be about getting on with delivering what the people want. Politicians should do what they say and get on with the task of governing – quietly, effectively and efficiently. Yet politics too often appears to be failing, dominated as it is by self-serving politicians, lobbyists and the dark arts of politicking and spin. Frustration with the political elite is such that experts or business leaders might be seen to be more likely to do better in delivering good government.

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Our argument is that stealth attitudes among citizens need to be seen as an expression of a widespread and embedded populist understanding of politics in mature democracies. The stealth perspective gets its leverage from a populist understanding of the gap between how politics *should be* and how *it is perceived* to be. The drivers of stealth attitudes populism we would also expect to reflect its populist character. As such, stealth attitudes might have a broader but nonetheless shared constituency with the most strongly mobilised form of populism in contemporary UK politics – that expressed by UKIP (Ford and Goodwin, 2013). This has consistently been shown to be disproportionately male, of lower social status and from older age groups. We suspect that the stealth perspective is, in comparison with UKIP support, likely to attract support from individuals from across a broader social spectrum. But we suspect also that some of the demographic factors noted above may be in play, a proposition we test directly in what follows. Supporters of stealth populism are more likely to be users of populist media coverage of politics than those who follow politics through the more nuanced coverage from more detailed broadsheet media. In terms of their orientation towards politics we would envisage that its supporters would declare themselves less interested in politics, resistant to greater involvement in politics but confident enough in their own capacities to support a greater direct say for themselves over key issues. Those disproportionately inclined to express a stealth disposition do not see themselves as incapable citizens but as citizens frustrated by the failure of the political system to deliver. These citizens may not be deeply interested in politics but they do fear that the governing system is failing and they are likely to stand out in expressing that concern.

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The sunshine perspective, in contrast, embraces much more closely a textbook version of liberal representative politics and its (legitimate) limits (Neblo et al. 2010a: 572, fn 18). It sees value in debate and deliberation and recognises the need to look for compromise. Accountable elected politicians need to be at the heart of decision-making in order for government to be legitimate. Whereas the stealth-oriented citizen will engage with politics only under sufferance (and in order to hold those in office in check), the sunshine-oriented citizen is a more willing participant as long as the political world corresponds sufficiently to the ideal of a level playing field (see also Authors 2015). From the stealth perspective, politics is about achieving efficiency in collective action; from the sunshine perspective it is about reconciling competing values. Advice from business and other experts in making public decisions has its place in this latter world, but the key role remains with elected politicians who need to have the final say (and bear the ultimate responsibility). As this suggests, both perspectives are as much normative as they are empirical.

Neblo et al (2010a: 573) argue the sunshine perspective items tap into an idealised sense of what democracy could be: 'how they [citizens] think representative democracy should work in principle'. In contrast to the realist, negative judgement about politics captured by the stealth perspective, the constituency for this conventional and positive narrative about what democracy could be about should be greater than that for the stealth view. Sunshine captures a default understanding based on long-standing civic culture norms. As such, we might expect that the factors driving its support will not be as distinctive as those driving the more populist, angst-ridden stealth understanding.

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We argue that this framing of stealth views as, at the same time, eroding but existing alongside the bedrock of sunshine perspectives is helpful when trying to understand the dilemmas of contemporary democracies. The issue is not which form of democracy citizens prefer, but rather why so many citizens find the practice of contemporary politics so consistently disappointing and alienating. Stealth views capture an expression of a classic populist anxiety about the gap between democracy as redemptive popular sovereignty and its rather more prosaic and pragmatic contemporary practice that in turn finds idealized expression in the sunshine perspective.

Research Design: Data collection and methods

The research we report was conducted in partnership with the Hansard Society, a non-partisan think tank based in London that focuses on issues of democratic politics and engagement. The Hansard Society has used annual face-to-face surveys to conduct an audit of political engagement in Britain since 2003. In 2011/12 our research team were able to add questions to their audit survey on stealth and sunshine attitudes, replicating the questions posed in the earlier studies. The survey was conducted through face-to-face interviews with a representative quota sample of 2,454 adults aged 16 or above living in Great Britain, conducted by TNS-BMRB. The interviews took place in two waves (first wave: 7-13 December 2011, 1,193 respondents; second wave: 11-15 January 2012, 1,261 respondents) and were carried out in respondents' homes.

We had the advantage of using an already established and robust survey and working with an established survey instrument at relatively modest cost. Yet we were also using a survey designed for a broader general purpose and a rather different overall focus. Appending

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additional questions to an existing survey also meant that compromises had to be made about the way questions were asked because of a desire not to overstretch the time involved in undertaking the survey for respondents. For example, the questions about stealth and sunshine attitudes were asked randomly to a sample of half the respondents in each wave, providing a substantial (1000 +) sample for each analysis but leaving us unable to test, for example, responses from citizens who were strong supporters of both stealth and sunshine orientations. There were also limits to the range of questions that could be asked that could have provided useful independent variables. The survey is rich in its questions and potential insights but some variables which might credibly help explain stealth or sunshine attitudes were not incorporated. These include details of respondents' educational attainment, attitudes to conflict avoidance and the strength of partisan commitments. These missing variables limit what we claim from our survey results but do not undermine its capacity to support our reframing of the stealth arguments through a populist lens, as we shall demonstrate.

