RECOGNISING POLITICAL INTEREST

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a deceptively simple question at the heart of debates around political engagement: why are some people interested in politics? I claim that political interest should be conceptualised as an agential process whereby an individual self-assesses themselves as being interested. There have been numerous quantitative studies on political engagement which have established the strength of association between political interest as a dependent variable and a range of independent variables. However, the association between these variables and political interest has been under-theorised. This thesis addresses this gap and establishes the process by which someone comes to recognise their interest in politics. Politics does not mean the same thing to all people and I contend that the self-assessment of political interest depends on the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics.

A key contribution this thesis makes is its development of an analytical framework which can be used to inform the future study of political interest. I use Q-methodology to explore the range of meanings of politics and this innovative approach forms a methodological contribution. By using Q-methodology, my thesis reveals five distinct meanings of politics. This finding was developed through the use of semi-structured interviews which revealed that the self-assessment of political interest is conditional on individuals recognising the salience of politics, as well as perceiving a sense of place within their meaning of politics. Our understanding of political interest has much to gain if we accept the complexity, rather than an imagined parsimony, of what it means to be interested in politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of political interest is developed by this thesis. Political interest is an underexplored concept and we know little about the deeper reflexive processes which have influenced an individual's decision that they are interested in politics. This project addresses the gap by exploring the factors which influence someone to self-assess themselves as being interested in politics. Our appreciation of political interest is enriched if we accept its complexity and agential dimensions, rather than assuming parsimony, or focusing purely on the outcome of people's self-assessment. Overall, I argue that political interest is a self-assessment that is conditional on how an individual relates to their meaning of politics. I will demonstrate that the self-assessment of political interest is informed by an individual recognising the salience of their meaning of politics and perceiving a sense of place, or that they belong, within their meaning of politics.

Previous studies of political interest are grounded in quantitative methods which demonstrate that some people have a greater tendency to be interested in politics than others (Bennett and Bennett, 1989; van Deth, 1989; Shani, 2009; Robinson Preece, 2016; Prior, 2019). While these quantitative studies provide a useful starting point and allow us to identify trends within political interest, there is still considerable theoretical work to do to understand how the individual comes to assess themselves as being interested in politics. Consequently, we miss some important considerations as to what the individual means by politics, the importance placed on politics, and people's political agency, such as their sense of whether they can meet the demands of politics and have a place within their meaning of politics.

The lack of emphasis placed on understanding how someone comes to assess themselves as being interested in politics appears to be an oversight given the strength of association between measures of political interest and political engagement (Macedo, 2005 cited in Prior, 2019, p. 11). Those who are more interested in politics have been found to be more likely to participate in politics (Prior, 2019). There is also the potential for the relationship to run the other way as engaging in politics may strengthen interest in the subject (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Quintelier and van Deth, 2014; Prior, 2019). If we are looking to enhance engagement with the political system and address the participation gap (Bartels, 2008; Dalton, 2017), then there is much to be gained by furthering our understanding of political interest.

Subsequently, in this thesis, I argue that there are intersecting gaps in our knowledge of political interest. The first relates to the processes by which someone comes to assess that they are interested in politics. The second concerns how this assessment may be informed by the meaning, or interpretation, of politics held by the individual. I address this gap by exploring the process by which people come to recognise their own interest in politics and develop an analytical framework to inform the study of political interest.

The central conceptual argument of this work is that political interest is a self-assessment made by an individual. An interest in politics is both experienced and reflected upon, but existing studies of this concept capture only people's self-assessment of their political interest.

While the measurement of political interest has been conceptualised as a self-assessment (van Deth, 1989), the full implications of viewing political interest as an 'evaluative statement or judgement' (Boulianne, 2011, p. 152) have not been investigated. Thus, the focus of analysis should be recast to explore the factors that can influence whether someone self-assesses as being interested in politics. My position is distinctive by progressing away from understanding political interest as a response to the political system alone, or arising from the characteristics or qualities of the individual. Furthermore, I claim that the self-assessment of an interest in politics is an agential act – an individual chooses whether to assess themselves as being interested in politics and this is a deeply complex, reflexive cognitive process. In other words, interest is not something that you just 'have', nor is interest just something that you 'are' – an individual makes an active choice to self-assess that they are interested in politics. To develop our understanding of political interest we should consider the process by which someone self-assesses their interest in politics.

Generalised accounts of interest note that it is directional – you are always 'interested *in something'* [emphasis added] (Ainley, 2017, p. 5). When considering political interest, palpably, it is politics that is the object of interest. The thesis demonstrates that people can hold different meanings of politics and that, furthermore, the self-assessment of interest will be based on individuals' meaning, or interpretation, of politics. In particular, the thesis uncovers that the self-assessment of political interest is dependent on the way in which individuals relate to their meaning of politics. Namely, whether an individual identifies: 1. the salience, or relative importance, of politics, and 2. a sense of place in politics, or perceiving that they belong and are 'accepted' by politics. Exploring these elements allows us to begin to surface why it is that some

people assess, or recognise, an interest in politics while others do not self-assess themselves to be interested. Given the strong association between political interest and political participation, progressing our understanding of political interest provides a starting point in which to develop engagement with the political system. In doing so, this thesis makes a number of contributions to our understanding of political interest and people's engagement with politics more widely.

Contribution of the thesis

In presenting this argument and the development of a framework to inform the study of political interest, I make three main contributions.

- Conceptually, I extend existing arguments as to why political interest should be viewed as an agential self-assessment.
- Q-methodology is used to identify the distinct meanings of politics people hold and marks the methodological contribution of this thesis.
- Analytically, the thesis reflects people's views about politics, along with their relationship with politics, and progresses our understanding of what can influence someone to assess themselves as being interested in politics. The findings have implications for policy and practice which attempt to develop political engagement.

<u>Conceptual contribution</u>

Attempts have been made to explore how people conceptualise political interest (Horner, 2007; Riddle, 2016) in order to address the claim that we do not know what

people refer to when they say they are interested in politics. Horner (2007) and Riddle (2016) suggest that political interest is multi-dimensional, in other words, political interest is not one single 'thing' but instead is comprised of multiple elements. As such, these studies highlight the complexity of political interest. However, as will be argued, our understanding of political interest gained from Horner's and Riddle's studies is hampered by their research being rooted in exploring how people perceive politics rather than interest specifically. Horner's and Riddle's work demonstrates that people can hold different meanings of politics, however, we are left uncertain as to the process by which someone 'becomes' interested in politics.

While arguing that political interest is a self-assessment is not a profoundly novel conception, I progress this assertion one step further by examining the implications of this understanding of political interest. If political interest is acknowledged to be an agential self-assessment, then the focus of study should consider the conditions which can influence the assessment of an interest in politics. I have established these conditions by noting that an individual's self-assessment of their political interest is conditional on them identifying both the salience of politics and a sense of place within their meaning of politics.

Methodological contribution

A major methodological contribution of this thesis is the use of Q-methodology to identify the range of meanings of politics in circulation. This is the first time that Q-methodology has been used to explore whether people hold different meanings of politics. Q-methodology involves a participant ranking a series of statements on a topic

in order to communicate their preferences (known as a Q-sort). A participant's ranking is then compared with other collected Q-sorts to identify areas of similarity and difference across people's accounts of the topic under study. Q-methodology is neither a fully quantitative nor a qualitative method. Instead, it uses elements of both to form a distinct approach which facilitates the 'systematic study of subjectivity' (Brown, 1993, p. 93).

I believe that the advantage of Q-methodology is that it allows holistic accounts to emerge and can establish areas of subtlety that may have otherwise escaped the researcher's attention if they were to rely solely on methods such as interviews or questionnaires. For instance, the posing of questions within interview schedules or questionnaires has the potential to lead the participant or respondent to conceptualise politics in a particular way. However, Q-methodology grants participants the freedom to express their particular conceptualisation of politics via the way in which they sort a series of statements which capture the different elements of the meaning of politics, for example, how politics is defined and the evaluative judgements people make about politics. This is particularly important for a project that wants to understand the complexity and reflexivity of the agential self-assessment of political interest. One of the challenges of conducting a Q-study is providing a suitable range of distinctive statements. As such, the statements I used in the study were informed by nine in-depth semi-structured interviews that I carried out with community organisations; examining data from the Qualitative Election Study of Britain; and the literature on meanings of politics and political engagement.

Analytical contribution

Q-methodology facilitated a further contribution of this thesis – the identification of five distinct meanings of politics. These accounts capture the nuance between the different meanings of politics and alert us to the importance of considering that people are likely to hold different conceptualisations of politics. The five meanings may provide a foundation on which to explore people's relationship with politics and has the potential to inform future studies of political engagement. These meanings of politics are summarised below:

1. **Politics impacts people's lives – being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account.** Politics affects people's life chances and their choices. Therefore, it is important to hold people involved in political decisions to account and people should pay attention to politics.

2. **We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict.** The functions and complexity of politics are recognised. However, the level of adversarial conflict in politics is off-putting. The practice of politics generates confusion and incredulity within this meaning of politics.

3. **Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage.** While politics is everywhere in society, some people are more affected by politics than others. There is concern about the accessibility of the political system. Despite the inequality of influence, it is important that people engage with politics.

4. **The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests.** There is little faith that the political system acts in everyone's best

interests within this meaning of politics. There is disappointment with politics and the influence vested interests have over the political process.

5. **Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics.** The reach of politics on our everyday life is expanding. However, there is trust in the people involved in politics and those who hold this meaning of politics feel represented within politics.

In addition, I undertook a further 19 in-depth interviews with people who had completed a Q-sort on: their relationship with politics, their interest (or uninterest) in politics, and the reasons for their declared interest, or lack of interest, in politics. These data, combined with the Q-sorts, revealed that two crucial considerations impact on whether people assess themselves to be interested in politics: salience and place.

The thesis' findings have the potential to influence policy and practice. Attempts to urge people to turnout to vote may be enhanced by considering how to encourage people to assess themselves as being interested in politics. My project finds that this encouragement could take the form of increasing the perceived salience of, as well as a sense of place in, politics. The thesis found that the salience of politics is often identified to have a collective dimension, where politics is seen to be important for society as a whole rather than an individualised account of importance. Holding a sense of place in politics was conceptualised as the individual perceiving that they belonged or that they were entitled to engage with politics. Therefore, campaigns or interventions which aim to increase political interest, and related participation within politics, need to target both of these dimensions. Other empirical findings suggest that

salience and a sense of place may be encountered, or perceived, in different ways across the five distinct meanings of politics identified within this thesis. Attempts to promote engagement with politics should be mindful that people are at various 'starting points' which may affect how campaigns and interventions to increase political engagement are received. This final contribution demonstrates that the findings of the thesis may attain practical application, as well as act to develop our theoretical accounts of political interest.

Research questions and research design

The thesis outlines three components that are key to developing our understanding of political interest. These components are: 1. people's meaning of politics, 2. how people relate to this meaning, and 3. the resulting tendency to self-assess as being interested in politics. The following research questions explore these three components of a developed account of political interest and structure the thesis.

1. *How can we understand political interest?*

The first research question opens up discussion as to the different definitions of political interest and appraises the multiple characterisations of the concept. From this starting point, it will be possible to establish how this thesis conceptualises political interest and progress our comprehension of political interest.

2. *What types of meanings do people hold about politics?*

In asking this question, I seek to consider the extent of variation in the way in which politics is interpreted. This question explores whether there are multiple meanings of politics in circulation and also aims to establish how these different meanings of politics may be described.

3. *To what extent do individuals' meaning of politics influence the assessment of their interest?*

The final research question builds on the first two. I explore the connections between the potential variety in meanings of politics and an individual's assessment of political interest.

I developed a mixed-methods research design which first used Q-methodology to identify the potential variety in the meanings of politics. Secondly, I conducted semi-structured interviews to gather data on people's relationship with politics to explore the links between individuals' meaning of politics and the assessment of their political interest. However, in total, the study entailed three stages of data collection. The first stage gathered data which would inform the development of the statements that participants sorted as part of a Q-study (known as a Q-set). This involved completing nine semi-structured interviews with community organisations to discuss the work of their organisation and whether it was perceived to be political. The statements were also developed with reference to data from the Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) (Winters and Carvalho, 2011; Carvalho and Winters, 2015, 2016; Carvalho, Winters and Oliver, 2017, 2019), as well as the wider literature on the meaning of politics and political engagement.

