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Mass-Observation and Vernacular Politics at the 1945 General Election

Abstract

This article sheds fresh light on popular attitudes towards politics in the 1940s. It does so by reading against the grain of archived material from Mass-Observation's (M-O) study of the 1945 General Election, as it played out in the constituency of Fulham East. Where the formal reports from this investigation have underpinned influential accounts of 'apathy' in 1945, this article returns to the original field notes from the investigation. By attending to the framing of the M-O encounter in Fulham, it suggests that we can reinterpret seemingly apathetic responses as a reaction to the alienating high expectations underpinning the M-O questionnaire, exacerbated by the classed and gendered dynamics of the interview. In other instances, however, it argues displays of apathy or ignorance could indicate the popular delimiting of an appropriate level of political interest, confining this to voting, in contrast to the importance of critical, detailed 'study' of politics implicit within the questionnaire. The article consequently contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding the re-use of archived social-science material by suggesting that we can only rely on such material to gain access to 'vernacular' attitudes when we reckon with its fundamentally mediated nature, framed by the assumptions and intersubjective dynamics of the social-science encounter. In turn, it offers an example of how recent interest in the vernacular might be combined with an older, more traditional form of political history, centred on elections.

In the summer of 1945, five volunteers working for Mass-Observation (M-O) spent time studying the general election campaign as it played out in the west London constituency of Fulham East. From the start of the campaign in mid-June, to when polls closed 4 weeks later, the M-O volunteers made recordings of party-political meetings, noted down

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'overheard' conversations, and conducted interviews with 396 individuals.¹ Out of this investigation, M-O published reports purporting to shed light on the Labour Party's eventual landslide election victory. Where Labour had successfully captured East Fulham (a swing seat in 1945), these reports claimed to speak to the reasons for the party's success in the country at large.² Historians who have made use of the material from this investigation have tended to validate M-O's intended framing of this research, relying on the observers' summarized conclusions to understand the causes and reflect on the meaning of Labour's victory.³ Most notably, the published file reports from M-O's Fulham investigation underlie the influential 'apathy school', most associated with the work of Steven Fielding, Nick Tiratsoo, and Peter Thompson. This work, published almost three decades ago, reproduced M-O's claim that the 1945 General Election campaign was observed by a 'dispirited electorate' considering its opinions from beneath a 'cloak of apathy'.⁴ There are issues with relying on M-O's published conclusions, however. As one group of scholars has noted, 'cynicism and apathy ... served an institutional purpose for MO', demonstrating the 'indispensable' nature of the organization's work for contemporary authorities (potential funding bodies) interested in overcoming such apathy and better communicating with electors.⁵

Taking heed of such problems, this article pursues a different approach. Drawing inspiration from historians' re-use of archived material from post-war social-science investigations, I return to the original field notes from M-O's investigation in Fulham in 1945.⁶ In returning to these field notes, I contend with legitimate criticisms concerning how M-O's

¹ Mass-Observation Archive Online [hereafter MOA], File Report [hereafter FR] 2267: Election Observations (July 1945), 1, references the five investigators at work in Fulham. The five recurring sets of initials that emerge across the material are: LB, GST, JWSST, NA, MH.

² MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945, 28, 94, 99. See also J. G. Ferraby, 'More on the Meaning of that British Election', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 9 (1945), 394–5.

³ P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (2nd edn, London, 1975), 15; A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–1945* (1992 edn, London, 1969).

⁴ S. Fielding, 'What did "the People" Want? The Meaning of the 1945 General Election', *The Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), 632, 637. See also S. Fielding, et al., 'England Arise!' *The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995), 62. For similar reliance on M-O reports and reproduction of their conclusions: K. Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007), 80.

⁵ J. Moss, et al., *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction and the Rise of Anti-Politics* (Cambridge, 2018), 53. See also J. Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013), 325.

⁶ M. Savage, 'Working-Class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology*, 39 (2005), 929–46; S. Todd, 'Affluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 501–18; J. Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2014), 215–39; D. Cowan, 'The "Progress of a Slogan": Youth, Culture, and the Shaping of Everyday Political Languages in Late 1940s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), 435–58; F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England 1968–2000* (Oxford, 2018).

institutional interests and the researchers' individual agendas shaped the organization's observational work. Any researcher re-using this material must recognize the selective, mediated nature of the 'vernacular' testimony contained in the archive.⁷ Rather than undermining its value, however, I seek to illustrate how critically engaging with these challenges surrounding the use of M-O material can *enhance* historical research.⁸ Rather than treating the 1945 investigation in Fulham as a neutral, data-gathering exercise, I read against the grain, attending to the intersubjective dynamics and framing of the interview encounter. Doing so not only helps to better account for those seemingly 'apathetic' responses garnered in Fulham, but it also suggests ways of reassessing their significance.

The questionnaire used by M-O in its interviews in Fulham in 1945 assumed a high level of political engagement. Individuals were asked *which* of the speeches on the radio or in the papers they had liked best, whether there were any issues they felt were getting insufficient attention in the election campaign, and how they felt about the way the campaign was being conducted. Some interviewers explicitly probed for 'correct' answers, evaluating interviewee responses as 'vague' or 'OK'. Interviewees were asked about speeches on the wireless and whether they had been following the election campaign at national and local levels, before being asked if they intended to vote.⁹ The selection and ordering of questions thus privileged voters' sustained engagement with and critical study of the election campaign. The high expectations, implicit within the questionnaire, could heighten the 'apartness' of politics from everyday life, rendering it accessible only to those with the time outside of work and domestic commitments for critical, extensive 'study'.¹⁰ This effect was arguably exacerbated by the fact the investigators in Fulham (predominantly older, middle-class women, due to wartime changes in personnel) embodied an ideal of active political engagement through their voluntary work for M-O. In this context, we can better understand why working-class women especially tended to give repeated replies of 'don't know' to the questionnaire. Such seemingly 'apathetic' responses can thus be seen, at least in part, as a reflection of the intimidating, alienating dynamics of the interview encounter.

⁷ For the Mass-Observer's method of privileging the exact recording of shorter comments, easier to categorise in later analysis (reconstructing more extensive testimony later based on 'memory') see J. G. Ferraby, 'Recording and Classifying Verbatim Information' (August 1944), MOA, FR 2146, 3–4. See Lawrence's similar cautioning against treating post-war social-science field notes as affording access to 'some supposedly "pure" vernacular voice': J. Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford, 2019), 6.

⁸ For similar emphasis on the intersubjective dynamics of post-war social-science interviews: Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters', especially 217.

⁹ For the full questionnaire: MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1080.

¹⁰ L. Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation 1954-70* (Basingstoke, 2010), 2.