So far we have talked about stealth and sunshine in conceptual terms but not in terms of how it they might be gauged and measured. To capture stealth attitudes requires the use of innovative survey questions designed and first deployed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) in a representative sample survey in the United States in 1998. That work was replicated by Neblo et al (2010a) in the United States; these authors also devised and deployed an additional set of sunshine questions in the same study. Bengtsson and Mattila (2009) redeployed the same stealth questions in Finland. Webb (2013) replicated both stealth and sunshine questions for Britain. Evans et al (2013) did the same for Australia, whilst Coffe and Michels (2014) have used the stealth measures in a study in the

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Netherlands. In sum, the survey instruments that are key to measuring stealth and sunshine are relatively new but have been successfully used in a range of countries.

Stealth attitudes were identified by gauging respondents' support for the following four statements:

1. Elected politicians would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems[1].
2. What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out one's principles.
3. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.
4. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.

However, following the suggestion of Neblo et al (2010b), we offered six responses: 'strongly agree', 'tend to agree', 'neither agree nor disagree' 'tend to disagree', 'strongly disagree' and 'don't know'.

The sunshine questions were asked in the two tranches of the 2011/12 survey to half of respondents on a random basis. The questions directly replicated those pioneered by Neblo et al (2010). Respondents were asked to give one of six responses (strongly agree/tend to agree/neither agree or disagree/tend to disagree/strongly disagree/ do not know) to four statements:

[1] We substituted the word 'politician' for 'official' as the term 'elected official' is not used so commonly in Britain.

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1. Openness to other people's views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours[2].

2. It is important for elected politicians to discuss and debate things thoroughly before making major policy changes[3].

3. In a democracy like ours, there are some important differences between how government should be run and how a business should be managed.

4. It is important for the people and their elected representatives to have the final say in running government, rather than leaving it up to unelected experts.

The design of survey questions is a challenging endeavour. Following others, we offered closed rather than open-ended questions for practical reasons of survey administration and in order to minimize the demands on respondents. Because we offered the option of "don't know" and "neither agree nor disagree" (in contrast to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse) we hoped to avoid creating forced choices for respondents. But we recognise that there is a considerable debate about the advantages or not of this option (Pastek and Krosnick, 2010). Yet the core criteria for good survey design were met unambiguously in the sense that the questions asked were relatively easy to answer and they followed conversational

[2] The wording used by Neblo et al (2010a) is slightly different, in that it includes at the end the statement, 'in a country as diverse as ours'. This, we reasoned, was more suited to the USA context, and might also be seen as leading the respondent to acquiescence with the statement to a greater degree than our more neutral wording

[3] Again, as in the equivalent stealth question, we used the phrase 'elected politicians' in preference to its US counterpart, 'elected officials'.

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conventions, thereby avoiding the potential for misunderstanding (Pastek and Krosnick, 2010).

This said, both the stealth and sunshine battery of questions are, even in the view of their respective designers, far from perfect (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002: 143-4; Neblo et al, 2010b: 34-43). Yet ultimately both sets of authors claim, convincingly in our view, that the questions they pose capture core attributes of stealth and sunshine perspectives. Indeed, arguably, and crucially when it comes to our own methodological choices, these studies – in and through the questions they pose – essentially serve to *define* stealth and sunshine perspectives empirically. As such, if our findings are to be comparable with those of existing studies, we need to use the same formulation of words. But there are undoubtedly methodological issues here that need addressing.

Neblo et al (2010b: 34) note that a key motivation for formulating the sunshine items in the way they do is to counteract the fear of acquiescence bias. Arguably the best evidence that they achieved this is their finding, which our own analysis confirms, that the two sets of survey questions prompted rather different patterns of response and, crucially, have very different correlates (see also Webb 2013; Evans et al. 2013). Reinforcing this impression is a further observation – namely, that logistic regression modeling of each of the stealth and sunshine questions separately, reveals common determinants for each of the stealth questions and common, but different, determinants for each of the sunshine questions. As Figure 1 shows, stealth and sunshine do not share the same drivers, with the exception that both correlate with a tendency to support greater use of direct democratic devices. The

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stealth and sunshine questions are capturing something more than people trying to be agreeable.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