The administration of the Q-sorts formed the second stage of data collection. Overall, 38 Q-sorts were completed and 37 of these Q-sorts were analysed. Q-methodology offered a way to identify and describe the different meanings of politics. Participants who completed a Q-sort were invited to undertake a follow-up interview as the final

stage of data collection. These interviews discussed participants' relationship with politics and aimed to establish a link between the identified meanings of politics and the assessment of political interest. Nineteen semi-structured interviews were completed and pen portraits were developed to facilitate a whole-person approach to analysis (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, 2008). Throughout all stages of fieldwork, participation took place under the condition of informed voluntary consent and participants who were interviewed were offered the chance to withdraw their data within a month of the interview.

Theoretical framework

As discussed above, within this thesis political interest is conceptualised to be a self-assessment that an individual makes in relation to their meaning of politics. I position this self-assessment as a moment of agency. It is the individual who decides whether or not they are interested in politics. The theoretical framework used within this thesis provided the foundation from which to explore how someone comes to self-assess that they are interested in politics.

Developing our ideas surrounding agency exposes the processes which inform whether someone recognises their interest in politics and allows us to consider how someone relates to their meaning of politics. In other words, I wanted to examine how the way in which people think, feel, and position themselves in response to their meaning of politics may influence the decision to self-assess as being interested in politics. It was important to find a theoretical framework that captured this kind of deep exploration of the different cognitions, emotions, and potentially unconscious and

submerged thought processes of agents, as well as one that situated the elements within past experiences and relevant structural contexts. Calling on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and Akram's (2013; 2019) developed conceptualisation of agency fulfils these requirements and allows the thesis to present an advanced account of political interest. The theoretical framework developed within this thesis foregrounds the idea that people's assessment of their interest may be informed by their past experiences and pre-existing perceptions of politics. I go on to refine and progress this account through the analysis of empirical data and, finally, the thesis presents an analytical framework to inform the study of political interest.

Akram (2019) explores how an account of the unconscious, as rooted in Bourdieu's habitus, and the internal political conversation, may help us to explore political engagement. The internal political conversation refers to the process by which people deliberate and think about politics. This deliberation would include reflexivity and may also be informed by the structuring quality of habitus. I found this developed account of agency was useful for my research project which aimed to consider the factors that influence how someone assesses their interest in politics. In particular, Akram's account of the internal political conversation allowed me to begin to explore how the assessment of interest arises from the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics.

Summary of findings

The Q-study identified five distinct meanings of politics. This is an innovative finding which has implications for our understanding of political interest. The five meanings of

politics tell us that when people assess their interest in politics, they are calling upon different accounts, or interpretations, of politics. However, there was not a linear transition from participants' meaning of politics to their self-assessed political interest. Those participants who identified as being interested held a range of meanings of politics. Therefore, political interest emerges from the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics, rather than emerging solely from the meaning of politics itself.

Moreover, the semi-structured interviews reflected the complexity of the concept of political interest – there was not a shared understanding of what 'is' an interest in politics. This supports the suggestion that political interest is an agential process in which the individual 'decides' whether or not they are interested in politics. Interviews revealed participants' internal political conversation and the way in which their meaning of politics informed the assessment of their interest in politics. Furthermore, interviews also unveiled intimations of the unconscious within the way in which participants related to their meaning of politics. This finding demonstrates that the assessment of political interest is a complex agential process in which there are elements of both reflexivity and the unconscious.

This thesis uncovered that participants' assessment of their interest in politics was shaped by the extent to which they identified the salience of their meaning of politics, as well as whether they identified that they had a place, or a sense of belonging, within their meaning of politics. The assessment of an interest in politics is dependent on people perceiving that politics is important and that they have a right, or are entitled, to be interested in politics. These findings add to our understanding of political interest,

hitherto an underexplored concept, and are important for studies of political engagement and participation, as well as civic or political education.

Thesis structure

Having established the background to the study and summarised the findings and the wider contribution, it remains for this introductory chapter to outline the structure of the thesis.

Chapter one offers a review of the literature on political interest and, in doing so, provides the foundation on which the main argument of this thesis is developed. First, the different definitions of political interest are outlined. I argue that our understanding of political interest has been limited by attempts to define the concept as an objective and discrete entity which exists outside of the individual's self-perception. Political interest is often defined as being 'motivational' (Luskin, 1990; Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019; Robison, 2014, 2017) or as holding 'curiosity' in politics (van Deth, 1989). However, I argue that these definitions of interest obscure the processes by which someone 'becomes' interested and are more often than not under-theorised. Instead, our understanding of political interest would be strengthened if we considered the processes by which someone decides that they are interested in politics.

The literature review presents a distinction between the experience of interest and individuals' self-assessment of interest. From this distinction, I argue that there is the potential for a disparity to occur as someone may experience interest in politics but

may not necessarily self-assess as being interested. The chapter closes by outlining empirical studies of political interest to explore who is more likely to self-assess as being interested. I argue that these studies often imply an association between political interest and an individual's meaning of politics, however exploration of these links are weak, as is our understanding of political interest as a result.

Chapter two outlines the theoretical framework discussed above which helps us to appreciate the processes by which someone may self-assess as being interested in politics. The chapter opens by strengthening the argument that self-assessed political interest emerges from the meaning of politics that people hold. In so doing, I make a connection to the work of Marsh et al. (Marsh, Vines and Halupka, 2016; Vines and Marsh, 2018) who argue that it is insufficient to view political (dis)engagement only in terms of supply-side or demand-side accounts and instead emphasise the interrelation and interaction between both sets of accounts. I take the argument of Marsh et al. one step further by noting how this interrelationship implies, but does not explicate, the need to call upon individuals' meaning of politics to develop our accounts of political (dis)engagement. The chapter then proceeds to explore the processes by which someone may self-assess as being interested in politics with reference to the work of Bourdieu (1977) and Akram's (2019) developed account of agency. The self-assessment of political interest is informed by the way in which someone relates and positions themselves in response to their meaning of politics. The concepts of habitus and the internal political conversation alert us to the potential reflexive or unconscious dimensions that influence the relationship someone has with politics.

The foundation of the thesis is established via the literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter three proceeds to detail the research design that directs the exploration of these ideas and facilitates the emergence of findings. The chapter provides a summary and defence of the use of Q-methodology, as well as outlining how the approach has been administered within this project. The chapter also outlines the adjustments made to the research design in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of this for the thesis. Chapter three also details the use of semi-structured interviews to explore participants' relationship with politics, as well as the analytical strategy employed by the thesis. Discussions of the limitations of the research design close the chapter.

As will be explored in chapter three, Q-methodology requires participants to sort through a set of statements about the subject under study. Within this thesis, the subject under study is the meaning of politics. Studies that have used Q-methodology have been criticised for not adequately discussing the process by which these statements are developed (Kampen and Tamás, 2014). The first empirical chapter (chapter four) outlines the statements that were sorted by participants. The chapter discusses the development of the statements that participants sorted by calling on: 1. the literature on the different meanings and interpretations of politics, 2. data gathered via semi-structured interviews with community organisations, and 3. Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) data. This chapter establishes that there are two dimensions to the meaning of politics – an individual's definition of politics and the way in which they orientate themselves to politics. To limit the meaning of politics to only its definition, or to the way that the individual orientates themselves to politics, restricts our understanding of the variety of ways in which people conceptualise politics.

The thesis progresses to consider the empirical analysis of data gathered via the Q-study in chapter five. This chapter reveals the five different meanings of politics and details differences in how people define and evaluate politics. The findings from the semi-structured interviews are outlined in chapter six. Participants' discussions further reveal the complexity of political interest and the agential processes which occur when people assess themselves to be interested in politics. The chapter unveils that the self-assessment of political interest does not arise from individuals' meaning of politics alone. Nor does it appear to emerge via the level of material or cultural resource an individual can access. Rather, the self-assessment of political interest emerges from the way in which an individual recognises the salience of politics and perceives that they have a place, or belong, within their meaning of politics.

Chapter seven presents an analytical framework intended to provide theoretical and practical guidance to support the future study of political interest. The analytical framework unites the thesis' theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings and comprises the major contribution made by this thesis. This chapter also outlines the thesis' conceptual, methodological, and analytical contributions.

Finally, I conclude the thesis by returning to the three research questions that structured the study. The first question asked how political interest should be conceptualised, while the second question asked what types of meanings of politics people hold. The final question considered the extent to which these different meanings of politics influence political interest. Again, I note that the assessment of

political interest is dependent on an individual perceiving the salience of politics and a sense of place within politics.

I then present the implications of the findings, noting that the salience of politics is often interpreted via a collective lens. In other words, politics is viewed to be relevant and important because of its ramifications for the way that people interact as part of a wider society. This stands in distinction to an individualised conceptualisation of political salience. Furthermore, a sense of place is broader than that of internal political self-efficacy and also incorporates the extent to which an individual perceives that they belong, or are entitled, to be interested in politics. The chapter, and thesis, ends by locating the study as a launchpad for further research – noting how future studies could progress the ideas within the thesis. Consequently, my work has the potential to stimulate further debate within the study of political interest and broader engagement and also has a wider reach which could inform policies and campaigns aimed to increase political participation.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Having an interest in politics has been demonstrated to contribute to the likelihood of an individual engaging with the political system (Prior, 2019) while also being identified as a little-understood concept (Horner, 2007; Prior, 2010; Robison, 2014; Riddle, 2016). It is a term which is frequently incorporated when exploring political engagement[1], with an interest in politics suggested to be antecedent to political behaviour (Shani, 2009; Prior, 2019) and partisanship (Arzheimer and Schoen, 2016). However, I argue that the conceptual confusion that surrounds political interest means it is uncertain what exactly we are referring to when discussing political interest, let alone how it develops. Analytical and definitional imprecision is a problem with existing research on political interest. One contribution of this project is to move away from attempts to conceptualise political interest in terms of what it 'is' – and the suggestion that it embodies a particular quality, towards conceptualising an interest in politics as a self-assessment. If we view interest as a self-assessment, we can provide depth by considering the conditions in which someone is more or less likely to assess themselves to be interested in politics.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on political interest. First, the difficulty the discipline has had in defining what is meant by political interest will be discussed. Having established that political interest should be viewed as a self-assessment, the literature review will then proceed to consider the potential that someone may 'experience' interest, in other words, a psychological state of interest, but may not identify, or self-assess, that they are interested in politics. This draws on

[1] The literature on political engagement will be examined in more detail in chapter four.

literature in educational psychology. The literature review will then proceed to develop the second key element of the argument – interest (in general) is directed to a particular object (Ainley, 2017). Therefore, our understanding of the assessment of political interest will be progressed if we explore how people perceive and interpret politics. To put it another way, greater attention should be paid to the 'meaning' of politics which people hold (Robison, 2014) and the impact that this meaning of politics can have on people's assessment of their interest in politics. The final section of the literature review explores empirical studies of political interest and examines who is most interested in politics. That is to say, who is more likely to self-assess that they are interested in politics. This exploration adds further weight to the thesis' call to action to consider how individuals' subjective representation of their political interest will be mediated through their interpretation, or meaning, of politics.

Political interest should be defined as a subjective self-assessment

It is difficult to define political interest. The different definitions of political interest can lead to further confusion as to what we mean when we talk about political interest. Interest has been described as a 'clearly recognizable experience', calling upon readers' shared experience; 'as anyone knows who has ever been unable to put down a detective story or been bored to tears at a cocktail party' (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948, pp. 40–41). Indeed, frequently, the literature on political interest incorporates this quotation to introduce a definition of interest as something that we know when we experience it (Horner, 2007; Shani, 2009; Robison, 2014; Riddle, 2016). Prior (2019, p. 19) notes the potential to 'understand intuitively what it means to be "interested" in something' yet also notes that the expression of interest is 'a complex sentiment' which entails 'both feeling and thinking, multiple phases of

development, and a prediction about uncertain future gratifications'. While Lazarsfeld et al.'s vivid description may aim to demonstrate that being interested is a shared and recognised state, it does little to provide analytical clarity as to what is meant by interest.