In other instances, however, responses of 'don't know' could signal a rejection of the assumptions underpinning the questionnaire. This can be detected in those interviewees who freely admitted their relative lack of engagement with and knowledge of the election campaign yet continued to voice their intention to vote. At times, this reflected the strength of an individual's partisanship or the fact that other factors, beyond the election campaign, counted for more in the formation of their political identity.¹¹ More broadly, however, these responses asserted the appropriate limits of political interest. In Fulham, as elsewhere, ideals of active engagement and critical 'study' was associated with a middle-class, associational political culture. Where interviewees qualified their interest in and attention to politics, privileging voting over a detailed, sustained engagement with the election campaign, they resisted the activist ideals implicit within the questionnaire and delineated their own understanding of what was an appropriate level of political engagement.¹² This analysis suggests we can move beyond ideas of apathy, and reckon with the greater complexity of popular political attitudes, when we recognize that individuals in the past could have very different ideas of what political engagement looked like.¹³ David Cowan has shown how responses of 'don't know' from M-O interviewees in the post-war period, their apparent ignorance of political slogans, could form a means of expressing political independence.¹⁴ In this instance, responses of 'don't know' expressed a relative degree of independence *from* politics. Relatedly, Daisy Payling has argued in relation to the wartime Survey of Sickness that where interviewees displayed 'apathy or ignorance', this could form 'a subtler form of resistance' to the framing of the questionnaire, a means of 'expressing citizenship on their own terms'.¹⁵ I want to suggest we can view the M-O interview encounter in Fulham in 1945 in a similar light.

This article, then, intervenes in two key literatures. The first concerns politics in 1945. Building on existing criticisms of the so-called 'apathy school', this article suggests that by relying upon the formal, summarized conclusions from the 1945 investigation, these authors have reproduced the Mass-Observers' own high standards of politicization, implicit within the questionnaire and shaped by the organization's institutional

¹¹ See e.g. MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1219.

¹² Cowan, 'The "Progress of a Slogan"', 441.

¹³ For similar recognition that political actors in the past could hold different standards and ideas of democratic engagement: H. McCarthy, 'Whose Democracy? Histories of British Political Culture Between the Wars', *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 221–38.

¹⁴ Cowan, 'The "Progress of a Slogan"', 442, 453–4.

¹⁵ D. Payling, "'The People Who Write to Us Are the People Who Don't Like Us': Class, Gender, and Citizenship in the Survey of Sickness 1943-1952', *Journal of British Studies*, 59 (2020), 317.

interests.¹⁶ Instead, it argues that by returning to the original field notes from the investigation, reckoning with the framing and intersubjective dynamics of the interview encounter, we gain deeper insight into the nature of popular political attitudes in 1945. In this sense, the article also contributes to an ongoing discussion surrounding the re-use of archived social-science material.¹⁷ It argues that we can only rely on such material to access the so-called 'vernacular' attitudes when we reckon with its fundamentally mediated nature, when we recognize the degree to which such testimony was shaped by the social-science encounter. In this sense, it builds especially on Jon Lawrence's research into the negotiation of differences in post-war social-science encounters. Yet, in applying this approach to the earlier, more experimental work of M-O, the article underscores the importance of attending to the commercial incentives underpinning such investigations, beyond existing emphasis on their intellectual and political preconceptions.¹⁸ Ultimately, by drawing these two sets of literature together, the analysis pursued below offers the latest example of how historians might go about combining the recent vernacular 'turn' with an older, more conventional interest in electoral politics.¹⁹

The article begins by contextualizing the M-O investigation in Fulham in 1945. This section provides an account of the intellectual preconceptions and financial incentives underpinning the 1945 investigation, suggesting ways in which M-O's work in Fulham points towards the challenges facing the organization as it entered the post-war period. The next section examines the election campaign in Fulham and the responses elicited in response to the M-O questionnaire on the ground. Analysing the assumptions framing the questionnaire and the classed, intersubjective dynamics of the interview, the article suggests we might reinterpret the 'apathetic' responses given by female, working-class interviewees as a reaction to, or at least to have been exacerbated by, the alienating, intimidating dynamics of the social-science encounter. The final section turns to

¹⁶ J. Hinton, '1945 and the Apathy School', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), 268. For further work responding to the 'apathy' thesis: J. Moss, et al., 'Golden Age, Apathy or Stealth? Democratic Engagement in Britain 1945-1950', *Contemporary British History*, 30 (2016), 441-62; P. Sloman, 'Rethinking a Progressive Moment: The Liberal and Labour Parties in the 1945 General Election', *Historical Research*, 84 (2010), 722-44; D. Thackeray, 'Mass Observation, Apathy, and Electoral Politics in England, 1937-1950', *The Historical Journal*, 65 (2021), 750-73.

¹⁷ Roundtable on 'Historians' Use of Archived Material from Sociological Research', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 392-459.

¹⁸ For existing emphasis on the political and intellectual preoccupations of social-scientists and their investigations: A. Campsie, 'Mass-Observation, Left Intellectuals and the Politics of Everyday Life', *The English Historical Review*, 131 (2016), 92-121; L. Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science and the British Left 1945-1970* (Oxford, 2020).

¹⁹ For the place of the vernacular 'turn' within modern British political history: R. Goldsmith, 'Towards the Vernacular, Away from Politics? Political History after the 'New Political History'', *Political Quarterly* (2023), 1-7. <<https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1111/1467-923X.13262>>

consider those alternative instances where, rather than being intimidated by or seeking to fulfil the expectations implicit within the questionnaire, interviewees upended such expectations to speak on their own terms. In such cases, responses of 'don't know' articulated an alternative understanding of the requirements for voting, alongside resistance to the ideals of active, critical political engagement implicit within the questionnaire. The article ends by considering how this rethinking of popular political attitudes in 1945 may help to shed fresh light on the distinctive characteristics of Britain's post-war political culture.

M-O in Fulham

Across 4 weeks, from mid-June to early July 1945, five volunteers working for M-O made recordings of party-political meetings in East Fulham, noting down 'overheard' conversations, and conducting interviews with 396 individuals. This focus on Fulham can be explained, at least in part, by its established credentials as a constituency relied upon to speak to trends in public opinion: The success of Labour's 'outsider' candidate at the 1933 East Fulham by-election was mythologized by Stanley Baldwin as indicative of popular support for peace, while the Conservatives' successful recapture of the seat in 1935 (albeit with a marginal victory) reflected broader, national trends.²⁰ The selection of Fulham also reflects the borough's position as an 'old field of M-O research'.²¹ M-O first conducted an investigation in Fulham in March 1938, when co-founder Tom Harrison and a team of Mass-Observers were invited by the local Labour Party to study an upcoming by-election in West Fulham.²² After 1938, Fulham was regularly relied upon as a site for analysing 'metropolitan' opinion, treated as the counterpart to the organization's work in Bolton or 'Worktown'.²³ Despite this, wartime shifts in personnel mean most of the observers working in Fulham in 1945 are likely to have been new to the area from an investigative standpoint. From 1943, following Tom Harrison's conscription into the army, Bob Willcock took over as acting director of M-O, with John Ferraby as chief report-writer.²⁴ After 1942, M-

²⁰ For the by-election's mythologized significance: M. Ceadel, 'Interpreting East Fulham' in C. Cook and J. Ramsden (eds), *By-elections in British Politics* (London, 1997), 94–95. For revisionist accounts: R. Heller, 'East Fulham Revisited', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 6 (1971), 176, 186; M. Stewart, *Life and Labour: An Autobiography* (London, 1980), 39. For the 1935 general election result in East Fulham: F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1918–1949* (3rd edn, Surrey, 1983), 17.

²¹ MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945, 42.

²² Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 94. The File Report from West Fulham references consulting 'East and West Fulham' Party Agents: MOA, FR A7 West Fulham By-Election (March 1938), 3.

²³ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 90.

²⁴ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 307, 309. Both men were exempt from conscription on medical grounds.