That said, the stealth and sunshine questions are related in the sense that the sunshine questions are set up, in effect, as a mirror opposite to the original stealth items. So it is interesting to note that in some surveys, such as those administered by Neblo et al (2010 a and b) in which both tranches of questions were posed to the same respondents, it is clear that many individuals that were supporters of a stealth view were also supporters of a sunshine view. This does not surprise us, for reasons already alluded to. The explanation offered by Neblo et al (2010b; 40-3) is that respondents ostensibly agreeing with stealth propositions are passing a judgement on 'actually existing' political systems, whilst their support for sunshine responses reflected a more idealised aspiration or ideal (in effect, a view of how politics should be). This, we feel, is unconvincing and reads too much like an attempt to explain away and rationalise a seeming paradox – a paradox premised on the assumed incommensurability of stealth and sunshine view (and the irrationality of holding both views simultaneously). For us there is simply no such paradox. Public attitudes are, like politics itself, conditional and complex – and, in making sense of the complexity of politics, citizens inevitably draw on a range of pre-formulated vernaculars or dispositional orientations which may, on the face of it, appear contradictory. So it is perfectly reasonable for a person to express agreement with propositions from both sets of ostensibly competing views, with the stealth set of attitudes available to be triggered by a negative experience of politics whilst the more positive set of sunshine attitudes are available to be

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triggered by a more positive cue. Tests on our data using positive and negative triggers for political engagement show the operation of precisely such effects (Authors, 2013).

Finally, we know that question wording, the ordering of questions and the ordering of responses can affect survey results (Pastek and Krosnick, 2010). Yet the stealth and sunshine items we use are becoming an established part of the range of survey questions used within political science. Some may still argue that they prompt certain responses; yet the distinct, varied and yet consistent pattern of the responses that we and others generate using such survey questions we think makes that claim implausible. Notwithstanding any shortcomings that exist, we would argue that the stealth and sunshine survey questions do what all good questionnaires aim to achieve in that they 'offer a window into political attitudes and behaviours that would be impossible to achieve through any other research design' (Pastek and Krosnick 2010: 11). Choosing to replicate the original formulation of the questions is also crucial to achieving the comparability of our results with that of the existing literature that we seek.

Following the practice of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), the Stealth 1-4 questions were combined in a compound index of the four responses – coded '1' for those respondents giving a positive answer to each of Stealth 1 and 2 questions and to at least one of the Stealth 3 and Stealth 4 questions (and coded '0' for any other set of responses)[4]. The production of a dichotomous dependent variable in this way allowed us to deploy binary

[4] Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002: 143-4) offer no direct explanation for this choice but suggest that while the first two items capture distinctive features of the stealth perspective the responses to the business and expert involvement questions capture the shared idea that policy-making would be better if non-elected independent voices were involved in decision-making rather than professional politicians.

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logistic regression modelling techniques to study the influence of a range of independent variables. Neblo et al (2010a) propose a similar procedure for the sunshine questions.

The survey methodology also allowed us to explore the influence of a range of factors identified as potentially significant drivers of stealth perspectives in our discussion of populism. These were grouped under five headings. First the survey enabled us to cover the standard demographic variables such as gender, age and social class often associated with political behaviour. A further set of variables were concerned with interest in, and knowledge of, politics. A third set of variables introduced into the analysis sought to capture the relationship between stealth and expressed attitudes to the system of governing. A fourth set of factors sought to capture citizens' perceived personal efficacy – namely, whether they might or could (if they so wished) influence decision-making at local and national levels. A fifth set of explanatory variables explored perceptions of the influence of the media and evidence on the impact of reported news readership based on distinctions between broadsheet, tabloid and local newspaper readership.[5] Finally, the Finnish study (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009) found a strong connection between stealth attitudes and a commitment to greater use of direct democracy. To see if a similar effect

[5] The following newspapers – *The Sun, Mirror, People, Daily Star, Daily Record, Sunday Mirror, Sunday People, Sunday Sport, Daily Express, Daily Mail, Sunday Express*, and *Mail on Sunday* - were designated as tabloids. *The Daily Telegraph, Times, Guardian, Financial Times, Independent, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times, Observer,* and *Independent on Sunday* were similarly designated broadsheets. Sometimes a three-fold distinction is drawn between the tabloids, the broadsheets and an additional category of mid-market papers including the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express* and their Sunday editions. But for our purposes, given our interests in tabloid populism, there is no case for making such a distinction.

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was present amongst the British sample we included an additional question formulated in the same way (on support for a greater use of referendums).

We accompanied our survey work with 14 focus groups conducted in various locations throughout Britain in 2011 and 2012. The focus groups were each facilitated by one of the research team. They were recorded and subsequently transcribed. The focus groups were used to gauge citizens' understandings of politics, their sense of what was wrong or right with its conduct, and to explore in more detail the criteria by which such judgments were made. Each group concluded with a discussion of potential reforms to the political system and what might be done to improve politics and citizens' experiences of it. We then used the ideas emerging from the focus groups to present a series of reform options in a survey conducted in Britain in December 2012 by TNS-BMRB. This used face-to-face interviews with a representative quote sample of 1128 adults (for more details see Hansard Society, 2013, pp. 103-105).