This lack of clarity in the wider literature persists when considering how political interest has been defined. There is no clear consensus about what is political interest. Political interest is frequently positioned as encouraging political engagement – in order to engage with politics, you need to be interested in it. While studies have confirmed a positive association between interest and political engagement (Shani, 2009; Prior, 2019) and it would appear that being interested in politics facilitates engagement, this association is frequently underspecified. For example, Stoker (2006) uses measures of self-reported political interest across multiple countries to discuss the status of political engagement, however there is limited discussion as to what it is to be interested in politics. This lack of exploration seems to reflect the position of Lazarsfeld et al. by assuming that we 'know' what it is to be interested in politics. It seems to be logical to say that political interest leads to political engagement. However, as noted by Prior (2019, p. 15), frequently a measure of political interest is included within statistical models with little exploration as to why, or indeed what is measured by this variable. Consequently, the link between interest and engagement is often assumed rather than explored.

Studies which focus directly on political interest do place a greater emphasis on discussing its conceptualisation. However, there is no clear consensus as to how

political interest should be conceptualised. An interest in politics has been described as having a motivational quality which is foundational to political engagement (Luskin, 1990; Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019; Robison, 2014, 2017). Holding interest in politics is seen as a gateway to promote political engagement through heightening people's awareness and access of political information. Note here that political engagement is used in its widest sense. While political participation can be distinguished by actions which are intended to influence the political system (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995, p. 38), here, political engagement is characterised broadly. Political engagement can include attempts to influence the political system such as signing a petition or donating money to a political organisation (Dalton, 2014, pp. 38–40; van Deth, 2014), in addition to arguably more 'passive' interactions such as posting about politics on social media, to discussing or reading about politics (Wyatt, Katz and Kim, 2000; Prior, 2005; Theocharis, 2015). Verba et al. (1995, p. 39) differentiate between 'doing politics, rather than being attentive to politics'. The broad conceptualisation of political engagement within this thesis does not make a normative distinction and includes both attempts to influence politics, as well as the act of paying attention to politics.

Closely mapping Prior's (2019, p. 4) view, this study takes the position that interest is 'an internal disposition, clearly distinct from behaviour' – similarly a conceptual separation must remain between political interest and political engagement. Interest 'is internal inside a person' (Prior, 2019, p. 11) whereas engagement involves external action and behaviour. Political interest is undoubtedly difficult to define. Some authors discuss the measurement of political interest as a subjective self-assessment (van Deth, 1989), or an 'evaluative statement or judgement about how appealing the realm of politics is for the respondent' (Boulianne, 2011, p. 152). Here, political interest is

understood as how someone views themselves and whether or not they identify that they are interested in politics. As will now be explored, political interest has also been defined via motivation or curiosity. However, such definitions are affected by conceptual weaknesses which will also be outlined.

Political interest has been argued to have a motivational dimension whereby interest is understood to activate political engagement (Luskin, 1990; Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019; Robison, 2014, 2017). However, defining interest as solely motivational explicitly links political interest to behaviour or action. Consequently, this conceptualisation of political interest cannot account for those who identify as interested but who may not engage based on this interest (van Deth, 1989, p. 277). For example, someone may be interested in politics but may choose not to discuss politics as to do so would lead to an uncomfortable atmosphere or argument (as explored by Eliasoph (1998)). Furthermore, someone may be interested in politics but a busy schedule means that they do not have the time to keep abreast of the latest political developments.

Some definitions shift from an emphasis on motivation and reflect a more complex conceptualisation of political interest. However, such attempts frequently conflate interest with other indicators of political engagement. For instance, Bennett (1986, p. 37) views the political interest of a population to exist on a 'continuum of awareness, interest and attention'. To repeat Prior's (2019) conceptualisation, political interest should be thought of as an internal sense of oneself. Whether an individual identifies themselves as being interested is their assessment and their assessment alone.

Interest has also been described variously as possessing curiosity towards politics in which there is a desire to gather further information about politics, understood as an awareness or attentiveness directed towards politics (van Deth, 1989; Lupia and Philpot, 2005), as well as a civic attitude (Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992, p. 10). However, describing interest with reference to either curiosity or attentiveness again views interest as motivating behaviour and is contra to viewing interest as a self-assessment. To be attentive suggests that there is a conscious effort directed towards a particular topic that can waver over time. Curiosity is, perhaps, less obviously related to action. However, to be curious is to want to know more about a topic and could be assumed to motivate the access of knowledge. As Prior (2019, p. 291) notes, those who are interested in politics are likely to have more contact points and actively seek out information about politics compared to those who are uninterested. However, Renninger and Hidi (2016, pp. 44-45) argue that curiosity is finite – once knowledge has been accessed then curiosity is sated. Therefore, to equate interest with curiosity precludes interest from having an enduring quality. Nevertheless, Renninger and Hidi (2016, p. 3) do still identify interest as having a motivational quality – again demonstrating the complexity of trying to define political interest. My point here is that interest can motivate action, but it is not necessary for interest to motivate action.

The complexity of identifying what is political interest can be seen in the shifts van Deth makes across time when defining political interest. Initially, van Deth (1989, p. 278) defines political interest via curiosity and later develops this account by viewing political interest as not 'a mode of political behaviour, but a type of political commitment only' while also recognising that there is a motivational component to political interest (van Deth, 2000a, p. 119). Van Deth (2000a, p. 119) insinuates this sense of political

commitment when identifying political saliency, or the 'relative importance' the individual places on politics, as '[a] second conception of political interest'. It is noted that people can state that they are interested in politics but assert that politics is unimportant within their lives and vice versa, people may be uninterested but still identify the importance of politics. To van Deth (2000a, p. 131), people may feel an obligation to recognise the importance of politics but this is not matched by a subjective interest in politics**.** While van Deth does imbue political interest with a motivational quality, to view political interest via a 'commitment' does allow us to decouple political interest from the behavioural dimensions of political engagement. Van Deth hints at (but does not explore) how people's relationship with politics can lead to interest. To be committed suggests an investment has been made in politics and this idea of an investment only stands with reference to the relationship the individual has with politics. However, van Deth's naming of political salience to be a 'conception', or a form of political interest, further muddies our understanding of just what it means to be interested in politics. While van Deth provides little explanation as to how salience is associated with interest, we are alerted to the potential to further explore the association between perceptions of politics and political interest.

A weakness with the literature that defines political interest via motivation or curiosity is that it suggests that there is a specific 'thing' or entity that is being captured when someone says that they are interested in politics. However, such definitions mean our understanding of political interest is limited to being the equivalent to something else. In other words, the conceptualisation of political interest is reliant on our understanding of another entity. Interest is seen to be equivalent to curiosity, or the motivation interest generates to act, rather than being an independent concept in its own right. This then

begs the question as to why bother studying political interest rather than curiosity or motivation? My point is that our attempts to understand political interest should progress from efforts to label what interest 'is' (that is to say, what comprises interest). This act of labelling creates a limited conceptualisation of interest which is reliant on drawing equivalences with other qualities. Interest is undoubtedly difficult to define. Valsiner (2015) notes that the study of (general[2]) interest also encompasses the exploration of the processes from which interest emerges. Therefore, interest should not be 'limited to an ontological issue…, but acquires a developmental focus' (Valsiner, 2015, p. 33) which can account for the relationship between the individual and the object of interest. Therefore, as stated by Valsiner, within this framing 'one cannot study "interest," but something else from which recognizable 'interest' occurs' (p. 33). In other words, there should be an emphasis on depth; on exploring where interest 'comes from', or, to bring this back to the focus of the thesis, how does someone's relationship with politics influence their self-assessment of being interested in politics?

When I use the term self-assessment, I am referring to the agential process which influences the individual's recognition of their political interest. I do not use the term assessment to refer to the expression of rational preferences and the conscious weighing up of available information. Instead, I emphasise the 'self' within the self-assessment of political interest. Doing so reveals the potential for a more developed understanding of agency which gives scope for the individual's assessment to be informed (either consciously or unconsciously) by their previous experiences and interactions. In making this distinction, I am purposefully distancing the

[2] The term 'general' interest is used here to differentiate between literature discussing a broad understanding of interest and literature on the specific concept of political interest.

conceptualisation of self-assessment away from an account of rationality, and instead move towards an understanding of assessment as being influenced by multiple and complex factors to which the individual may, or may not, be aware.

At this point, two significant strands of the argument of this literature review are revealed. The first is that political interest should be defined as an individual's self-assessment. We should progress from suggesting that interest can be defined as a self-contained and discrete entity (as this will lead to drawing equivalences with other concepts) and rather consider interest to be a self-assessment. The second strand is linked to the first. Interest, in general, is always directed to an object. You are not just interested, you are 'interested in *something'* [italics added for emphasis] (Ainley, 2017, p. 5). Within this thesis, the 'something' is politics. The directional quality of interest (that interest is directed towards something) means that interest 'arises' from the relationship between the individual and the object in question (Hidi and Renninger, 2006; Renninger and Hidi, 2011, 2016; Ainley, 2017).

Exploring political disengagement offers a starting point to develop the argument that interest is a product of the relationship someone has with politics. Political disengagement can be associated with a 'distance' between the individual and the political system and there is a lack of interest, or apathy, directed to politics (Bennett, 1989). However, there is also the potential for an individual to still value politics even though they are seemingly uninterested and disengaged from politics. This distinction is captured by Jenkins' (2018, p. 193) idea of 'disenchantment as disillusionment'. Jenkins, in using the term 'disillusionment' highlights how the political system can still

be viewed to be important, or valued, but dissatisfaction with the 'enactment' of politics promotes a sense of distancing oneself from involvement, or engagement. Bhavnani (1991, pp. 13–14) makes a similar point when distinguishing between apathy and cynicism directed towards politics. To be cynical requires at least some degree of assessment of and engagement with politics. Disillusionment with politics is rooted in the idea of expectations (Flinders, 2009, 2012, 2014). To be disappointed requires a sense of what something should be, of standards that are unmet. The key point here is that if someone is disillusioned, or disappointed, with politics this is still indicative of a connection with politics – politics is something that is still valued despite the decision to not engage with the political system. The disengaged, in contrast to the disillusioned, are uninterested in politics but may lack a conceptualisation of politics in that they do not know, or perhaps care, about politics. A lack of conceptualisation suggests that there is little thought paid to politics, it is not something which is valued. Both the disillusioned and the disengaged may self-assess that they are uninterested in politics. However, both groups are likely to hold different relationships with politics. Calling on the distinction between disengagement and disillusionment draws attention to the idea that to understand political interest we need to explore what people think and feel in response to the object of interest – politics.

One way to progress from the definitional ambiguity of trying to neatly identify a discrete conceptualisation of what 'is' political interest is to call on the work of Renninger and Hidi (2016, pp. 8-9) who identify that people experience a psychological state of interest. The 'state' of interest is experienced in the moment and 'is characterized by increased attention, effort, concentration, and affect' (Renninger and Hidi, 2016, p. 9). This state may be motivational; indeed, it may lead to greater

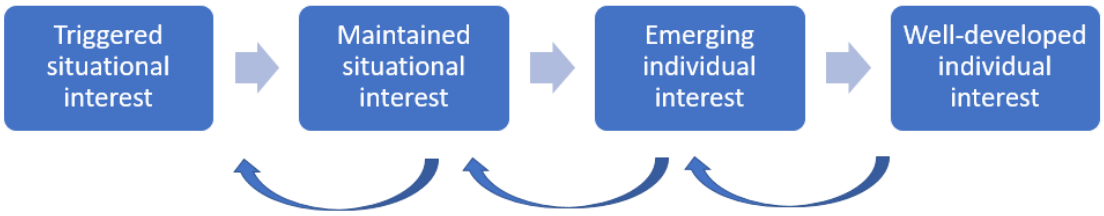
attention, however fleeting, being paid to politics. Hidi and Renninger (2006, p.112) suggest that there are two components to a psychological state of interest: an affective component and a cognitive component. The affective component encompasses both positive and also negative feelings generated in response to the object of interest. By way of contrast, the cognitive component reflects the 'perceptual and representational activities related to engagement' (Hidi and Renninger, 2006, p. 112). This understanding of interest as a psychological state allows us to avoid definitions which conflate interest with drivers of behaviour such as motivation or curiosity. To apply the account of interest as a psychological state to political interest means that it is possible to experience an affective or cognitive response when encountering politics (in other words to experience a state of interest) but these responses do not necessarily trigger a particular form of behaviour. For example, someone may hear of a political development, think that they should find out more about this development, but never get round to reading up on the topic. There will be the potential that the state of interest can motivate behaviour but, crucially, interest does not necessarily have to be motivational.