O fieldworkers were largely older women exempt from conscription on the grounds of sex and age.²⁵ The observers volunteering in Fulham in 1945 are thus likely to have been unfamiliar with the borough on the grounds of research, while field-note references to having to leave meetings early to return home suggest most did not live locally.²⁶ This context may help to account for the reticence of some interviewees, grounded in a reluctance to share their views with 'outsiders'.²⁷ Similarly, the conspicuous nature of the observers is illustrated by references to East Fulham becoming 'M-O conscious' during the investigation.²⁸

The combination of methods used in Fulham, spanning recordings of party-political meetings, 'overheard' conversations, and direct interviewing, built on M-O's previous constituency election surveys.²⁹ While the motivations behind the 1945 study are not clear from the surviving material, this methodological backdrop reflects a potential incentive. Tom Harrison framed M-O's by-election studies as a means of probing 'the relationship between private and public opinion' and better understanding 'popular indifference to the political process'.³⁰ In 1945, however, M-O had not yet had the opportunity to explore these themes through a survey of a general election. The East Fulham investigation thus presented a chance for M-O to pursue its intellectual interests in an unprecedented electoral context. At the same time, the organization's precarious financial situation is likely to have provided additional motivation. The Labour Party had offered no further commissions to M-O after 1938. Instead, from 1940, the organization turned to the Ministry of Information as a sponsor, specifically for its study of wartime by-elections and 1942 reconstruction survey.³¹ When this financial support began to dry up after September 1941, M-O came to rely on commissions from the Advertising Service Guild.³² In light of M-O's wartime financial struggles, an

²⁵ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 300. There is a near-complete gap in M-O's work in Fulham between 1941 and 1945. For wartime work in Fulham see MOA, TC 5/1/J (Evacuation 1939–1944, Children in 'Metrop'); TC 55/1/A (Gas Masks 1939–43, Gas Tests and Mask Maintenance); TC 75/3/A (Women's War Work); TC 23/2 and 23/3 (Fulham ARP Study 1939, 1 and 2).

²⁶ MOA, TC 76/2/A, 823, 833, 841; 76/2/D, 911. For an exception to this unfamiliarity, see the initials 'LB' attached to a 1943 M-O report on the 'Wings for Victory Week' in Fulham: TC 29/1/I (Forces – Men in the Forces 1939–1956 – Exhibitions and Fundraising Events), 865–66.

²⁷ MOA, TC 76/2/A, 778; 76/2/F, 938; 76/2/I, 1158, 1159, 1170, 1171, 1172; 76/2/K, 1372, 1375, 1382, 1445, 1447, 1469, 1471, 1493. Jon Lawrence has analysed how the 'fiercely independent, privatised culture' of the English working class complicated the investigative efforts of post-war social scientists: 'Social-Science Encounters', 215.

²⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1047.

²⁹ For these previous election surveys: Thackeray, 'Mass Observation', 761–64; Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 77, 94, 153.

³⁰ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 153, 40, 44.

³¹ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 96, 153.

³² Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 216.

investigation of the general election may have been regarded as an opportunity to woo potential funders, including political parties.³³

These intellectual and financial incentives speak to the tensions underlying M-O's 1945 Fulham study, between an open-ended 'anthropology of ourselves' and a concern with proving the 'indispensable' nature of M-O's research for contemporary authorities.³⁴ This anthropological impulse is particularly evident in an observer's report of Churchill's visit to Fulham, recording 'laughter at a dog with a large black tail' and overheard comments such as 'all these children will be able to take care of themselves when they grow up ... I'm celebrating my birthday'.³⁵ This interest in 'ordinary' conversations, set against the backdrop of a formal, potentially ceremonial occasion, marks a clear continuity with M-O's first publication, *May 12th: Mass-Observation Day Surveys* (1937), which consisted of an 'extraordinary' montage of 'ordinary' observations on the day of the coronation.³⁶ At odds with this anthropological approach, however, was a concern with providing useful material. This is exemplified by observers' evaluation of politicians' speeches, offering comments such as 'No platform personality ... too literary in phraseology', while annotations (presumably from the investigation's report-writer Ferraby) suggested accounts of popular behaviour in meetings should be transferred into a grid of audience 'reaction' against quotes from politicians' speeches.³⁷ This offers a clear contrast to the deliberate avoidance of 'overarching patterns of interpretation' in M-O's earlier research.³⁸ These comments ultimately reflect one of the potential intended audiences of the organization's work, namely political parties interested in understanding the reception of their campaigns. Similarly, M-O's attempt to demonstrate the valuable nature of its research for political authorities can be seen in emphasis on the investigation's accurate prediction of the local election result. Through comparing interviewees' voting intentions with the actual result in Fulham, M-O's overview of the Fulham

³³ For M-O's interest in securing commissions from the Labour Party, including through their work on the 1950 general election: Thackeray, 'Mass Observation', 768.

³⁴ For discussion of these characteristic tensions: B. Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London, 2002), 77. M-O's desire to prove its 'indispensable' nature to authorities is discussed in Stoker et al., *The Good Politician*, 53.

³⁵ MOA, TC 76/2/D, 915, 917, 918. For the anthropological inspiration behind M-O: Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 15. For similar interest in the rituals of mass behaviour: TC 76/2/A, 802-803.

³⁶ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 93.

³⁷ For these evaluative comments from the observers: MOA, TC 76/2/A, 809 and 785. For the annotations encouraging a grid of 'speech' and 'reaction': TC 76/2/A, 780. This fits with the emphasis on 'finding out the sorts of remark and speech which were most effective' in the West Fulham by-election study: MOA, FR A7 West Fulham By-Election (March 1938), 8.

³⁸ Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 93.

campaign stressed the 'typical sample of political opinion' gathered in the investigation.³⁹

This emphasis on the typicality of attitudes in Fulham was reproduced and taken further in reports based on the investigation. In one such report, findings from Fulham were placed alongside diarist material from elsewhere in the country (spanning Bishop Auckland, Swansea, and Burnley).⁴⁰ This combination of writing from the 'activist', self-selecting diarists with observational material relating to 'ordinary' individuals reflects an attempt to provide a total, representative account of popular political opinion in 1945.⁴¹ The presentation of Fulham as 'one typical London borough' was in keeping with its established function as a site of 'metropolitan' opinion.⁴² Elsewhere in the same report, however, interview responses from Fulham were used to conclude that 'the eyes of the nation are firmly fixed on hard facts'; the report's discussion of 'how people made up their minds' was similarly framed around Fulham, justified by the suggestion that 'a similar story comes from all the other constituencies of which we have information'.⁴³ This use of the Fulham study to speak to national voter intentions resulted in a disregard for the particularities of the borough's political culture. Where the election campaign in Fulham featured extensive heckling, this M-O report emphasized the 'lack of active demonstration and excitement' across the country, while characterizing the borough as one of 'mixed classes' despite its predominantly working-class residents.⁴⁴ This emphasis on Fulham's 'mixed' class character speaks to sociologists' difficulties in the 1950s and 1960s in locating an English 'Middletown', disagreeing as to whether a working-class or middle-class, metropolitan or rural site would most effectively speak to post-war national identity.⁴⁵

This framing of Fulham as 'representative' is also evident in M-O's publications. In light of the growth and enhanced legitimacy of opinion polling organizations in the post-war period, M-O sought to defend its approach against the quantitative methods of its competitors.⁴⁶ In one

³⁹ MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1057 and 1059. See similar comments concerning the reliability and accuracy of the Fulham material in FR 2265: General Election (July 1945), 4, 8.