Despite their limitations, the four stealth and sunshine responses do capture a negative populist orientation towards politics on the one hand and a more positive commitment to the values and processes of representative democracy on the other. In short, they allow us to explore empirically some important matters for understanding the degree and nature of citizens' estrangement from politics in contemporary democracies.

Results: the Connection between Stealth and Populism

Table 1 provides the details of the responses obtained from our British survey. It confirms majority support for the first two stealth propositions on the need for more action and less talk from politics and the importance of politicians sticking to their stated principles. The

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idea of a greater role in governing by experts or business leaders receives a more balanced response with roughly equal numbers agreeing and disagreeing. Subtracting those disagreeing from those in agreement reveals more still about the shape of the responses. For the 'talk' item, the result is +64.7; for the 'compromise' item +38.8; for the 'experts' item +1.3; and for the 'business' -3.9.

Support for the first two items on the stealth list is higher than support on the second two, a finding that is matched in other comparative work (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Neblo et al, 2010a; Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009, Webb, 2013). Citizens are bothered about politics being "all talk and no action" and "too much about compromises" but are not so willing to the same degree to express 'a broad fondness for nondemocratic decision-making structures' (Neblo et al, 2010, p. 580). When they do support a greater role for business people or experts, this seems to be associated with a clear and palpable frustration with the job of governing being done by elected politicians (a finding confirmed in the focus group data). Stealth, in this light, we would argue is less about being opposed to a vision of more expansive democracy and more about a concern and frustration about the way democratic politics works. In short, it is about a populist angst.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The heart of the stealth perspective, then, is support for the first two propositions. We can judge the depth of that support by following the procedure suggested by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse – namely, by counting those respondents that support both propositions and either one of the last two stealth statement. Three or more stealth democratic traits are in the case of our British respondents supported by 35.5 per cent of respondents.

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Interestingly, the strength of support for such views in Britain is higher than that recorded either by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) in the USA (27.2 per cent) or by Bengtsson and Mattila(2009) in Finland (25.7 per cent).

Our argument for the populist character of stealth attitudes is reinforced if we examine the correlates and drivers of such a stealth orientation in more detail. Figure 1 confirms stealth and sunshine drivers are different. Table 2 displays the results of an estimated logistic regression analysis with accumulated support for stealth as the dependent variable. In terms of demographic factors, and in contrast to the American and Finnish samples, in Britain age is a pronounced driver of stealth attitudes for those aged 35-54. Support for stealth was also stronger among those aged 55+. Among other significant factors driving stealth support are a set of attitudinal tie-ups that fit with our broad designation of stealth as a populist response to the contingencies of modern politics. Citizens who think that the system of governing is working well are roughly half as likely to adopt a stealth perspective compared to those who think that the system of governing works less well. Another attitudinal response that would appear to fit with a populist framing of stealth is that those who express an interest in politics are roughly half as likely to adopt a stealth attitude, compared to those who profess no such interest. Yet those citizens who support greater use of referendums to decide important questions are at least twice as likely to adopt a stealth world view as those who do not support the proposition. Again we see a populist framing in stealth views, as frustrated citizens favour a more direct say for "the people" in decision-making as a result. These various findings largely confirm our view of stealth consciousness as part of a populist vernacular. Stealth attitudes are more prominent

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amongst older voters, those who are disaffected and turned-off politics and would in their frustration like to see more chance for direct control by citizens.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

We are further reinforced in this view by the evidence that connects stealth attitudes to reported behaviour, in particular to newspaper readership. By far the strongest factor driving stealth attitudes in the entire analysis is readership of a national tabloid newspaper. Within the British sample, respondents are nearly four times as likely to adopt a stealth perspective if they read a tabloid newspaper compared to a broadsheet. The effect is still quite strong and in the same direction for readers of both a tabloid and a broadsheet. Reading a local newspaper, many of which now also take a tabloid form, also appears to be a significant driver of stealth attitudes, although the impact is not quite as strong as for readership of a national tabloid. But such respondents are still more than twice as likely to adopt stealth views compared to a broadsheet reader.

We have clearly demonstrated a correlation between the stealth perspective and newspaper readership. However, we recognise that the direction of causation is, as ever, a deal more difficult to establish definitively. First, as is widely recognised in the literature (for a review see Street, 2011, pp. 101-118), media effects on politics are difficult to demonstrate. The evidence is tantalizing in the sense that we cannot be sure if those holding stealth attitudes favour tabloid newspapers, or, conversely, whether reading tabloid papers is driving stealth attitudes. If ever there were a 'chicken-and-egg' problem, this is it (see also Newton & Brynin 2001, p. 265): is it that readers choose newspapers aligned to their views or do newspapers by their presentation of the news influence

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readers' views? The challenge is partly methodological and given access to only one set of survey results, it is largely irresolvable. It could be addressed by carefully constructed experiments or through the use of time series panel data. But, as neither of those options were open to us, we are left with the observation that to connect tabloid readership with stealth attitudes goes with the grain of the insight emerging from most political communication scholarship (Street, 2011). An emphasis on work that argues that media effects are relatively weak and likely merely to reinforce existing attitudes has given way to an alternate view that is prepared to concede that the media may have more direct and powerful effects on citizens' views and behaviour. Moreover, while much of the early work focused on the impact on voting behaviour, some of the more recent trends have been towards work looking at broader impacts and cumulative impacts of the media on citizens' attitudes (Gavin and Sanders, 2003; for a more general discussion, see Whiteley 2011). This work generally tends to the view that impacts of a significant scale do occur, at least on specific groups of voters. Our study is entirely consistent with such a conclusion.