Hidi and Renninger work within the field of educational psychology where there is an emphasis on interest development and, in particular, how school pupils' interest in curricula content can be developed and maintained. Hidi and Renninger's four-phase model of interest development (2006; Renninger and Hidi, 2016) provides a starting point for us to explore the emergence of interest. The model is built on a review of the empirical literature on interest development which suggests that there are two forms of interest, *situational* and *individual* (Hidi and Renninger, 2006, p. 112). Situational interest is influenced by 'environmental stimuli' (Hidi and Renninger, 2006, p. 113), in

other words, the way that content is presented (Renninger and Hidi, 2016, p. 10). Two forms of situational interest are identified: 1. triggered situational interest, whereby interest is activated and results in short-term changes in 'cognitive and affective processing', and 2. maintained situational interest where triggered situational interest 'reoccurs and again persists' (Hidi and Renninger, 2006, p. 114). For example, someone who is finding out about a topic for the first time will experience triggered situational interest. To continue to experience interest when encountering this topic will lead to maintained situational interest. Within situational interest, Prior (2019, p. 20) emphasises the 'heightened arousal and an affective reaction to the object that triggered it'.

According to Hidi and Renninger's four-phase model of interest development (see figure 1 below), there is the potential for situational interest to be transformed into the third and fourth stages of interest development – 3. emerging, and 4. well-developed individual interest. The third stage, emerging individual interest, relates to both the psychological state of being interested, and also an emerging 'predisposition to seek reengagement' (Renninger and Hidi, 2016, p. 13). The fourth stage notes that this interest has become well-developed. Emerging interest then builds on maintained situational interest in that the individual begins to seek out information on the topic. Within well-developed interest, there are sustained attempts to engage with the topic. As suggested by figure 1, interest is conceptualised to be dynamic. There is the potential for interest to develop and deepen as well as the potential for interest to lessen or diminish and move to a lower 'phase' if there is not continual engagement with the topic.

Figure 1 Model of interest development (Hidi and Renninger, 2006)



The four-stage model of interest development begins to draws attention to the potential for people to perceive the object of interest in different ways. For example, Renninger and Hidi (2016, p. 13) note that within situational interest there may be little awareness of the object of interest and so people may need to have greater encouragement to engage with the topic. By way of contrast, within individual interest there is a stronger conceptualisation of the object and a greater sense from the individual that they direct and control their own engagement with the object. To draw this point out, the model describes less the stages of interest but rather describes two classifications, or forms, of interest based on the factors that have influenced interest – the environment and external stimuli within situational interest, and a more developed concept of the object of interest within individual interest. Knogler (2017, p. 113) identifies that these two forms of interest are distinct from the conceptualisation of 'in the moment' interest as a psychological state. Knogler develops the model of interest-development by separating the 'in-the-moment experience' (2017, p. 113) of being in a state of interest from the two different descriptions, or forms of interest. As will be explored now, separating the state of interest from the conditions from which interest is generated progresses our understanding of interest as a self-assessment.

Prior (2019, p. 4), in a similar vein to Robison (2014, p. 19), refers to Hidi and Renninger's individual interest as dispositional interest in that people can be more or less inclined to be interested in something independent of environmental cues. Prior (2019, p. 23), clarifies that situational interest should not only be associated with affective responses and notes that dispositional interest is not wholly reliant on cognition. Situational interest will involve cognition, even if only to link the state of interest to the stimulus generating interest (Prior, 2019). In other words, identifying what it is that is causing the state of interest. Dispositional interest is associated with the 'internal spur for someone to reengage with the content domain' over time (Prior, 2019, p. 22). This tendency can be present without requiring the individual to come into contact with content that engenders interest. To put it another way, someone can still be inclined, or have a tendency, to be interested in politics without this having to be generated by encountering the stimulus of politics. Similarly, I would suggest that someone can have an ongoing tendency to self-assess that they are interested in politics without this necessarily needing continual environmental stimulus.

My point here is that a distinction can be made between an individual experiencing the state of interest and assessing that they are interested in politics. To self-assess as being interested in politics is dependent on how someone relates to the object of interest, or politics. Prior (2019), to some extent, implies this by identifying that the analysis and study of political interest relates to the measurement of dispositional interest, however, I contend that there is limited empirical exploration of the process by which someone comes to decide that they are interested in politics. I argue that this gap can be addressed by emphasising that our study of political interest is rooted in the individual's recognition of their interest. In other words, for someone to say they

are interested in politics, they need to recognise that they are interested in politics. This may appear to be an obvious point, however, the shift in analytical focus from the experience of interest to the self-assessment of interest opens up the potential for someone to experience a state of interest but not necessarily identify their interest. These two 'dimensions' of interest can be present, one without the other. Someone can have the tendency to self-assess as being interested in politics without necessarily experiencing a state of interest, and vice versa. The ramifications of this are considered in the next section.

The experience of political interest does not necessarily produce the assessment of interest

To reiterate, I am claiming that someone experiencing a state of interest in response to politics is distinct from their decision to declare 'I am interested in politics'. The vast majority of the literature on political interest are empirical studies which primarily call upon large datasets derived from civic engagement surveys. Political interest is frequently operationalised through subjective self-reports (Bennett, 1986; van Deth, 1989; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Prior, 2019), asking participants the question 'how interested would you say you are in politics?'. However, political interest has also been measured through the creation of indices which combine a series of measures. Examples of these have included subjective assessments of interest, in addition to reflections on behaviour assessed by the researcher to indicate interest, and political knowledge (van Deth, 1989, pp. 284–287; Dalton, 2017). For example, within Dalton's (2017, p. 87) analysis, a two-item index is used which combines both respondents' self-reported interest in politics, as well as a measure of how frequently

respondents discussed politics. The variety of measures reflect earlier discussions on the lack of clarity as to how to conceptualise political interest.

Additionally, there is also a lack of consistency with regards to how the subjective 'political interest' question is phrased. A study by Lee et al. (2015) used anchoring vignettes to demonstrate that, cross-nationally, there are broadly similar interpretations of the answer categories that form the responses to the 'standard' political interest question. In other words, people have similar interpretations of what it means to be 'very interested' or 'not at all interested' in politics. Lee et al. argue that this finding indicates the validity of measures of political interest – that the political interest question measures what it purports to measure. However, Lee et al.'s study is focused on exploring how the scale, or 'level' of interest, is interpreted, rather than a wider focus on how 'interest' and 'politics' are interpreted by respondents.

A case has been made that interest is always directed to a particular object. To again repeat Ainley (2017, p. 5), you will always be 'interested in something'. However, civic engagement questionnaires can ask for self-reported interest in variously: politics, election campaigns, or government and public affairs (Bennett, 1986; Shani, 2009). Frequently these questions are all referred to as capturing interest in 'politics' despite targeting different objects of interest. However, Prior's (2019, p. 50) analysis positions political interest as a one-dimensional concept with measures of 'information about government and politics', 'public affairs and politics', and 'politics' all highly correlated. This finding is supported by Solvak's (2009) analysis of European Social Survey data which indicated that election campaigns had only a minimal effect (within the margin

of error) on related increases in reported interest in politics. Prior (2019, p. 75) does find a small increase in campaign related interest but maintains that 'general' political interest remains constant during a campaign. Prior argues that the correlation between election campaigns and measures of interest adds further evidence that political interest should be viewed as a disposition, rather than a reflection of situational interest. The argument is strengthened by Prior's (2019, ch. 5) analysis demonstrating the stability of political interest over time. It is not so much that the 'political interest' question is measuring a response to stimulus but rather it is capturing a more subjective self-assessment, or the extent to which someone recognises that they are interested in politics. If we are to accept that measures of political interest reflect a subjective self-assessment, then we also need to explore the implications of measures of political interest being dependent on individuals' self-perceptions.

Rather than measuring a clearly defined, objective, and discrete 'entity', the point here is that measures of political interest are open to be influenced by respondents' interpretations. The self-assessment of political interest is informed by the individuals' meaning of politics (Robison, 2014) and how they relate, or position themselves, in response to this interpretation. A central tenet of this thesis is that if we explored how people interpret politics, or the meaning of politics that they hold, we would progress our understanding of political interest. The argument that political interest is a self-assessment can be furthered by considering studies which have explored the association between political knowledge and self-assessed political interest.

In response to an apparent decline in political interest identified in the 1978 American National Election Study (ANES), Bishop et al. (1984) examined whether survey question order can affect reported levels of political interest. They found that respondents reported lower levels of interest when they were asked a particularly difficult knowledge question before being asked to rate their interest in politics. While this analysis has been challenged (Bennett, 1986; Feldman, 1988; Block, 2006; Shani, 2009), further work has demonstrated that respondents questioned their level of interest if they were unable to answer the knowledge question (Lasorsa, 2003; 2009). The association between interest and knowledge was strongest for: those with lower levels of formal education, women, younger respondents, and those with lower incomes (Lasorsa, 2009). However, the association between self-perceived interest and knowledge was weakened when respondents were asked to give their opinion on how well citizens were kept informed by politicians and the media (Schwarz and Schuman, 1997; Lasorsa, 2003, 2009). When respondents were given the opportunity to apportion 'blame' for their perceived lack of knowledge, they were less likely to look inwards and attribute their inability to answer to their lack of interest in politics. These studies demonstrate that the self-assessment of political interest may be influenced by other factors. Furthermore, the assessment of interest is influenced by people's interpretation of politics and their own relationship with these interpretations. Again, measures of political interest do not capture a discrete entity but rather an individual's self-assessment.

Adding to the argument that we need to consider what may influence the self-assessment of political interest, to be interested in politics has been suggested to be socially desirable (Lasorsa, 2009; Sturgis and Smith, 2010). Furthermore, people's

social network can influence whether someone acknowledges that there is a sense of 'prestige' associated with being interested in politics (van Deth, 1989, p. 283)**.** The idea that being interested in politics is perceived to be socially desirable reflects an interpretation of politics – that politics is something that is valued and that being interested is something that is worthwhile. To enhance our understanding of the self-assessment of interest, we should explore the meanings of politics that people hold.

Methodologically, it is near-impossible to capture the in the moment experience of political interest (the 'state' of being interested in politics). The study of political interest is dependent on self-reported levels of interest (Prior, 2019, p. 42). Conceptualising political interest as a subjective self-assessment allows us to side-step attempts to identify political interest as a measure of a defined and discrete entity that is distinct from the person who is interested. To put it another way, attempts to define political interest via curiosity or motivation suggest that a particular quality or precise essence is being measured. As discussed earlier, these conceptualisations run into trouble as it is not possible to distinguish what is distinctive about political interest. Viewing political interest as a self-assessment shifts the focus of analysis towards what influences this assessment. Therefore, we avoid becoming caught up with attempts to clearly articulate what quality, or entity, the variable political interest measures.

Nevertheless, as van Deth (1989, p. 283) notes '[i]t still remains unclear what people actually mean' when rating their own interest in politics. Dostie-Goulet (2009, p. 406) also notes the lack of clarity when stating that 'every person conceptualizes his or her interest or lack of interest differently' and instead notes that political interest relates to

‘the extent to which politics is attractive to someone’. There is scope to explore the underlying processes which inform individuals’ self-assessment of their political interest. This thesis emphasises the need to explore how people’s conceptualisation of politics is associated with the assessment of their interest in politics. The argument that political interest reflects the individual’s interpretation of politics rather than a pre-existing, objective, entity does not challenge the measurement of political interest. It is still worth asking the question ‘how interested in politics are you?’, but this measure should be considered a starting point to understand how people have assessed their interest in politics.