⁴⁰ MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945. For accounts from beyond Fulham, see 14–15, 139–40.

⁴¹ For the relationship between M-O's diarist panel and investigative work: J. Hinton, 'The "Class" Complex: Mass-Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain', *Past and Present*, 199 (2008), 207.

⁴² MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945, 28.

⁴³ MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945, 99, 94.

⁴⁴ MOA, FR 2270A: The General Election 1945, 94, 42.

⁴⁵ M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010), 137.

⁴⁶ For a comparison of M-O's approach with the quantitative methods pursued by BIPO and other survey organizations: L. Beers, 'Whose Opinion? Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British Politics 1937–64', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), 186. For these organizations' greater success in securing post-war commissions: J. Moran, 'Mass-

article, published by John Ferraby in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in the autumn of 1945, the East Fulham material was used to dispute an alternative explanation for Labour's victory proposed by the American 'Opinion Research Corporation' in a previous issue.⁴⁷ Although Ferraby began by recognizing that the Fulham survey 'does *not* allow for a forecast of the national popular vote', he nevertheless concluded by suggesting there was 'no reason to believe major attitudes differed in other constituencies except qualitatively'.⁴⁸ Moreover, while emphasizing the 'importance of studying spontaneous comments and background qualitative material', Ferraby's attempt to speak to the causes of the national result relied upon quantitative analysis of M-O interview responses.⁴⁹ This use of the Fulham material consequently speaks to M-O's difficulties after the Second World War, when its 'apparent lack of statistical rigour' fared poorly in view of the 'rapid development of scientific sampling', while illustrating how these pressures resulted in a move away from the organization's earlier concern with particularities and peculiarities.⁵⁰

The questionnaire used by Mass-Observers in Fulham in 1945 (Fig. 1) speaks to the tensions underpinning the investigation. The questions posed to interviewees reflect the organization's long-standing interest in popular attitudes towards politics: 'Have you been following the news about the General Election or not? ... Do you expect to vote in the election or not? ... How do you feel about the way elections are run?'. Such questions were clearly intended to provide useful material for potential audiences such as political parties: 'What do you think are the most important things being discussed at this election? ... What do you like most in your own party's policy?'. Yet, they also tend to presuppose a set of straightforward 'yes or no' answers: 'Can you tell me the names of the candidates here and which party they stand for?'.⁵¹ In this sense, the phrasing of the questionnaire betrays how the popular testimony gathered from such interviews was used after the investigation, tabulated and

Observation, Market Research, and the Birth of the Focus Group, 1937-1997', *Journal of British Studies*, 47 (2008), 835, 838.

⁴⁷ The author of this original piece from the Opinion Research Corporation submitted a further reply to Ferraby, outlining his methodology and accepting one of Ferraby's two criticisms: F. Cantwell, 'Mr Cantwell Replies', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 9 (1945), 296.

⁴⁸ J. G. Ferraby, 'More on the Meaning of that British Election', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 9 (1945), 394-5.

⁴⁹ Ferraby, 'More on the Meaning'. See Ferraby's mention of the fact 'only 6% of Labour supporters mentioned nationalisation' and the 'Fifteen percent of Conservative' supporters mentioning Churchill. For M-O's continued reliance on Fulham for its increasingly quantitative research in the post-war period: Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 348.

⁵⁰ Moran, 'Mass-Observation, Market Research', 838.

⁵¹ Hinton has suggested that women were more likely than men to respond with 'don't know' to these sorts of questions, out of a 'sensible reluctance to engage in the male pastime of cloaking uncertainty in dogmatism': '1945 and the Apathy School', 268.

items for every person that mentioned at least one item, or 1.5 per person questioned'.⁵²

Accounting for apathy

In 1945, the incumbent Conservative MP Bill Astor stood for re-election in the constituency of Fulham East. Astor, described in the press as a 'leading member' of the Tory Reform Committee, faced two opponents at the ballot box.⁵³ Standing for the Liberals, Philip Syrett was the 'son of a City solicitor', while Labour candidate Michael Stewart had a background in teaching and as a lecturer for the Workers' Educational Association.⁵⁴ Opening Labour's eve of poll meeting on 4 July at Fulham Town Hall, local Party chairman J. W. Perotti stressed the importance of the following day's voting. Perotti stated 'Tomorrow you will record your vote, and when polling is finished you will be responsible for the form of government that will govern this country for the next 5 years. Very important: first, because it is the first election we have had for 10 years ...'.⁵⁵ Local by-elections continued after 1935 (including in West Fulham).⁵⁶ However, the Second World War prevented the dissolution of the 1935 Parliament after its allotted 5-year term. The overdue nature of the 1945 General Election was drawn upon by contemporaries like Perotti to emphasize its significance. Admittedly, not everyone in Fulham shared Perotti's belief in the importance of the election. The local press reported numerous electors missing on polling day on account of being 'on holiday'.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, some contemporaries endorsed the significance of this extensive gap since voters had last gone to the polls, consequently viewing the election as an opportunity to set politics on a new path. This is captured by those individuals who articulated their conscious political re-assessment within their interviews with M-O, extending beyond any straightforward 'swing to the left'. One income-tax expert related 'I lived in Newton Abbott before the war and I considered myself a Conservative there, but now my sympathies are more with Labour', while another interviewee stated 'well up to the present I'm Labour but I might alter my

⁵² MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1060.

⁵³ *The Telegraph*, 2 July 1945, 5. For the Tory Reform Committee's alternative vision of Conservatism in 1945: K. Kowol, 'The Conservative Movement and Dreams of Britain's Post-war Future', *The Historical Journal*, 62 (2018), 477–9.

⁵⁴ 'East Fulham Liberals' Choice', *Fulham Chronicle*, 8 June 1945, 1; 'Schoolmaster Socialist', *Fulham Voice*, 23 February 1950 in MOA, TC 76/4/F (1950 Election: Fulham East). For Stewart's adoption in Fulham in 1936: Stewart, *Life and Labour*, 39.

⁵⁵ MOA, TC 76/2/A, 834.

⁵⁶ See the framing of these by-elections as part of the wartime 'swing to the left': Addison, *The Road to 1945*, 127, 1546, 249; P. Addison, 'By-elections of the Second World War', in C. Cook and J. Ramsden (eds), *By-elections in British Politics* (London, 1997), 130–50.

⁵⁷ 'Polling Booths Battle Ended', *Fulham Chronicle*, 6 July 1945, 1.

views'.⁵⁸ This sense of the possibility for change was enhanced by the significant number of new electors 'recording their vote for the first time' in 1945, again due to the overdue nature of the election.⁵⁹ In Fulham, party-political efforts to cater to this 'spirit of youth' are evident in the use of children for distributing pamphlets, displays of 'youth' on posters, and local candidates' emphasis on their youthful credentials.⁶⁰ Such efforts contributed to the distinctive 'progressive' feel of political culture in 1945, but ultimately formed part of an established local practice of youth engagement in politics.⁶¹ Where political scientists have sought to assess the bearing of this younger generation of voters on Labour's victory, this evidence reveals how contemporaries interpreted the significance of these voters before the election result.⁶² The number of new voters in 1945 ultimately had an additional significance, provoking concern among elite commentators surrounding these electors' political inexperience and thereby marking a continuity with anxieties held between the wars.