Our core argument is that stealth attitudes constitute a distinctive type of negativity towards politics, reflecting in turn a populist orientation in all contemporary democracies created by the tension between the promise of democracy and its more messy delivery. A strong stealth orientation is not tied significantly to a perceived sense of powerlessness as measured by various efficacy questions. Stealth supporters do want to have more of a say through referendums but we argue that such a stance is consistent with a broader populist perspective.

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The limits to populist angst: let the sunshine in

A stealth orientation exists among a substantial section of British citizens. But, as suggested for the USA by Neblo et al (2010), it is also possible to find even larger support for a set of more positive propositions about the way that politics works. Table 3 shows support for the four sunshine propositions we tested. The pattern of support is generally greater than that shown for the equivalent items that constitute the test of the prevalence of stealth values. The exception is the 'talk' item which achieved 71.6% agreement in it stealth form but only 67.7% in the sunshine form. On the other three items the sunshine "agree" responses comfortably outstripped the stealth ones. Taking agree responses away from disagrees reveals a strong pattern of support with the talk item at +62.2, the openness item at +74, the business item at +60.1 and the expert item at +59.9.

If we accumulate the sunshine responses in a manner equivalent to that we used for stealth responses (by selecting those respondents who agree with the first two sunshine statements and at least one of the last two) we get an idea of the depth of support for the sunshine perspective. We find that 64 per cent of respondents supported three or more sunshine traits. In short, it is clear that sunshine values outstrip stealth values by a large degree in the British sample, nearly doubling accumulated stealth support. The lesson to be drawn from these findings appears clear. Populist angst about the way politics works exists, but against a background in which other more positive folk intuitions about politics persist.

The issue thus becomes, for us, what might trigger in citizens an understanding of politics and political experience couched more in terms of such positive dispositions. How, in other words, might politics be reformed so as to crowd out stealth and let the sunshine in?

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Neblo et al (2010) suggest that more opportunities for deliberation with the system of democratic decision-making are the way forward. We think that rather than going for one pre-ordained solution it might be better to explore reform options more widely (and, indeed, inductively). After all, our survey found relatively high levels of support for greater levels of direct democracy through the use of referendums (72% agreed with the statement that 'important questions should be determined by referendums more often than today'). It also found that strong supporters of stealth and sunshine perspectives were more likely to be backers of that option. Rather than assume a priori what might trigger a more positive orientation towards politics we thought it preferable to ask citizens themselves.

Reforming politics: Citizens' Preferences

Accordingly, at the end of the focus group sessions we asked the participants to identify, in writing, three reform ideas for improving politics, whether mentioned in the prior discussion or not. The 153 participants gave us a potential 459 reform ideas. Only a few members of the focus groups did not offer three ideas and even fewer offered ideas that were difficult to fathom. We gave our focus group participants no steer as to what type of reforms they might identify; their task was merely to propose reforms which they felt had some credible chance of improving the politics they are currently offered. We received 450 useable suggestions (these are summarised in Table 4).

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

As Table 4 shows the top preference, in terms of reform ideas, was to ensure that those who made decisions, especially elected representatives, were open in what they did and accountable for their performance. In the discussion in the focus groups there were many

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occasions when unfavourable comparisons were made between the mechanisms of accountability that people found themselves subject to in their own working lives and the perceived unaccountability of elected representatives. Similarly, repeated emphasis was placed on the perceived basic lack of performance delivery mechanisms available to citizens to hold politics in check, or even to account. Another big concern was improving communication and ensuring that fair and accessible information about decisions (and their underlying rationale) is provided. A further concern was about broadening the social base and experience of those standing for office as elected representatives.

In a wider representative sample survey undertaken as part of the Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement 2013 (Hansard Society, 2013) we were able to test whether the reform options selected by the focus groups were favoured more generally by the public. The results (see Table 5) do indeed show very similar reform preferences among citizens in this representative sample to those identified through the focus groups.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion

Understanding popular negativity towards politics in contemporary democracies is a crucial task, as is diagnosing its causes and potential solutions. Sadly it remains the case that, as political scientists, we understand a lot more about what drives voting behaviour than the more elusive topic of how citizens understand and think about democratic politics. Yet, without deepening considerably our understanding of how citizens' orient themselves to the practices of contemporary democracy it would seem impossible to grasp the significance and nature of the challenge posed by negativity towards politics, let alone to

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respond creatively to that challenge in such a way as to address the concerns from which it issues. In such a context, the lens provided by the stealth perspective is particularly helpful. We have shown that stealth attitudes are prevalent and we have argued that such attitudes can and should be seen as the expression of a populist angst about the way politics works. Many British citizens hold stealth views.