Both Horner (2007) and Riddle (2016) argue that there are multiple dimensions to political interest, in other words there are various elements to political interest. However, reflecting on Horner’s and Riddle‘s work in greater depth demonstrates that they describe the multiple dimensions and complexity inherent to politics, rather than capturing the multiple dimensions of political interest per se. Horner (2007) examined respondents’ conceptualisation of political interest through first asking them to declare their level of political interest on a numerical scale and then interviewing them about their interest in politics. Horner (2007, pp. 54–63) identified three dimensions to political interest: *taste*, or the positive or negative affect experienced in response to politics; *oversight*, relating to perceptions of civic duty and a related sense of external self-efficacy; and *stake* which captured perceptions of the effects of politics on the participant. Riddle (2016), building on Horner’s work, reconceptualised the taste dimension to ‘enjoyment’ and also introduced the dimension of motivation.

Within both Horner's and Riddle's studies there is a conflation between participants' reflections on politics and their level of political interest. In other words, discussions of political interest instead called upon participants' views and interpretations of politics. Riddle (2016, p. 62) acknowledges this conflation as a limitation of the study. Within Horner's study, each of the three dimensions of political interest reflect differences in the way in which politics is understood and conceptualised rather than capturing specific aspects of political interest. For example, within the 'stake' and 'oversight' dimensions of political interest, interest is represented as the recognition of the value and entrenchment of the effects of politics on everyday life. Similarly, the 'taste' dimension captures whether politics inspires positive or negative feelings. Rather than exploring the multidimensionality of political interest, the two studies each confirm that politics can be interpreted in different ways. The association between people's conceptualisation of politics and their self-assessed political interest is considered in the next section.

Up to now, the chapter has established that political interest should be considered a self-assessment and a case has been made that this subjective assessment is not the same as the experience of interest. Therefore, there is the potential for a disparity to occur between the experience of the state of interest and an individual self-assessing themselves as being interested in politics. Exploring the link between individuals' conceptualisation of politics and the self-assessment of political interest develops our understanding of how this disparity may arise.

Political interest as dependent on the conceptualisation of politics

So far, the chapter has made a case that political interest should be conceptualised as a subjective self-assessment. There is a distinction to be made between the experience of being interested and someone self-assessing that they are interested in politics and our study of political interest is limited to these self-assessments. I argue that the self-assessment of political interest is informed by individuals' interpretation of politics and that we have much to gain in exploring this association. This argument is similar to the one made by Robison (2014, 2017) who explores the association between political interest and the way in which politics is interpreted, namely, whether an individual's interpretation of politics coheres with their motive for engaging with politics. For example, Robison (2014, 2017) found that increasing the perception that political engagement would lead to social rewards (for instance, respect and social bonding) contributed to higher levels of political interest.

Robison's findings are helpful in raising our awareness that the study of political interest should consider people's meaning of politics. However, there is much scope to build on Robison's work. Specifically, Robison's association between the meaning of politics and individuals' motives limits the perceptions of politics to the functions that politics is viewed to provide (in other words, what does politics do for us?). Robison (2014, p. 35) does discuss how understandings of politics, or the 'who, what, why, and where of it', can shift across different contexts and political environments. However, there is scope for a more comprehensive account of the differences in individuals' meanings of politics. I respond to this gap in chapter four where I explore the different dimensions that constitutes a meaning of politics. Within this thesis, I build on Robison's work by taking one step back in order to explore the different accounts, or

meanings of politics. Having laid this groundwork, I can then progress to explore the association between an individual's meaning of politics and their perception of themselves as an interested person. In other words, my work places a greater focus on whether an individual perceives themselves as politically interested. This stands in contrast to Robison's more instrumental account in which political interest is generated via an account of how politics can 'serve' our motives.

Shani's (2009) study of the origin of political interest begins to explore the association between the interpretation of politics and how someone may or may not perceive themselves to be an interested person. Shani (2009) found that patterns of structural inequality are reflected in the assessment of political interest. Social class is difficult to operationalise and may encompass levels of material resource or occupation, similarly social class can be also seen as a subjective measure reflecting individuals' class identity. There are limited indications that those with higher incomes are more likely to express higher political interest (Bennett, 1986, pp. 74–78; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995, pp. 348–350). If those who have higher levels of interest are more likely to participate in politics (Prior, 2019) then there is the potential for inequality of influence within the political system which will have implications for policy (Bartels, 2008; Dalton, 2017). Given the association between political interest and political participation, developing our understanding of what influences the self-assessment of political interest may offer a way to address inequality within the political system.

Shani's (2009) study of political interest alerts us to the idea that people may relate to, or position themselves in response to, politics in different ways based on the

processes of early socialisation and the cognitive and cultural resources (in terms of educational attainment and occupation) which can accrue from a high-status family background. Parents' political interest has been found to correspond with their children's if they both live in the same location (Prior, 2019, pp. 241–260). This finding adds further support to the idea that the environment that someone grows up in influences their political interest. Shani (2009, p. 28) links familial resources to enhanced perceptions of political self-efficacy and a sense of 'ease' and being well-acquainted with the 'ways in which the political world operate[s]' and experiencing the benefits of being 'typically perceived by others as entitled to be involved'. While Shani (2009, pp. 364–411) acknowledges the influence of cognitive and cultural resources, gained through primary socialisation, on political interest, this association is not seen to be deterministic. Shani's findings suggest that an interest in politics could be encouraged through increased exposure to political discussions within the individual's wider social network, incorporating social studies within the curriculum, and involvement in extracurricular activities.

By way of contrast to Shani's analysis, Prior (2005, 2019, pp. 263–279) challenges the idea that accessing greater levels of resource is associated with higher levels of political interest. Instead, political knowledge and related interest is viewed to be associated with media consumption (Prior, 2005). In particular, Prior focuses on current affairs programming on television, noting that those who consume a higher level of output are more likely to express interest in politics through enhancing their political knowledge (Prior, 2005; see also Boulianne (2011) for a study of how the access of different forms of media both strengthens and generates interest in politics). The crux of Prior's argument is that as the choice of media has increased, it is easier

for an uninterested individual to actively avoid political information. Therefore, according to Prior (2005, p. 589) it is 'motivation, not ability' which leads some people accessing information about politics while others do not.

In response to Prior's argument, Shani (2009, p. 23) contends that there is a need to consider why it is that certain groups are more predisposed to access political media than others, a decision which can, in part, be influenced by 'disparity in [the] distribution of resources or opportunities'. Consequently, Shani's (2009) work takes a more developed view by relating political interest to the individual's perceptions of the political system and their place within it. Prior's argument is based on an assumption that political knowledge gained through accessing media sources will generate interest in politics. However, as also noted by Shani, the decision whether to access information about current affairs is itself a preference which needs to be explored further. My argument is more aligned to Shani's position than Prior's. The point to take here is that rather than seeing political interest as being 'caused' by something, there is greater value in identifying the conditions in which people are more likely to self-assess themselves as being interested in politics.

Although not expressed in explicit terms, Shani's work begins to allude to the idea that political interest is the product of how the individual perceives 'politics', as mediated through the political system and the extent to which individuals' sense that their involvement is welcomed. The reading of political interest established by my thesis suggests that it is not simply that exposure to political discussions within the home or wider social network of friends increases interest through imparting political knowledge

(Dostie-Goulet, 2009) or a learned curiosity (Koskimaa and Rapeli, 2015, p. 146). Rather, it is more the case that this exposure can influence an individual's meaning of politics. For example, in the United Kingdom someone may work for a food manufacturer whose exports to the European Union have reduced as a result of Brexit. Conversations about the precarious trading conditions may begin to touch on the terms of the Brexit withdrawal agreement and may take a political turn. When discussing politics, people may actively consider their own opinions and this opens up the opportunity to reconsider what 'is' politics (what sort of issues are 'political') and note that politics is something with which their peers engage.

Previous studies have considered whether the self-assessment of political interest should be considered an attitude which is regularly updated or a more stable identity (Prior, 2010, 2019, pp. 143–151). Exploring debates as to whether political interest is an attitude or an identity can support us in determining how open the self-assessment of political interest is to being influenced by external events. Prior (2010, p. 748) references Sears' (1983, p. 102) contention that attitude stability is dependent on consistent interpretations of the object in question and that the inherent complexity of politics means that people's interpretations of politics may shift. Politics is not a fixed entity. What I mean by this is that what is thought to be encompassed by 'politics' is open and may be subject to change. Consequently, there may be instability within political attitudes associated with a shifting sense of what is politics. It may be that an individual's changing level of interest over time indicates a shift within their meaning of politics.

Longitudinal analysis by both Prior (2010, 2019, pp. 143–149) and Shani (2009, pp. 51–54) suggest that political interest 'crystallizes', or becomes more stable, as panellists age (as also found by Neundorf et al. (2013) and Russo and Stattin (2017)). Neundorf et al.'s (2013, p. 93) critique of Prior's (2010) analysis indicates that expressed levels of political interest are less stable for those aged 30 years and under, consequently, it is suggested that political interest can still develop in early adulthood. Neundorf et al.'s (2013, pp. 102–103) analysis suggest that this potential for development is stronger for those individuals whose parents had lower levels of political interest. Nevertheless, it would appear that there is a degree of stability within an individual's self-assessment of their interest in politics. This has led Prior (2010, p. 763) to state that interest in politics 'behaves like a central element of political identity, not like a frequently updated attitude'.

Nevertheless, in later work, Prior (2019, p. 31, fn 8) clarifies that political interest is neither 'an identity or an attitude', instead emphasising the 'affective and cognitive processes' of interest and noting that political attitudes and identities can, in themselves, inform interest in politics. Prior's shift away from viewing political interest as an element of political identity is a more coherent position. Identities have been described as the 'traits, characteristics, social relations, roles and social groups that define who one is' (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, 2012, p. 69). Identities inform how individuals interpret the world and 'make meaning' (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, 2012, p. 94). Some people may view their interest in politics as an identity but I would suggest that we should not assume that all people take this view. It is difficult to see how assessing oneself as being interested in politics informs someone's interpretation of the wider world. As discussed, there does appear to be an association between

interest and the propensity to participate in politics. However, it is difficult to understand how someone's worldview is informed by their interest in politics as opposed to, for example, their gender identity or ethnicity which have a clearer contribution to someone's sense of self. Rather, a more fruitful starting point may be to consider what informs the self-assessment of political interest. This conceptualisation opens up the opportunity to explore whether some people are more likely to assess themselves as being interested compared with others. The final section of this literature review describes trends in the subjective self-assessment of political interest and explores the extent to which these trends are associated with different meanings of politics.

Who is interested in politics?

Bennett and Bennett (1989, p. 106) state that there is 'conceptual and methodological disarray' across the empirical literature on gendered differences in political interest. This disarray is viewed to be a product of differences in the operationalisation of political interest across civic engagement studies and the variety of statistical techniques used to analyse data. As such, Bennett and Bennett suggest the ability to compare empirical studies is limited. Despite these limitations, this section of the literature review will explore general trends in terms of 'who' assesses that they are interested in politics, along with considering the theoretical underpinnings which have been used to examine such trends.

The decision to engage with politics is often explained with reference to supply-side factors and demand-side factors (Hay, 2007, p. 39). Supply-side factors are rooted in

the organisation and actions of the political system. By way of contrast, demand-side factors are grounded in the individual and could relate to self-perceptions or the individual's level of resources. While quite a blunt distinction (Hay, 2007, p. 158), the empirical literature on political interest can be categorised via explanations which foreground supply-side factors and those that highlight demand-side factors. Furthermore, frequently, empirical studies underexplore and do not make a clear link between the individual's self-assessment of political interest and their meaning of politics.

Turning first to supply-side accounts, such reflections on the political system, or 'political factors', reflecting the language of Bennett (1986, p. 121), include: levels of partisanship; perceptions of political self-efficacy in both its internal and external forms; and identification with citizenship duties. As identified by Prior (2019, p. 347), it is likely that there would be 'reciprocal causation' between supply-side factors and political interest. Just as assessments of the political system influence political interest, interest in politics may also influence judgements of the political system. Nevertheless, Prior (2019, p. 338) acknowledges that an increase in the perception of the importance of politics (or the salience of politics) leads to greater political interest. However, Prior (2019, p. 345) also finds that it is more difficult to establish the direction of the association between political interest, trust, and democratic satisfaction, citing the work of Bennett (1986, p. 171) and Clarke et al. (2004, pp. 306–307) to demonstrate that a critical stance on the political system may also lead to higher levels of political interest. Furthermore, Prior's (2019, p. 344) analysis of British Household Panel Study data suggests that a change in perceived political efficacy does not necessarily lead to an increase in political interest.