In the inter-war period, unprecedented extensions to the franchise provoked anxiety among political elites surrounding the rationality of new electors and their capacity to be integrated into the democratic system without provoking serious political and social instability.⁶³ Such anxiety spurred extensive political education campaigns, focused on developing 'intelligent, responsible' and 'active citizenship' through 'study of domestic or foreign affairs ... and emphasising more generally the importance of independent critical thought'.⁶⁴ These campaigns were frequently carried out by all-female political associations including the instructive work

⁵⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1091; 76/2/J, 1248. See also 76/2/A, 789; 76/2/K 1461.

⁵⁹ MOA TC 76/2/A, 834. See emphasis on the 'first chance to vote' for many electors in 'Polling booths battle ended', *Fulham Chronicle*, 6 July 1945, 1. Just under a fifth of M-O interviewees reported having been too young to vote at the previous election (71 out of total sample of 396). For associations of youth, progressivism and reconstruction: E. Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (London, 2017), 34; C. Langhamer and H. Barron, 'Children, class, and the search for security: Writing the future in 1930s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 368.

⁶⁰ MOA, TC 76/2/B, 849; 76/2/D, 904; 76/2/F, 935; 76/2/G, 1021.

⁶¹ Interview 'GRAY, JOHN' (2000:03, Imperial War Museum Collection Online, 20202) <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80018716>> accessed 19 April 2021, Reel 1; H. Turner, *Growing Up in Fulham: Memories of SW6, 1940-1953* (London, 2004), 175-6. Laura King argues that the Second World War marked a distinctive phase in the deployment of 'children' in political debates: L. King, 'Future Citizens: Cultural and Political Conceptions of Children in Britain, 1930s-1950s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 394-5, 401, 411.

⁶² M. Franklin and M. Ladner, 'The Undoing of Winston Churchill: Mobilisation and Conversion in the 1945 Realignment of British Voters', *British Journal of Political Science*, 25 (1995), 429-52.

⁶³ P. Thane, 'The Impact of Mass Democracy on British Political Culture, 1918-1939', in J. Gottlieb and R. Toye (eds), *The Aftermath of Suffrage: Women, Gender and Politics in Britain 1918-1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 54. For shifts in inter-war electoral culture resulting from anxiety surrounding new women voters: J. Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), 125.

⁶⁴ McCarthy, 'Whose Democracy?', 230; Thane, 'Impact of Mass Democracy', 58.

of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and the Women's Institutes.⁶⁵ In Fulham, the inter-war period saw similar party-political efforts to direct the political engagement of newly enfranchised female electors, illustrated by the establishment of a 'Women's Branch' of the East Fulham Conservative and Unionist Association in 1922, while both East and West Fulham had active Labour Women's Sections by 1926.⁶⁶ These associations offered political training through activities such as speaking competitions, as well as social engagements and whist drives.⁶⁷ While typically discussed in relation to the 1918 and 1928 extensions to the franchise, and thus framed as particular to the inter-war period, these anxieties and ideals persisted in 1945, evident in the opinions of politicians and commentators in Fulham.⁶⁸

Across the major political parties, local candidates reinforced the importance of an informed, engaged electorate. Liberal candidate Philip Syrett emphasized the 'complicated' nature of politics, and the subsequent need for voters to 'read the literature of all parties. Consider carefully your candidates and their policies. It is so much easier not to think'.⁶⁹ At a meeting for Conservative women, local candidate Bill Astor decried the 'tremendous lack of knowledge about the parties and their candidates', referencing voters who were unaware of his candidacy and 'didn't even know who stood for Churchill', subsequently suggesting that 'Enlightenment was the thing'.⁷⁰ In turn, the weekly left-leaning political column in the *Fulham Chronicle* stressed the need for voters to 'wake up ... exercise the vote intelligently' and 'study the programmes of all parties'.⁷¹ At a national level, these anxieties were explicitly attributed to the belief that, owing to the wartime suspension of party politics, a 'very large number of electors and, in particular, the younger generations have been prevented ... from becoming acquainted with the facts and issues of the political life of the country'.⁷²

⁶⁵ Thane, 'Impact of Mass Democracy', 59, 61.

⁶⁶ R. E. J. Parsons, 'Women and Politics' in *Fulham Gazette* (17 August 1925), in Hammersmith and Fulham Archives, Fulham [hereafter HFA], Conservative Party Association, F3291. See the Fulham Borough Labour Party letterhead from 4 September 1926 listing Labour Women's Sections in East and West Fulham: HFA, West Fulham Labour Bulletin, F329.3 WES. For Conservative efforts to target new female electors: D. Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), 132, 141–2.

⁶⁷ West Fulham Labour Bulletin, No. 5 (May 1943) and No. 7 (September 1943), in HFA, F329.3 WES.

⁶⁸ Thane, 'Impact of Mass Democracy', 57.

⁶⁹ MOA, TC 76/2/B, 844. Syrett's election campaign slogan was, 'Consider your candidate, consider your vote': *Fulham Chronicle*, 29 June 1945, 2.

⁷⁰ MOA, TC 76/2/C, 865–6.

⁷¹ 'Wake Up!', *Fulham Chronicle*, 1 June 1945, 4. For the columnist's leftist tendencies: 'Split Vote Farce', *Fulham Chronicle*, 22 June 1945, 4.

⁷² 'Notes for Speakers and Workers, June 1945', Conservative Party Archive, Oxford, PUB 224/11C, 6. Such anxieties were exacerbated in 1945 by the difficulty of reaching young

Beyond political elites and press commentators, the M-O encounter in Fulham upheld the importance of active, informed citizenship. This is made clear by returning to the M-O questionnaire used in Fulham in 1945 (Fig. 1).

As well as reflecting the varied incentives behind the 1945 investigation, the Fulham questionnaire also speaks to the difficulties the Mass-Observers encountered when conducting interviews in practice. The palimpsest discernible here, the handwritten additions, amendments, and crossings out, reflects that certain parts of the questionnaire were 'liable to be misunderstood', allegedly going over 'the heads of a good many of those interviewed', subsequently requiring rephrasing and 'explanation'.⁷³ The field notes from M-O's investigation reveal numerous instances where interviewees struggled to answer the questions posed. In some cases, this stemmed from the timing of the interview. Where individuals were interviewed before the election campaign in Fulham had got into full swing, they were less likely to be able to name local candidates or offer critical commentary on the campaign so far, informing their interviewers that 'It's hardly begun ... [There's] nothing to follow in Fulham so far'.⁷⁴ More typically, however, interviewees appear to have struggled to answer the questions posed because they required such extensive, detailed engagement with—and factual knowledge of—the election campaign. Numerous respondents, when asked their views on the outstanding personalities of the election or what they felt were the most important issues being discussed, admitted 'I don't know. I haven't interested myself in it that much ... Couldn't say about that—I've not followed it that much'.⁷⁵ Such answers speak to the high expectations underpinning the questionnaire. In turn, individuals were asked by the Mass-Observers if they had listened to speeches on the wireless and followed the election campaign at national and local levels, before being asked if they intended to vote.⁷⁶ The ordering of the questionnaire thus also worked to underscore the importance of voters' sustained engagement with and study of the election campaign.⁷⁷

service voters; local press reported 4,350 service voters registered in East Fulham: *Fulham Chronicle*, 15 June 1945, 2.