However, we have also shown there is a popular base for a more positive understanding of politics held by an even larger group of citizens. Public opinion can express frustration with politics. But equally, it appears that it can just as readily see a way forward that is normatively defensible and compatible with the aspirations of many citizens. However, judging by the expressed aspirations of citizens themselves, the way forward does not only appear to be the deliberative participation favoured by many deliberative theorists.

The most popular of the reform approaches chosen by citizens in our study seem to match with a stealth populist critique of contemporary political practice rather than a strong desire for more deliberative participation. The top reform ideas that emerge from citizens themselves are all about making representative democracy work in practice the way they think it should, such that their confidence in politics as a governing process might be restored. The onus of the reform trajectory is on a shift in the behaviour of elected representatives in terms of their accountability and responsiveness. In addition what is clear is that the populist negativity displayed by citizens may require more effort at promoting a better understanding of politics (Flinders, 2012). It is here particularly telling that better information and education about politics were high on the list of reform options favoured by citizens.

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Designing the mechanisms to produce reforms to convince citizens that such a bringing together of aspiration and reality is possible remains a significant challenge. The reform suggestions from citizens offer some useful guidelines but hardly provide the blueprint designs for institutional reforms. Yet parliaments across established democracies have shown a willingness to undertake some reforms to re-connect with citizens (Beetham, 2011) and many of these reforms, on the surface, address some of the concerns outlined in Tables 4 and 5. But there are doubts that the reforms go far enough. We hope that David Beetham (2011, p. 140) is right when he suggests there are forces at work that will open up the existing processes of representative democracy to radical change – whilst also revealing to citizens more of the internal workings of the political process in a way that encourages support for the complex and convoluted dynamics of democracy in complex and divided societies.

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Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of selected significant drivers of stealth and sunshine democracy in Britain