In addition to the supply-side accounts of political interest, explanations of political interest are also built on demand-side factors. These accounts associate interest with the socio-demographic profile of the individual. The literature identifies that, broadly, those who are older, those with a higher level of formal education, and men are more likely to express an interest in politics – consequently: age, levels of education, and gender have been identified to influence levels of assessed interest (Bennett, 1986; Bennett and Bennett, 1989; van Deth, 1989; Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997; Mestre and Marín, 2012; Robinson Preece, 2016; Fraile and Gomez, 2017; Fraile and Sánchez-Vítores, 2020). The next section of the literature review focuses in-depth on the association between gender, age, and education on self-assessed political interest. Before we look at these associations, it should be acknowledged that many studies of political interest do not include ethnicity as a variable. Consequently, our knowledge of the association between ethnicity and political interest is limited. Next, I discuss work which has considered the link between ethnicity and political interest.

Limited exploration of the association between ethnicity and political interest

Although the association between political interest and ethnicity appears somewhat underexplored, there are examples of where this association has been considered (Bennett, 1986, pp. 75–76; Block, 2006; Sanders et al., 2014, p. 127; Prior and Bougher, 2018). In the main, the study of political interest has called upon quantitative methods. However, using quantitative methods to study ethnic groups can risk limiting our appreciation of nuance within people's experiences (Gillborn, 2010, p. 254). In particular, the aggregation of ethnic groups when reporting findings may conceal differences in reported outcomes between groups (GOV.UK, 2020). With the

exception of Sanders et al. (2014) whose study of political participation focuses on Britain, the exploration of political interest and race and ethnicity analyse data from the United States. The data analysed within the studies based in the United States are split into the sub-groups of 'Black' and 'White'. At this stage, it is important to be aware of the complexity of ethnicity and the risk that these categorisations may miss a wealth of experience from people who identify as other ethnic groups. It should be acknowledged that Sanders et al.'s (2014) analysis does have greater granularity and the exploration of political participation considers levels of political interest across different ethnic groups. Based on descriptive analysis, Sanders et al. do not find a difference in levels of political interest between those who identify as White and groups identified in the study as ethnic minorities[3]. However, within the descriptive statistics, there were differences across ethnic groups. For example, 48% of respondents (n=524) who identified as Black African were interested in politics a great deal or quite a lot, compared to 23% of respondents (n=270) who identified as Bangladeshi and 41% of respondents (n=2,805) who identified as White (Sanders et al., 2014, p. 128). There was limited exploration as to what may have informed the different levels of political interest. While we know little about political interest and race and ethnicity, summarising these findings may still highlight an association between an individual's meaning of politics and their expressed levels of interest.

Across the studies based in the United States, people who identify as Black were found to report lower levels of political interest than people who identify as White (Bennett,

[3] Throughout this section, I replicate the terms referred to in the original research – e.g., ethnic minorities and African American – even though I recognise that these terms are complex, political, and contested.

1986, pp. 75–76; Block, 2006). Nevertheless, Bennett notes that Black people reported higher levels of interest in 1964 and 1982. This higher level of political interest was suggested to surface due to the 'dominance of civil rights issues on the national agenda over time' in 1964 and, in 1982, was attributed to the recession and impact of budgetary cuts made by the Reagan administration (Bennett, 1986, pp. 75–76). However, Bennett (1986, p. 41) uses a 'political apathy index' within this analysis which combines interest in election campaigns and interest in public affairs. Block (2006, p. 3) notes that previous studies 'treat race as a control rather than a theoretically central variable'. In Block's (2006, p. 70-75) work, Black people's interest across time was found to increase when society was assessed as being more racially tolerant, or there was a 'warmer' political climate. It should be noted that Block (2006, p. 66) assessed the 'warmth' or 'coolness' of the political climate by adapting an index which measured support for governmental actions that may improve race relations in America (rather than respondents' direct assessment of society's tolerance). The association between political interest and measures of tolerance suggest that there may be a link between Black people's assessment of their interest and their wider perceptions of society. No statistically significant association was identified between political climate and interest for White people (Block, 2006, p. 70). It may be that Black people's meaning of politics shifted within a 'warm' political climate compared to the meaning of politics held within a cool climate. However, this reading is very speculative and relies on there being a link between perceptions of societal tolerance and people's meaning of politics. Block's work provides a foundation on which these ideas could be explored further.

Prior and Bougher (2018) continue the exploration of political interest and race. They found that levels of interest in the 2008 and 2012 United States presidential campaigns were higher for people who identified as African American than those who identified as White. People who identified as African American reported higher levels of campaign interest in these years than during the 2004 and 2016 campaigns. Prior and Bougher attribute this finding to Obama's candidacy. Despite these shifts in levels of interest in the presidential campaign, Prior and Bougher (2018, pp. 835–838) found that general levels of political interest (so not campaign interest) remained stable. The distinction between shifting levels of campaign interest and general political interest hints that the Obama campaign may not have altered Black people's meaning of politics in the long-term. In other words, increased interest in the campaign was attributed to the candidate rather than a changing sense of the meaning, or interpretation, of politics. However, this does not challenge the argument that self-assessed political interest emerges from individuals' meaning of politics. Rather, the findings may suggest a certain stability to respondents' meaning of politics which may not have been influenced by the Presidential campaigns. Again, our understanding of the association between ethnicity and self-assessed political interest is limited.

Associations between political interest and age, gender, and formal education

Studies of political interest often incorporate measures of age, gender, and formal education. Exploring these accounts will demonstrate further how our understanding of political interest will be enhanced if we account for individuals' meanings of politics.

Age

The effects of age on levels of reported political interest present a more mixed and complex association between that of education and gender. While it has been demonstrated that older people frequently have higher levels of self-expressed interest than younger respondents (Glenn and Grimes, 1968), other studies have demonstrated that this can be considered a curvilinear relationship with those who are younger, and those who are older, demonstrating lower levels of interest in politics (Bennett, 1986, p. 76; Dalton, 2017, p. 87). Although findings suggest different levels of interest for the oldest members of society, there is some sense of commonality in that the youngest age groups are reported to be less interested in politics.

Accounts for the relationship between age and political interest are frequently examined in terms of a life-cycle account and birth cohort effects (van Deth, 1989, p. 302; Prior, 2019, pp. 108–111). Lifecycle accounts suggest that the attempt to establish a career and a home may act to distract younger people from politics so that it is not 'relevant to their lives' (van Deth, 1989, p. 303). This 'preoccupation' (Bennett, 1986, p. 70) leads to lower levels of interest in politics. Prior (2019, pp. 108–111) notes that it is only lifecycle accounts which suggest that political interest increases as people age. However, as discussed earlier, political interest appears to 'crystallise' in early adulthood (Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019). Therefore, younger people who do not become interested in politics in early adulthood are likely to remain uninterested.

By way of contrast, birth cohort effects (van Deth, 1989, p. 302) or generational accounts (Sears, 1983, p. 81) posit that the particular conditions in which an individual

is politically socialised, or when they first learn about politics, affects their level of interest. As individuals are exposed to a similar political context, it may then be the case that there are general trends for individuals to be more or less politically interested. Prior's (2019, p. 117) longitudinal analysis suggests that the effects of ageing on political interest are lessened when cohort differences are taken into account. Across the datasets, those born in the 1940s and who reached adulthood in the 1960s demonstrated the highest levels of interest. Prior (2019, pp. 119–129) argues that this is consistent with the 'impressionable years' hypothesis (Sears, 1983, p. 81) and suggests that the changing social context of the 1960s had a greater effect on those who were entering adolescence and adulthood and learning about politics. Consequently, it would appear that it is not so much the case that people develop political interest as they age, but rather the development of interest is influenced by the wider social and political context. This finding is in accordance with the earlier discussion of the stability of political interest. It would seem that once people develop political interest (or, to put it in the terms of this thesis, self-assess as interested), they are likely to remain interested.

While there has been some challenge made to lifecycle accounts, what unites lifecycle and cohort accounts is that both imply that people may 'experience' politics in different ways. In other words, the accounts suggest that people hold different meanings of politics. The lifecycle account suggests that individuals increasingly recognise the relevance of politics – to put it another way, there is the potential for individuals' interpretation and relationship with politics to change. By way of contrast, birth cohort or generational accounts suggest that the meaning of politics and people's subsequent relationship with this meaning is more stable, however different cohorts may hold

different accounts of politics. Therefore, both accounts suggest that younger people may ascribe different meanings and interpretations to politics which, according to the argument of this project, will influence their self-assessed level of political interest.

Education

While education has been cited as influencing the assessment of an interest in politics (van Deth, 1989, pp. 301–302, 2000a, p. 127; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995, pp. 348–350), there is some contention as to whether it is education in and of itself which influences levels of political interest, or whether the exposure to higher levels of education facilitates access to the resources and opportunities which inform the development of an interest in politics (Bennett, 1986, p. 69). As identified by Prior (2019, p. 213) a number of factors can be associated with education which could be linked to increased political interest. These factors may include coursework and subjects which consider political 'issues' or society more generally, as well as involvement in extracurricular activities and volunteering. Prior's (2019, pp. 216–220) analysis finds that in Britain and Switzerland, completing upper-secondary school (equivalent to A-levels in England and Wales or Scottish Highers) is associated with increased political interest but the effects of education declined over time.

Some of the literature examining the links between political engagement and education can tend towards being quite patronising. It should be noted that this literature discusses a more general account of political engagement rather than the more specific political interest which is the focus of this thesis. The cognitive mobilisation thesis of political engagement (Dalton, 1984) would suggest that as people progress through higher levels of education, their cognitive functioning

increases which provides them with the skills necessary to respond to the complexities of politics. There is likely to be a greater recall of political knowledge, both of political concepts and institutional structures. Denny and Doyle (2008) argue that levels of formal education reflect cognitive ability and that the inclusion of a measure of ability within statistical models lessens the strength of association between education and political interest. According to this view, there is a foundation of knowledge upon which awareness of, and subsequent interest in, current affairs can be built. This association is also suggested by Neuman (1986, p. 54) who notes that interest and knowledge are likely to interact with one another so that higher levels of interest lead to greater knowledge and vice versa. These accounts of the association between higher education and political interest are rooted in the idea that the individual is 'changed' or transformed by education. Indeed, this transformation seems to be limited to higher education and there seems to be little consideration as to how other, more practical or even informal, education may be transformational. Furthermore, it is unclear exactly what is the theoretical underpinning between higher education, or cognitive ability even, and political interest. It appears to be suggested that there is a 'level' of aptitude which then translates into interest. This has the implication of almost safeguarding exactly who can be interested in politics and the association between political interest and higher education via increased cognitive ability is not convincing. The processes from which interest emerges remain unclear. Furthermore, explanations which associate higher education with increased ability seem to be unable to respond to the idea that people who have not accessed higher levels of education may still be interested in politics.

By way of contrast, the civic voluntarism model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) would suggest that education provides the personal resources and exposure to situations which foster political engagement and related interest. Education is also seen to increase access to civic skills (such as communication skills) which are exercised during political engagement (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995, p. 275). Such engagement is perceived to increase an individual's scope of personal experience and, in relation, their perception that they have the skills required to engage with politics. Within the civic voluntarism model, education is suggested to facilitate and enable the conditions required to engage with politics and develop political interest.

Reiterating the differences between the civic voluntarism model and the cognitive mobilisation model demonstrates the different emphasis placed on the role of education in the development of political interest. At once education has been theorised to develop the individual skills required to respond to the complexities of politics, and has also been suggested to enable and facilitate the conditions in which an individual can develop political interest. This raises the question as to whether being interested in politics is facilitated by a specific skill set, in part enabled by higher levels of formal education, or whether the life outcomes influenced by accessing higher levels of education provide the conditions in which an individual is more likely to develop an interest in politics (Bennett, 1986; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Shani, 2009; Prior, 2019). Is it education itself, or the 'by-products' of education which generate interest in politics?