⁷³ MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1063. See also, TC 76/2/J, 1463.

⁷⁴ For such responses: MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1094, 1122, 1126, 1141, 1162, 1174; TC 76/2/J, 1225, 1242, 1243, 1290; TC 76/2/K, 1327, 1420, 1458, 1461. The election campaign in Fulham was reported to be 'by no means in full swing yet' in *Fulham Chronicle*, 15 June 1945, 2; most of the responses cited here were elicited on, if not before, this date.

⁷⁵ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1208. See also: TC 76/2/I, 1130, 1134, 1140, 1148, 1169, 1174, 1179; TC 76/2/J, 1210, 1212, 1214, 1222, 1245, 1246, 1247, 1250, 1304, 1343, 1318; TC 76/2/K, 1328, 1330, 1331, 1335, 1348, 1368, 1402, 1447, 1452, 1460, 1468, 1491.

⁷⁶ For the full questionnaire: MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1080.

⁷⁷ For interviewees' attempts to fulfil these criteria: MOA, TC 76/2/E, 921; 76/2/I, 1112, 1153, 1164; 76/2/J, 1225, 1245; 76/2/K, 1398, 1420, 1504.

It is hard to tell how far the M-O questionnaire was designed to inculcate 'proper' democratic practice along these lines. This motivation is arguably discernible in one observer's annotated frustration at an interviewee's reticence: 'only after a great deal of ferreting did this emerge'.⁷⁸ In turn, the testing of popular political knowledge in the interview encounter can be seen where observers labelled interviewee responses as 'correct', 'woolly', or 'vague', particularly for questions concerning the names of local candidates.⁷⁹ This evaluative impulse is borne out further in certain Mass-Observers' tactics of asking individuals on the street if they knew Fulham's constituency boundaries.⁸⁰ Other interviewers, however, appear to have placed greater emphasis on the importance of recording interviewee responses verbatim, reflecting an understanding of their role as neutral collectors, rather than interpreters, of mass, popular opinion. The protean, fluid nature of M-O's work, seen in the lack of formal interview sample or hypothesis behind the Fulham research, afforded greater scope for individual observers to conduct research according to their own interpretations of the organization's mission. Nevertheless, in their work for M-O, the observers as a whole can be seen as embodying the ideals of active political engagement implicit within the questionnaire.⁸¹ Jon Lawrence has argued that post-war social-science encounters acted as a 'catalyst' for popular reflection; this is particularly pertinent to M-O, as from its outset the organization sought to awaken popular political consciousness.⁸² Some of the responses to the M-O questionnaire in Fulham reflect the fulfilment of these aims, with one lorry-driver commenting, 'It's funny, me talking politics to you. I've never talked politics in my life before'.⁸³ Nevertheless, the above analysis suggests the M-O interviews cannot be seen as *neutral* catalysts, instead encouraging political engagement along particular lines.⁸⁴

Despite the efforts of some Mass-Observers to spread political engagement, the questionnaire's role in discouraging and delimiting participation can be seen in the self-critical reflection of one interviewee, a first-time voter, that 'I've not taken as much interest as I should in this

⁷⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1287.

⁷⁹ For answers labelled 'correct': MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1107, 1190, 1191, 1193, 1194, 1201; 76/2/J, 1232. In one case an interviewee's response was branded with the comment 'no satisfactory answer': 76/2/J, 1239. These comments tended to come from the observer with the initials 'JWSST', for whom I have been unable to find any surviving identification, including in Hinton's study.

⁸⁰ MOA, TC 76/2/E, 931.

⁸¹ For the socio-political motivations of M-O diarists: P. Summerfield, 'Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20 (1985), especially 441–2; Hinton, 'The "Class" Complex', 220.

⁸² Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, 7; T. Jeffery, *Mass-Observation: A Short History* (Brighton, 1999).

⁸³ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1218. See also 76/2/K, 1333.

⁸⁴ For M-O's more complicated approach in practice to letting the masses 'speak for themselves': Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 12, 33, 64.

election ... I feel as I don't understand politics I don't want to use my vote'.⁸⁵ The criteria perceived to be at work in the questionnaire, shared by local media and political commentators, could heighten the 'apartness' of politics, rendering it accessible only to those with the time and education such critical engagement was seen to require.⁸⁶ One female interviewee encapsulated this in her response of 'I don't know. You'd better ask someone more educated than me'.⁸⁷ Similarly, one working-class housewife repeated throughout her interview that she had not paid much attention to the election because, 'I got six kids and they take all my time ... Well I couldn't say that, I've not had time to study it ... I'm so busy, I got no time to follow it'.⁸⁸ In this context, the tendency of certain interviewees, particularly working-class women, to give repeated replies of 'don't know' can be better understood, reflecting the alienating high expectations framing the interview.⁸⁹ Such responses may also have stemmed from the intersubjective dynamics of the M-O encounter.

As related above, most of the Mass-Observers working in Fulham in 1945 were older, middle-class women.⁹⁰ The interview, consisting of only eleven questions, generally appears to have been conducted on doorsteps and in streets. In this sense, unlike later, post-war social-science encounters, the length and setting of the questionnaire generally precluded the necessity of developing 'rapport'. All the same, it is possible to discern the imprint of the intersubjective dynamics of the interview in the archived field notes from the investigation.⁹¹ This can be seen in those instances where Mass-Observers annotated interviewee responses with derogatory, classed judgements. On several occasions, working-class female interviewees were described as suspected 'prostitutes'. One Mass-Observers wrote at the end of an interview with a 28-year-old male labourer, 'Note. This was about the stupidest and most irritating person I'd come across so far'. The unequal power dynamics underpinning the encounter are also discernible on those occasions where observers appeared to have supplied information designed to discredit the testimony that

⁸⁵ MOA, TC 76/2/E, 926. For a similar comment see 76/2/K, 1440.

⁸⁶ Black, *Redefining British Politics*, 2.

⁸⁷ MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1472. See also: 76/2/K, 1425, 1485, 1494.

⁸⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1458. See also TC 76/2/K, 1370, 1375, 1380, 1388, 1421.

⁸⁹ The identification of the class identities of interviewees, as well as their ages, relies upon the estimates originally made by the Mass-Observers. For the varying accuracy of such estimates see footnote 19 in Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 263.

⁹⁰ These middle-class female interviewers noting down such responses included Lena Bleehan (LB): MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1375, 1415, 1416, 1442, 1472, 1477, and Margaret Holland (MH): 76/2/K, 1356, 1386, 1387, 1425. For details on these observers: Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 300, 329. For the similarly gendered, intersubjective dynamics of post-war social-science: Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters'.

⁹¹ The M-O File Report on its 1938 study of the West Fulham by-election also mentioned local 'dialect': MOA, FR A7 West Fulham By-Election (March 1938), 9.

they recorded.⁹² When one respondent, a 24-year-old labourer, suggested that wages and hours of work were the most important issues being discussed at the election, the interviewer added in parentheses '(contact was idling when I found him)'.⁹³ Such evidence may speak to a normative understanding of who counted as the 'man in the street', a division between a respectable 'ordinariness' and the idle, the ignorant or the disreputable.⁹⁴ Yet, it also cautions against accepting at face value M-O's purported self-differentiation from the detached elitism of contemporary 'gentlemanly' social-science. Compared to existing social research, M-O claimed to pioneer a 'human approach . . . taking into their confidence, as it were, the man in the street who is the subject of their researches [sic]. They come from no heights of learning to mix with ordinary people and things'.⁹⁵ While these aims may have been pursued in M-O's earlier investigations, subject to tighter, direct control from the organization's co-founders, this analysis suggests that, by 1945 at least, such standards could slip at the hands of investigators less committed to this founding ethos.