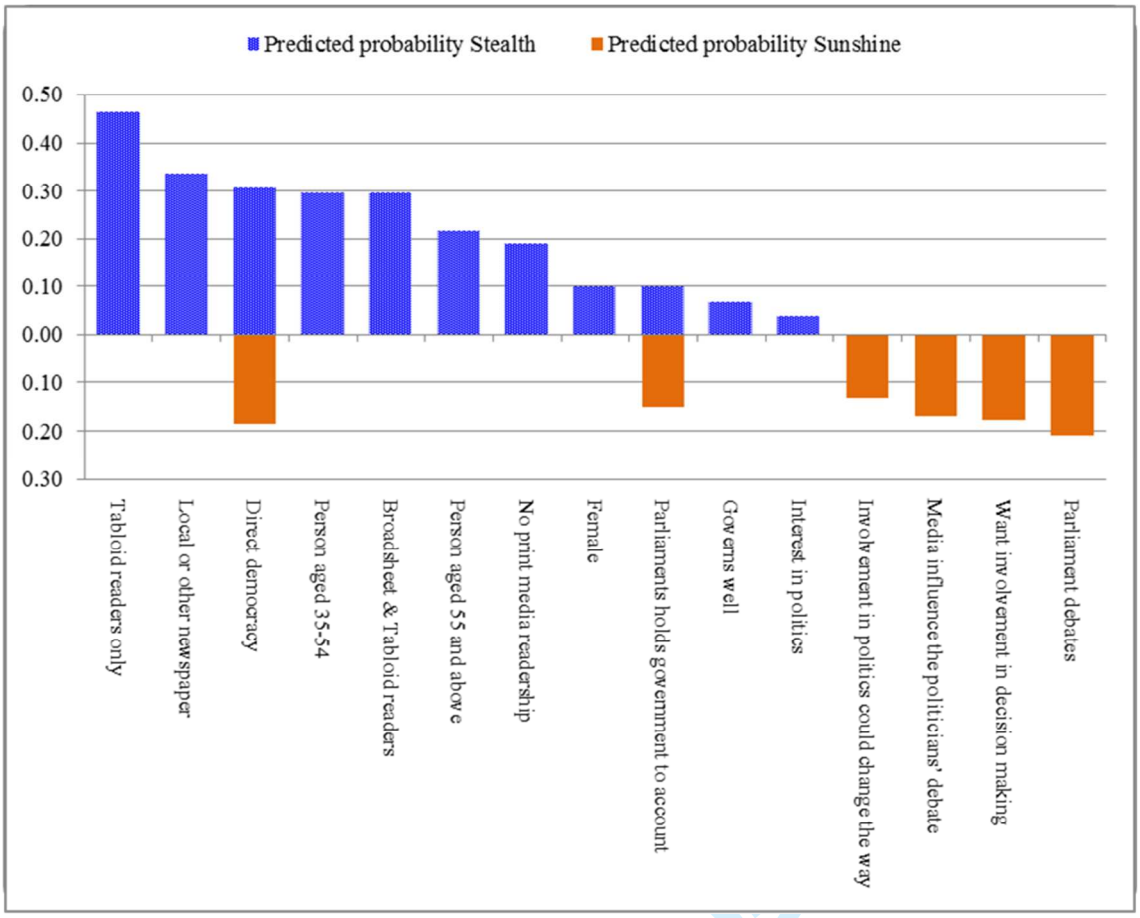

Table 1: Responses (%) on stealth items in Britain, 2011-12

Response to	STEALTH QUESTIONS: Politicians should stop talking and take action		Compromise is selling out one's principles		Leave decisions to successful business people		Leave decisions non-elected experts	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
SA	37.6	465	19.6	243	10.0	124	8.9	110
PA	34.0	421	32.3	400	20.8	258	22.4	277
PD	5.3	66	10.8	134	20.2	250	18.0	223
SD	1.6	20	2.3	28	14.5	179	12.0	149
NA/ND	17.3	214	29.4	364	29.7	368	33.1	410
DK	4.2	52	5.6	69	4.8	59	5.6	69
Total	100.0	1238	100.0	1238	100.0	1238	100.0	1238

Key: SA: strongly agree; PA: partly agree; PD: partly disagree; SD: strongly disagree; NA/ND: Neither agree nor disagree
DK: Don't know

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Table 2: Parameter estimates for Logistic regression model of responses on Stealth Democracy in Great Britain, 2011-2012 (N=899)

Determinant	Log odds ratio	standard error	Wald-statistic	Df	P-value	Odds ratio
Constant	-2.46***	0.46	28.24	1	0.00	0.09
Demographic						
Gender (male: reference)						
Female	0.17	0.16	1.14	1	0.29	1.19
Age (18-34: reference)						
35-54	0.77***	0.20	14.62	1	0.00	2.16
55+	0.57**	0.21	7.49	1	0.00	1.76
Social class (A or B)						
C1 or C2	0.09	0.22	0.16	1	0.69	1.09
D or E	0.21	0.24	0.76	1	0.38	1.23
Political Interest and Knowledge						
Likely to vote (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.26	0.19	1.83	1	0.18	0.77
Interest (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.92***	0.25	13.44	1	0.00	0.40
Knowledge (no: reference)						
Yes	0.16	0.22	0.51	1	0.48	1.17
Knowledge of parliament (no: reference)						
Yes	0.14	0.22	0.43	1	0.51	1.15
Attitudes to Governing System						
Governing system works well (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.55***	0.18	9.63	1	0.00	0.58
Parliament holds government to account (no: reference)						
Yes	0.50**	0.18	7.70	1	0.01	1.65
Parliament encourages public involvement (no: reference)						
Yes	0.17	0.18	0.92	1	0.34	1.19
Parliament is essential to democracy (no: reference)						
Yes	0.09	0.21	0.20	1	0.66	1.10
Parliament debates matter (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.07	0.18	0.14	1	0.71	0.93
Engagement and Efficacy						
Involvement in politics could change the way country run (no: reference)						
Yes	0.28	0.17	2.67	1	0.10	1.33
Involvement in local community could change the way area is run (no: reference)						
Yes	0.13	0.18	0.54	1	0.46	1.14
Have influence on decision of making in local area (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.22	0.20	1.24	1	0.27	0.80
Have influence on decision making in the country (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.39	0.24	2.67	1	0.10	0.67
Want involvement of decision of making in local area (no: reference)						
Yes	0.16	0.23	0.48	1	0.49	1.17
Want involvement of decision of making in the country (no: reference)						
Yes	0.31	0.23	1.80	1	0.18	1.36
Media: Influence and Readership						
Media influences how people vote (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.24	0.24	0.96	1	0.33	0.79
Media influences the topics politicians' debate (no: reference)						
Yes	0.34	0.21	2.66	1	0.10	1.40
Media influences the decisions politicians make (no: reference)						
Yes	-0.01	0.19	0.00	1	0.98	0.99
Print media readership (Broadsheet readers only: reference)						
Tabloid readers only						
	1.30***	0.26	24.77	1	0.00	3.68
Both	0.89***	0.31	8.22	1	0.00	2.43
Local newspaper or other readers only						
	1.00***	0.32	9.96	1	0.00	2.72
None	0.56*	0.29	3.62	1	0.06	1.75
Greater use of direct democracy						
Support more direct democracy (no: reference)						
Yes	0.78***	0.22	12.85	1	0.00	2.18

*0.10>p ≥0.05; **0.05>p ≥0.01; ***p<0.01; Df: degrees of freedom; Nagelkerke R square: 0.19; -2loglikelihood: 1042.39

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Table 3: Responses (%) on sunshine items in Britain, 2011-12