A potential resolution to this question is to recall that political interest should be viewed as a subjective self-assessment that is based on the association between an individual and the object of interest, politics. Consequently, the influence of accessing higher levels of education should be seen in terms of the effect it could have on the individual's perception, or meaning of politics. Rather than viewing higher levels of education as making politics more accessible, we should consider how the acquisition of skills means that it is more likely that politics is *perceived* to be accessible. It may be that the acquisition of skills through education has changed an individual's perception that they can understand politics – or their internal political self-efficacy. In other words, higher-levels of education may influence individuals' meaning of politics.

Gender

While a gender gap has been identified across different forms of political activity, women and men have broadly similar levels of turnout in elections (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010, p. 324). Nevertheless, there is a gendered difference in political interest. Men have been found to be more likely to express an interest in politics than women (Bennett and Bennett, 1989; Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997; Mestre and Marín, 2012; Robinson Preece, 2016; Fraile and Gomez, 2017; Fraile and Sánchez-Vítores, 2020).

The gender gap in political interest has been noted to first become apparent during mid-teens (Prior, 2019, p. 166; Fraile and Sánchez-Vítores, 2020). The historic absence of women within the public sphere has been suggested to influence women's perceptions of the political system, and their place within it (Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997, pp. 1064–1069). While it has been suggested that the gender gap

in interest would decrease as women's participation in education and the workplace increased, analysis suggests that a gap remains (Bennett, 1986, pp. 72–75; van Deth, 2000b; Mestre and Marín, 2012). The past absence of women in politics has been suggested to be internalised to the extent that some women question their ability to involved in politics and so 'remove' themselves through the denial of the expression of a political opinion (Bourdieu, 2010, pp. 412–415). This reading – an internalised sense from women that politics is not for them, would indicate that women are less likely to identify an interest in politics.

Further attempts to explain the gender difference in reported political interest have identified three broad explanations: 'sex-role socialization, structural (SES [socio-economic status]) variables, and situational factors' (Bennett and Bennett, 1989, p. 107 and also noted in Bennett, 1986; van Deth, 1989, 2000b; Fraile and Gomez, 2017; Fraile and Sánchez-Vítores, 2020). Situational factors are identified to include measures of 'marital status, employment status and parental status' (Bennett and Bennett, 1989, pp. 107–108; Mestre and Marín, 2012). Such situational factors have also been suggested to include the domestic division of labour in which women have traditionally held the majority of domestic responsibilities which is viewed to reduce the time available to engage with politics (Mestre and Marín, 2012). The influence of perceptions of internal political self-efficacy on gendered perceptions of political interest has also been found (Coffé, 2013; Robinson Preece, 2016). Furthermore, Campbell and Winters (2008) highlighted how women's perceptions of internal political self-efficacy likely influenced their interpretation of politics. Women were found to be more likely to reflect on the feelings that were generated in response to politics, often framing this in terms of the challenges of staying informed about political

developments and also showed a greater tendency to reflect on their feelings of 'powerlessness' and perceived inability to influence the political system (Campbell and Winters, 2008, p. 55). By way of contrast, when discussing their interpretation of politics, men were more likely to demonstrate 'observer responses' (p. 55) which were focused on the actions and strategies of political parties rather than self-perceptions of ability. The work of Campbell and Winters adds further evidence to the suggestion that men and women may hold different meanings of politics, in other words that gender may inform how people interpret politics. The suggested link between political self-efficacy and gendered perceptions of politics begins to further understanding as to why it may be the case that men and women report different levels of interest in politics. It would appear that there may be a difference in the way in which men and women relate to their meaning of politics, which is suggested to influence their self-assessment of interest.

Van Deth's (2000b) study exploring whether there had been a decline in the interest gender gap in the Netherlands makes this distinction most starkly. The study conceptualised political interest in terms of both self-reported levels of political interest, along with the reported frequency of political discussion. By contrasting data generated by both measures, van Deth (2000b, p. 264) concludes that the subjective rating of political interest denoted 'objects more relevant for men'. In other words, men may be more likely to see politics (as an object) as being more pertinent compared to women. This perception of politics is suggested to inform the self-assessment of political interest. Furthermore, women reported higher levels of political discussion than would be anticipated from their level of self-reported political interest. The reporting of levels of political discussion, as a political behaviour, are arguably more

‘neutral’ as they are not mediated by self-perception to the same extent as political interest, however, the measure is still dependent on participants’ recall and identifying the topic of their discussion as relating to politics. Nevertheless, van Deth’s finding adds further evidence that self-assessed political interest is a product of the individual’s interpretation of politics and consolidates the argument that the examination of political interest requires an assessment of the different meanings of politics that participants hold.

It has been noted that, despite higher levels of interest in local issues, women may perceive the word ‘politics’ to refer to national politics which can preclude women from assessing themselves to be interested (Coffé, 2013). Campbell and Winters (2008, pp. 61–62) also identified that women have a greater interest in domestic policy issues (defined as health, education, and law and order) than men, who demonstrate a greater interest in an institutional interpretation of politics, one that is ‘more traditionally defined’. Consequently, the work of Coffé and Campbell and Winters suggest that women are not less interested in politics but rather direct this interest towards different dimensions of politics. Therefore, if women are more likely to identify the political interest question as only pertaining to an institutional view of politics at the national level, then interest directed towards different dimensions of politics is unlikely to be recognised. Campbell and Winters’ analysis, along with Coffé’s work, lends support to the argument of this chapter that the self-assessment of political interest emerges from the conceptualisation of politics held by the individual. Therefore, this project seeks to build on these arguments and explore the process by which the self-assessment of political interest may be informed by an individual’s meaning of politics.

Throughout this final section of the literature review, it has been argued that exploring individuals' meaning of politics would develop our understanding of self-assessed political interest. This approach progresses our understanding away from viewing political interest via supply-side or demand-side explanations. There are associations between interest in politics and assessments of the political system, as well as interest and socio-demographics (age, gender, and education for example). However, it is unclear how interest in politics emerges from these supply-side and demand-side factors alone. The next chapter will develop discussions on supply-side and demand-side explanations and will establish how political interest should be considered a 'relational concept' (a term used by Vines and Marsh (2018, p. 436) when discussing anti-politics). What is needed to develop our understanding of political interest is an account of the meaning of politics and how people relate to this meaning of politics. My thesis addresses this gap by exploring whether people hold different meanings of politics and how these distinctive meanings of politics inform the self-assessment of political interest.

Conclusion

Reviewing the literature on political interest has demonstrated the lack of clarity as to what exactly we mean when we talk about someone being interested in politics. A case has been made that political interest refers to both the in-the-moment experience of interest, or state of interest, in addition to a self-assessment of interest – someone identifying and recognising that they are interested in politics. The study of political interest captures individuals' self-assessment of their interest in politics. This conceptualisation of political interest establishes that someone may experience the state of interest but may not self-assess themselves as being interested in politics.

Literature on interest has made a distinction between situational and individual (or in Prior's (2019) and Robison's (2014) terms dispositional) interest. Situational interest is viewed to be more reliant on environmental stimuli, whereas dispositional interest is the increased tendency to be interested. The distinction suggests that it is possible for someone to experience situational interest but for this to not be acknowledged by the individual. Consequently, the study of political interest would be enhanced if an emphasis is placed on exploring what informs someone to self-assess that they are interested in politics.

Previous studies often use quantitative methods to explore the association between political interest and a variety of supply-side or demand-side variables. These studies provide a useful account of the trends in terms of 'who' is interested in politics. It has been demonstrated across the literature that men, those with higher levels of formal education, and older people are more likely to express an interest in politics. The literature review has argued that interest will be directed towards something – the object of interest.

Robison (2014) notes that political interest is likely to be informed by individuals' meaning of politics and how this interpretation of politics aligns with their motives for political engagement. Some studies of political interest discuss indirectly how politics can be 'viewed' in different ways; however, these explanations can be speculative. This thesis develops our understanding of political interest by exploring the association between the self-assessment of interest and the meaning, or interpretation, of politics. The next chapter progresses these ideas by detailing the theoretical framework that

underpins this thesis. The chapter will consider how individuals may relate to, or position themselves, in response to their interpretation of politics and how this may influence their tendency to self-assess as being interested in politics.

CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Central to this project is the idea that politics can be interpreted in different ways, or that politics can mean different things to different people. Exploring these meanings of politics will further develop our understanding of political interest and what influences someone to recognise, or self-assess, an interest in politics. The theoretical framework alerts us to the idea that it is not just the meaning of politics which influences self-assessed interest but the processes by which people relate to their meaning of politics. In order to develop this point, the first section of the chapter explores how to study political interest. In other words, this section establishes where the analytical focus should be directed when studying political interest. The section reinforces the argument that the assessment of political interest emerges from the meaning of politics that people hold. The association between political interest and the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics is likely to be a dynamic and interactive process where it is difficult to discern a clear starting point. While the self-assessment of an interest in politics may inform how someone conceptualises politics, this thesis isolates the association between how someone relates to their meaning of politics and their self-assessment as being interested in politics.

First, the insufficiency of viewing political (dis)engagement as a product of either supply-side or demand-side accounts will be established. In so doing, I will extend Marsh et al.'s (Marsh, Vines and Halupka, 2016; Vines and Marsh, 2018) contention that anti-political sentiment arises from an interaction between supply-side and demand-side factors by arguing that this interaction depends on an understanding of

an individual's meaning of politics. The second section of the chapter then proceeds to consider how to understand the self-assessment of political interest. This section contends that the assessment of political interest should be viewed as a process of agency and that an individual chooses whether or not to assess themselves as being interested in politics. The theoretical framework established within this chapter builds on the puzzle presented in the literature review. It would appear that some people are more likely than others to express an interest in politics. To understand this occurrence, we need to progress from viewing political interest as a response to the political system, or a simple reflection of the characteristics of an individual (for example their level of education). Instead, political interest involves someone self-assessing themselves as being interested. It is an agential process. Therefore, the exploration of political interest should shift to consider what may influence this agential process. The work of Bourdieu and the concept of habitus, along with Akram's (2019) account of the internal political conversation, will be called upon to develop this discussion.

Section 1. How to study political interest: Why we need to know the meaning of politics to explore political interest

The literature review made the case that interest is experienced in relation to something. Political interest is a product of the relationship that someone has with the object of interest – here politics. It was also argued that political interest should be viewed as a self-assessment. We can only study or 'capture' political interest through the individual making a subjective judgement of their own interest levels. Assessments of political interest do not capture an objective measure of an external entity but rather

is rooted in the relationship an individual has with politics – how they relate to politics. Relating to politics can be thought of as being bidirectional. It involves how the individual sees themselves in response to politics, but also how the individual perceives politics in response to their own sense of who they are and their life circumstances.

In a similar approach to Marsh et al.'s (2016; Vines and Marsh, 2018, p. 436) discussion of anti-politics, political interest should be viewed as a 'relational concept' in which there is an interaction between supply-side and demand-side factors. A similar argument has been articulated by Hay (2007, pp. 158–160) but Marsh et al. develop this point in greater detail. I propose that Marsh et al.'s argument can be progressed if we explore how politics is interpreted (in other words, the individual's meaning of politics). In making this case, I will also strengthen my argument as to why our understanding of political interest can be furthered by exploring the meanings of politics that people hold and also how people relate to their interpretation of politics.

Marsh et al. define anti-politics as the disenchantment and disengagement directed to the political system and the political elite which reflects a 'decoupling between political authorities and citizens' (Vines and Marsh, 2018, p. 449). To Marsh et al. both demand-side and supply-side accounts cannot be understood in isolation and tacitly summon their opposite number. Demand-side accounts of anti-politics emphasise the responses of individuals to the political system. However, the emphasis on individuals' responses necessitates an understanding of what it is that people are responding to – the political system. Concomitantly, analysis of anti-politics which foreground supply-

side accounts also imply that it is individuals who are responding to the political system in a particular way. That is to say, supply-side accounts of anti-political sentiment do not arise from the ether of the political system alone but rather in how the individual interprets and makes sense of the political system (Vines and Marsh, 2018).