David Thackeray, surveying the election survey material collected by M-O from the organization's establishment in 1937 through to the 1950s, has criticized the conclusions of popular apathy drawn by M-O's employees and by those who have subsequently re-used their survey data. Albeit recognizing that 'women were less likely to provide detailed answers than men', Thackeray's re-analysis suggests that 'many people were eager to be seen to be politically engaged and able to offer a considered assessment of the veracity of the competing parties' promises'.⁹⁶ These interviewees, whether performatively or not, conformed with and sought to fulfil the criteria implicit within the M-O survey. This kind of response is certainly present in the material from M-O's 1945 investigation in Fulham. What I want to suggest here, however, is that we might also see

⁹² For rare instances where interviewees sought to rework the unequal power dynamics of the interview encounter for their own ends, for instance soliciting aid for a disabled husband unable to vote: MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1485.

⁹³ See also the suggestion in Mass-Observation's overview of the campaign that certain individuals were 'lying' in their responses: MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1047. This distrust of informants' testimony is similarly visible in Tom Harrison's instruction to observers that the ideal equipment was an 'ear plug': Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 33.

⁹⁴ In later, post-war investigations Mass-Observers selected interviewees who 'looked as if they might live in the area': FR 2370, 'World Organisation and the Future' (17 March 1946), 64. This analysis aligns with Claire Langhamer's discussion of normative ideas of 'ordinariness' in the mid-twentieth century: C. Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are Ordinary People? Ordinariness as a Category of Historical Analysis', *TRHS*, 28 (2018), 175–95.

⁹⁵ 'Mass-Observation in Bolton: A Social Experiment', 1–2, found in MOA, Worktown Collection [hereafter WC] Box 1: Organization of the Project, File C: Draft articles about Worktown project, 64–5; 'Spending and Saving in Worktown', 1, in MOA, WC Box 1: Organization of the Project, File C: Draft articles about Worktown project, 71. See also Savage, *Identities and Social Change*, 94–96.

⁹⁶ Thackeray, 'Mass Observation', 752, 756, 769.

responses indicating apathy, particularly from working-class women, as another kind of response to the expectations underlying the questionnaire, exacerbated by the intersubjective dynamics of the interview encounter.

Beyond apathy: alternative ideas of political engagement

There were other occasions, however, where rather than being intimidated by or seeking to fulfil the expectations framing the M-O encounter, interviewees upended such expectations to speak on their own terms. As related above, individuals in Fulham generally appear to have struggled to answer the questionnaire because of the extensive, detailed ‘study’ of the election campaign it required. Responses such as, ‘I don’t know sufficiently about it to say . . . Oh I couldn’t say. I don’t follow it enough to say’, capture this.⁹⁷ Yet, in many of these cases, despite admitting their relative lack of engagement with and knowledge of the election campaign, interviewees voiced a commitment to voting. At times, this kind of response could underline the strength of an individual’s partisanship. When asked whether they knew the names of local party candidates, for example, some replied: ‘Astor’s Cons[ervative]—that’s all I’m concerned about . . . Stewart. I’m only interested in the Lab[our] man’.⁹⁸ Admitting to a lack of engagement with the election campaign could also be designed to indicate political independence, a refusal to be told what to do or think: ‘I don’t follow them [speeches] in the papers. I have my own opinion.’⁹⁹ At other times, these responses reveal that alternative factors counted for more in the formation of political identities, seen in the example of those individuals who, unable to name their party’s local candidate and relatively disengaged from the election campaign, rooted their partisanship in the perceived class credentials of their chosen party. This was especially evident among respondents who voiced support for Labour. Across the M-O interview responses, individuals recurrently validated Labour’s working-class credentials, seen in comments such as ‘it really represents the working people . . . they see our point of view. They lead the lives we lead.’¹⁰⁰ The Mass-Observers’ field notes from party-political meetings in Fulham suggest national Labour figures, such

⁹⁷ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1318; TC 76/2/K, 1328.

⁹⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1104; TC 76/2/J, 1219. See also TC 76/2/I, 1124, 1145; TC 76/2/J, 1237, 1295; TC 76/2/K, 1335, 1348. Not knowing the names of local candidates could also express a belief that national politics mattered more than local, for instance: TC 76/2/J, 1297.

⁹⁹ MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1100. See also TC 76/2/K, 1372, 1492. For similar analysis: Cowan, ‘The “Progress of a Slogan”’, 442.

¹⁰⁰ MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1148, 1132; 76/2/K, 1479. For similar comments see 76/2/I, 1151 and 1200; 76/2/J, 1208, 1213, 1224, 1225, 1229, 1233, 1238, 1241, 1257, 1269, 1273, 1282, 1293; 76/2/K, 1455, 1458, 1463, 1508. Similar popular emphasis on Labour’s association with ‘the working classes’ can be found in: Stoker et al., *The Good Politician*, 167; R. Sibley, ‘The Swing

as Ernest Bevin, played a crucial role in consolidating Labour's classed credentials.¹⁰¹ The election campaign mattered, then, but in ways, the M-O questionnaire, with its emphasis on terminological, factual knowledge, was less attuned to. Perceptions of shared class identities between electors and elected enhanced political trust, owing to the belief that politicians who understood working-class experiences would prioritize workers' interests once in power: 'if you go in for the people who've got the money, you'll find they rebuild the Houses of Parliament before they build the homes'.¹⁰² Albeit focused on Fulham, these findings nuance David Thackeray's recent claim that Labour's victory rested on its superior credibility according to the 'valence' model governing popular attitudes towards parties in the 1940s, involving assessments of a party's performance rather than perceptions of its 'class loyalties'.¹⁰³

Taken together, these responses indicate that individuals on the ground could hold very different understandings of the criteria that, as potential voters, they were expected to fulfil.¹⁰⁴ In turn, these responses suggest that the activist ideals implicit within the questionnaire could sit at odds with interviewees' conception of politics, its significance to wider culture, and place in their lives. Interviewees spoke to their alternative standards of politicization in remarking 'I haven't interested myself in it that much ... I've not followed it that much ... I don't study it all that much ... I'm not in touch with every aspect of it'.¹⁰⁵ One Mass-Observation, picking up on these responses in her overview of the first week of the campaign, attributed them not to disinterestedness or lack of knowledge, rather 'a deep feeling of resentment of needlessly being plunged into a countrywide election so soon after the peace with Germany'.¹⁰⁶ There are other, potentially complementary ways, of interpreting this material, however. Admitting to ignorance and disengagement along these lines could also form a means of asserting the appropriate limits of political interest and engagement, confining this to participation in a general election, an extraordinary event in ordinary circumstances let alone in 1945. In this sense, we can view such responses along similar lines to those garnered as part of the 1943–1952 Wartime Survey of Sickness, as analysed by Daisy Payling. Payling has suggested that instances of 'ignorance', particularly from working-class interviewees, could form 'a subtler form

to Labour during the Second World War: When and Why?', *Labour History Review*, 55 (1990), 28.