	SUNSHINE DEMOCRACY QUESTIONS							
	Elected politicians Need to debate Before making decisions		Openness and willingness to compromise are important to politics		Important differences exists between running a government and business		Important for elected politicians to decide rather than leaving it to experts	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
SA	29.9	364	49.7	604	26.4	321	31.3	380
PA	37.8	460	26.6	324	37.9	461	33.7	410
PD	3.6	44	1.6	20	3.0	36	3.9	48
SD	1.9	23	0.7	8	1.2	14	1.2	15
NA/ND	21.5	261	16.7	203	25.2	306	24.2	294
DK	5.3	64	4.7	57	6.4	78	5.7	69
Total	100.0	1216	100.0	1216	100.0	1216	100.0	1216

Key: SA: strongly agree; PA: partly agree; PD: partly disagree; SD: strongly disagree; NA/ND: Neither agree nor disagree
DK: Don't know

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Table 4: Classification of Political Reform Ideas from Citizens

Reform Idea	Numbers of Mentions (%)
Change processes of politics to make it more accountable and to ensure that what is promised is delivered	128 (28)
Better education, information exchange and less spin in communication	68 (15)
Give citizens more of say (especially through referendums)	73 (16)
Deal with issues that are of concern	58 (13)
Improve representativeness and accessibility of MPs	43 (9)
Institutional changes to parliament, constitution reform or changes to electoral system	41 (9)
Get more experts involved in decision-making	15 (3)
Create a more positive media environment for politics	13 (3)
Give local communities more of a say	7 (-)
Get politicians to be more normal	4 (-)

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Table 5	**Reform preferences for improving politics**
Which of the following changes do you think would improve the British political system the most? Please pick up to three.	**%**
Make politics more transparent so that it is easier to follow	**48**
Make politicians more accountable for their performance between elections	**39**
Better information and education about politics for all citizens	**32**
Less 'spin' in political communication	**26**
Give citizens more of a say (e.g. more referendums, more consultation)	**29**
Get experts more involved in decision-making	**17**
More positive media coverage of politics	**12**
Constitutional changes (e.g. an elected House of Lords, a different voting system)	**8**
More people like me as MPs	**6**
None of these	**11**

Source: Data from Hansard Society (2013) *Audit of Political Engagement*

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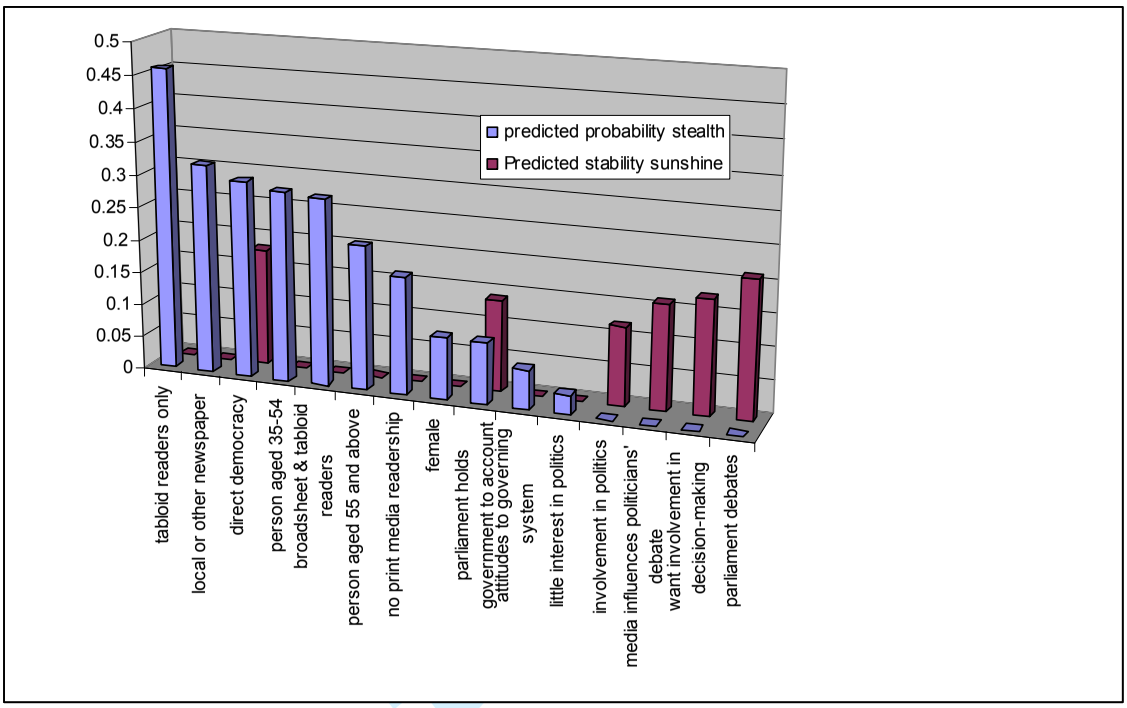

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