¹⁰¹ The Mass-Observation noted the positive reception of Bevin's reference, in a speech in Fulham, to the 'condition of the working man', elaborated with a working-class accent: MOA, TC 76/2/A, 783–5, 801–8, and 814–15.

¹⁰² MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1488.

¹⁰³ Thackeray, 'Mass-Observation', 752, 766, 771.

¹⁰⁴ This was most explicitly articulated at MOA, TC 76/2/K, 1458, 1492.

¹⁰⁵ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1208, 1222, 1315, 1212.

¹⁰⁶ MOA, TC 76/2/H, 1068.

of resistance' against the tacit assumptions framing the interview, a less confrontational means for interviewees to express citizenship 'on their own terms'.¹⁰⁷ It is hard to be sure how intentional 'resistance' was on the part of interviewees. What is clear from the surviving interview responses is that individuals on the ground in Fulham frequently felt the Mass-Observers, in conducting the questionnaire, were talking in alien, foreign terms. This is evident in interviews where questions required 'explanation', and in those where interviewees expressed frustration and disorientation at the questions posed: 'Now you're asking me a funny question . . . That's asking something . . . I don't know—it's not my idea of thinking . . . Oh I can't answer these questions'¹⁰⁸

David Cowan, pursuing a similar re-reading of M-O material, has argued that where interviewees failed to recognize party-political speech in 1940s London this apparent ignorance could signal, not apathy, but the idea 'that popular political opinions should express 'independence', rising above reductive political discourse by reflecting personal experiences'.¹⁰⁹ This analysis complements Cowan's research, by providing further evidence of the 'capacity of the public to decide, themselves, about what counted as an acceptable level of political engagement'. Taken together, our findings suggest politics in the 1940s was characterized not only by popular emphasis on political independence but also by a willing degree of independence *from* politics. As suggested by some of the comments quoted earlier in the article, this alternative attitude towards politics is more realistic for those whose work-related and domestic commitments precluded detailed study of and engagement with politics. In this sense, this relatively depoliticized approach was arguably grounded as much in practicality as ideology. For some, however, this was more than just an implicit rejection of the activist ideals underpinning the questionnaire. Instead, it also involved a rethinking of who or what was deserving of study. One working-class engineer's fitter, for example, admitted he had not been studying the election campaign and was 'not terribly interested' in what was going on in Fulham, before going on to argue 'I think the working classes should be studied more—what's the sense in building fine houses when we can't afford to pay the rent to live in them'.¹¹⁰ It is hard to tell how far these political attitudes were new to 1945.¹¹¹ Such responses potentially speak, however, to the impact of the Second World War in empowering working-class citizens, whether in terms of enabling

¹⁰⁷ Payling, "'The People Who Write to Us'", 317.

¹⁰⁸ MOA, TC 76/2/I, 1174; 76/2/J, 1210, 1250, 1247. See also TC 76/2/J, 1304.

¹⁰⁹ Cowan, 'The "Progress of a Slogan"', 442.

¹¹⁰ MOA, TC 76/2/J, 1283. For similar sentiments: TC 76/2/K, 1442.

¹¹¹ The interview responses from Mass-Observation's study of the 1938 by-election in Fulham offer a limited point of comparison in this respect, since the investigation was focused on discovering whether voters were more interested in domestic or foreign affairs: MOA, TC 46/2/C, 1152–56.

this rethinking or simply underpinning interviewees' confidence to articulate such views and upend the expectations implicit within the M-O encounter. Such analysis reinforces Ross McKibbin's suggestion that the Second World War altered 'the way in which the working class saw itself and was seen by others'.¹¹² In Fulham in 1945, the M-O encounter itself, the organization's interest in ordinary lives and attitudes, can be seen as contributing to and validating this heightened sense of working-class dignity and importance.¹¹³

Conclusion

This article has read against the grain in archived material from M-O's study of the 1945 General Election in Fulham East. Where previously historians have relied upon the formal conclusions from this investigation to better understand the causes of Labour's victory, reproducing M-O's intended framing of this research, this article has instead returned to the original field notes from the investigation and attended to the framing and intersubjective dynamics of the M-O encounter in Fulham. In this way, the article suggests we can reinterpret the seemingly apathetic responses, given especially by working-class women, as a product of the alienating high expectations underpinning the M-O questionnaire. In turn, this article has argued that responses along these lines, qualifying engagement with or interest in the election campaign while nevertheless committing to voting, could also signify a rejection of the activist ideals implicit within the questionnaire. Through such responses, interviewees can be seen as articulating their understanding of the appropriate level of political engagement.

The analysis pursued here offers a number of implications for the existing literature. First, it has added to well-trodden ground in criticizing the so-called 'apathy school', suggesting these authors reproduced the high standards of politicization held by the Mass-Observers and shaped by the organization's institutional concerns. By reading against the grain in the original field notes from the investigation, this article has provided an account of popular political attitudes in 1945 more in-keeping with our existing understanding of politics in the immediate post-war decades. This article has argued that individuals delimited their interest in and engagement with politics in 1945, confining this to voting. Such analysis aligns with Lawrence Black's suggestion that the 1950s and 1960s were characterized, not only by unprecedentedly high turn-out and strength of partisanship, but also by a relatively depoliticized political

¹¹² R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), 135. See also Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are Ordinary People?', 187-9.

¹¹³ See also S. Todd, 'Class, Experience and Britain's Twentieth Century', *Social History*, 39 (2014), 494.

culture.¹¹⁴ Admittedly, the material analysed here represents a snapshot of politics in 1945, centred on one west London constituency. Nevertheless, turning to M-O's later post-war studies in Fulham, its investigation of the 1950 General Election, for example, reveals some continuity between the attitudes outlined in this article, whether apathy produced by the interview encounter or the delimiting of an appropriate level of political engagement, after 1945.¹¹⁵ Reading against the grain in archived social-science material, therefore, may help to provide a new vantage point from which to understand the distinctive features of post-war politics.

In applying the critical re-use of archived social-science material to a study of the 1945 General Election, this article has also provided the latest example of how historians might pair the recent vernacular 'turn' with more traditional approaches to political history. Finally, then, this article intervenes in an ongoing literature surrounding the re-use of archived social-science material. As part of this literature, some have classified historians who use such material into two camps: those interested in the social-scientists themselves, and those interested in the people social-scientists studied.¹¹⁶ While useful for understanding the different work that has emerged out of this new methodological approach, the analysis pursued here suggests that we cannot do one without the other: Our analysis of vernacular attitudes through archived social-science material must be alive to the interests and assumptions of the social-scientists, framing the interview encounter. This is by no means a new suggestion. Yet, the continued tendency to treat M-O as a neutral, data-gathering exercise, relying upon its archived material to afford straightforward access to vernacular attitudes, suggests this point merits reiteration.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank David Cowan, Nick Garland, Jon Lawrence, Helen McCarthy, and Geraint Thomas for their helpful feedback on previous versions of this article. The author is also indebted to the anonymous reviewers at *Twentieth Century British History*.

¹¹⁴ Black, *Redefining British Politics*, 173.

¹¹⁵ For these responses in the 1950 election material: MOA, TC 76/5/B, 3152, 3153, 3165, 3175, 3215, 3241.

¹¹⁶ R. Dubler, 'The Sociologist and the Subject: Two Historiographies of Post-war Social Science', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 412–5.