While I agree that supply-side and demand-side accounts of anti-politics sentiment, and political (dis)engagement more broadly, do implicitly call upon one another, I suggest that our understanding of the interaction between supply-side and demand-side accounts can be furthered if we also consider how an individual understands, defines and interprets politics – in other words, what does politics 'mean' to the individual. There is an interaction between demand-side and supply-side accounts. However, our understanding of this interaction is stymied if we do not account for the meaning of politics that people hold. Exploring the meaning of politics allows us to progress from describing what this interaction 'looks like' towards greater analytical purchase by understanding how supply-side and demand-side factors relate to one another. The contribution this thesis makes is to explore and establish the different interpretations of politics in circulation.

First, to consider supply-side accounts, analysis of political (dis)engagement which foregrounds the political system can only make sense when considering how individuals respond to the political system. However, individuals' responses to the political system are formed with reference to their own interpretation of politics. In other words, responses to the political system are formed with reference to what people think politics 'is', their expectations of politics, and how what they observe as 'politics'

matches their account of what politics should be in a normative sense. In a similar vein, demand-side accounts implicitly reference the political system. For example, we cannot say that politics has not met people's expectations, that there is an expectation gap (Flinders, 2009, 2012, 2014), without exploring what expectations of politics are held and the evaluations people have of politics. My point here is that we can achieve a more granulated understanding of the interaction between supply-side and demand-side accounts if we view this interaction as being mediated through the interpretation, or meaning, of politics which people hold. Laurison (2016, p. 688) presents a similar argument when stating that analysis of inequality in political participation in the United States often omits 'a full understanding of socially structured differences in how people see, relate to, and understand politics' and notes that these differences are:

> *not only about levels of understanding or caring about politics, but also in simply liking or disliking politics, or a natural-feeling interest or lack of interest, or sense that politics is for other people* (Laurison, 2016, p. 688)

As identified in the literature review, there is a distinction between feelings of disillusionment with politics and disengagement from politics (Bhavnani, 1991; Jenkins, 2018). Our acknowledgement of these nuanced responses to politics would be furthered if we placed a greater emphasis on exploring what politics 'means' to people and how they relate to, or position themselves, in response to this meaning. For example, someone may not feel represented by the political system and abstain from voting. However, they may not reject political engagement in its entirety and may post highly critical messages about the actions of politicians on social media. To this person, there is still a value to politics but the political system has disappointed them

in some way (Jenkins, 2018). This sense of disappointment can only be understood with reference to what the individual thinks politics should be like and, in connection, how they relate to, or position themselves in response to this meaning of politics. In other words, the meaning of politics refers to the underpinning interpretation of politics. Within the example above, the meaning of politics refers to the individual's normative account of politics and the associated sense that politics as it 'plays out' comes up short. The way that the individual relates to this meaning of politics refers to how they associate with the meaning of politics – it is their response to their interpretation of politics. To put it another way, it is the manner in which the individual situates themselves in response to their meaning of politics. In the example above, the individual holds a meaning of politics and their feeling that there is little point in them voting reflects how they have positioned themselves in response to their account of politics. The decision not to vote is based on an understanding that politics is not as it should be and that they do not feel represented by politics. In other words, for an individual to perceive that politics is not as it should be does require an individual to hold an account of what politics should be (their meaning of politics) in the first place. The decision not to vote is a product of how the individual has related to their meaning of politics. My point here is that the meaning of politics forms the basis from which people's relationship with politics emerges.

Politics can be interpreted in different ways by different people. Furthermore, someone may decide to vote but finds politics too polarising to want to engage in political discussions. Here, the individual's meaning of politics may foreground the importance of citizenship duties and voting, but the person identifies that politics is fraught with adversarial conflict (their meaning of politics) and this is something they wish to avoid

(their relationship with this meaning of politics). The meaning of politics refers to the importance the individual places on citizenship duties, but also that politics produces discord within personal relationships. The individual relates to this meaning of politics as a 'site' of conflict which is to be avoided and results in the individual's engagement to be limited to the private expression of voting. Again, in this example, the person's political engagement can be understood with reference to their meaning of politics but also how they relate to this meaning of politics.

Staying with the idea of conflict avoidance, Coffé and Bolzendahl (2017) identify that women are more likely to be uncomfortable with interpersonal political conflict and this discomfort is identified to contribute to the gender gap in political participation. Here, the decision not to participate is an example of how someone relates to their meaning of politics. Politics is perceived to be fraught with conflict and division (the meaning of politics) and the individual may find this to be off-putting (relating to the meaning of politics). The meaning of politics refers to what politics is perceived to be by individuals. When I say that people relate to their meaning of politics, I refer to how individuals respond to their meaning of politics. It is the way in which individuals position themselves (their relationship with politics) based on their evaluations of politics. My point here is that to explore the meaning of politics and the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics allows us to recognise the nuance and variety in how people politically (dis)engage. There are examples of empirical studies which have explored how young people define and relate to politics (for example, White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; O'Toole, 2003; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Quintelier, 2007; Sloam, 2007). However, there is scope to make more explicit the connection between 1. the meaning of politics, 2. how individuals relate to this

meaning of politics, and 3. political (dis)engagement. In particular, my focus is to explore the meaning of politics and the way which people's relationship to this meaning influences their self-assessed political interest.

The literature review distinguished between the state, or experience, of political interest and the self-assessment of political interest. Due to methodological limitations, political analysis is reliant on studying people's expression of political interest (Prior, 2019, p. 42). In other words, the individual makes a subjective assessment of their political interest. Distinguishing between these two forms of interest (the in-the-moment state and individuals' assessment of their interest) highlights the potential that someone may experience the state of interest in response to politics but the individual may not 'translate' this experience of interest into a self-assessment of being interested in politics – their experience of the state of being interested in politics may not be recognised. Robinson Preece (2016) found that perceptions of internal political self-efficacy (individuals' level of self-belief that they can engage with politics), was associated with political interest. To Robinson Preece (2016), individuals may be more or less disposed to express an interest in politics. I am making a similar point, that some people may be more or less inclined to assess, or recognise, an interest in politics. However, I am proposing that we need a broader exploration of the meanings of politics that people hold than one limited to their perceived self-efficacy. In other words, it is not just the performance of the political system that we should focus on, but also what people define politics to be in the first place. By using Q-methodology, this thesis contributes a novel approach from which more developed accounts of politics can be surfaced.

When discussing the conceptualisation of general interest, Schmidt and Rotgans (2017; Rotgans and Schmidt, 2017) criticise Renninger and Hidi's (2006) model of interest development for suggesting that interest in a subject precedes knowledge. Put simply, that the acquisition of knowledge is influenced by holding a prior interest in that topic. Instead, Schmidt and Rotgans (2017; Rotgans and Schmidt, 2017) propose that previously acquired knowledge on a topic supports the development of individual interest. In response to this criticism, Renninger and Hidi (2019, p. 283, fn 7) emphasise the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and interest and that 'interest supports the development of knowledge, [and] interest can be an outcome of knowledge development'. The purpose of outlining this debate is to emphasise that even if people have little factual knowledge about politics, they are highly likely to still have some preconceptions or opinions about politics. As noted by Robison (2014, p. 28), people encounter objects of interest (or politics) 'not as blank slates, but as persons with existing skills, abilities, values, beliefs, identities'. My point here is that it is highly likely that people will interpret the term 'politics' in a particular way, that they will have a meaning of politics, whether or not they engage with politics.

It remains to outline how an individual's meaning of politics, and the way in which they relate to the meaning of politics, influences the assessment of political interest. For this task, the project needs a theoretical framework that can provide depth and allow us to understand the conditions which can influence political agency. I have drawn on the work of Bourdieu (1977) which helps us theorise agents' relations to politics as mediated by habitus, and the work of Akram (2013, 2019) to argue that the self-assessment of political interest is an agential act. Viewing the assessment of political interest via Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Akram's developed account of agency

frees us to progress from supply-side or demand-side accounts of political interest towards exploring how people relate to the meaning of politics that they hold.

Section 2. How to understand political interest: Agency and the self-assessment of political interest

Agency refers to 'the *contingent* [italics in original] but reflexive interplay between pervasive power relations and capacities for autonomy in collective life' (Jenkins, 2011, p. 159). Within this study, the self-assessment of an interest in politics is viewed as an example of an individual having political agency. When asked whether they are interested in politics, an individual can respond in a variety of ways. If asked via a questionnaire, they can confirm or deny their interest (or, depending on the question design, express that they do not know). The options in a conversation, or research interview, will be more open-ended and give the opportunity for the individual to talk through and clarify their response. Nevertheless, the point being made here is that there is agency in 'operation' when an individual assesses their interest. This study follows Akram's (2013, 2019) calls for a more developed account of agency to be applied to the study of political (dis)engagement. To Akram (2019, p. 34), analysis of political (dis)engagement (or political behaviour) is frequently couched in 'a language of rationality... or reflexive and choice dependent models of behaviour'. Although not quite the same point, there has been a tendency for studies of political interest to often assume that individuals have a common definition of politics, or that people share a similar starting point when assessing their interest in politics. There is scope for us to assume less about people's interest in politics and instead focus our attention on interpreting people's relationship with politics. There have been comparatively few studies which have considered how individuals' interpretation of politics may influence

the assessment of their political interest (the work of Campbell and Winters (2008), Coffé (2013), Robison (2014, 2017) and Robinson Preece (2016) are exceptions). Exploring the concept of agency begins to unlock the process by which an individual's assessment of their political interest emerges from their meaning of politics. A developed concept of agency facilitates us to consider how the individual relates to their meaning of politics.

Akram (2013, p. 57, 2019) makes a case that there are multiple dimensions to agency including: intentional action, reflexivity, habit, and the unconscious, and advocates for a better understanding of the interactions between these features of agency. In *Re-thinking Contemporary Political Behaviour*, Akram (2019) develops what are argued to be previously neglected characteristics of agency as applied to the study of political behaviour: the unconscious and the internal political conversation. The unconscious refers to the way in which there is the potential for the individual's interactions with the social world – the way that they act, think, or feel – to occur without always having conscious awareness as to why they are doing so, or what is influencing this phenomenon (Akram, 2019, pp. 66–67). As noted by Akram:

> *…the unconscious points to a realm of motivation and influence which is outside of the agent's control. We may – consciously – seek to tap into the unconscious but the unconscious is free to exercise influence whenever it wishes. It is part of agency, but crucially, it is informing behaviour in ways of which the agent is not aware* (2019, p. 66).

The internal political conversation is the interior process by which people deliberate and make sense of their available courses of political action, or what they think or feel about politics. Akram's (2019, p. 98) exploration of the internal political conversation called on 12 interviews which explored 'how individuals think about and make sense of their political identity and behaviour'. For example, one of the participants, Sue, discussed a shift in their political engagement from party politics towards involvement with local community projects which held greater meaning and was influenced by the 'residual class-based narrative' (p. 106) Sue was exposed to by her grandparents. The internal political conversation relates to the process by which Sue made sense of her relationship with politics.

Within this study on political interest, I seek to develop a theoretical framework which applies these underexplored characteristics of agency to surface the association between individuals' meanings of politics and their self-assessed interest in politics. For clarity, the ideas that inform this theoretical framework are outlined below:

1. Interest is dependent on the relationship people have with the object of interest (here, politics).
2. People can have different definitions, interpretations, and expectations of politics. In other words, there can be multiple subjectivities directed to politics and the word 'politics' can mean different things to different people. A developed account of agency allows us to explore how these meanings of politics may influence the self-assessment of political interest.
3. People can experience an 'in the moment state' of interest when encountering politics.

4. Someone experiencing a state of interest may or may not go on to assess that they are interested in politics. There is an agential process at play when someone is making this assessment.

5. The self-assessment of political interest is dependent on how someone relates and positions themselves to their meaning of politics. There may be reflexive or unconscious elements to the way people relate to their meaning of politics. Some people may not perceive a sense of belonging within their meaning of politics. Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Akram's account of the internal political conversation will influence the relationship someone has with politics and whether they self-assess themselves as being interested in politics.

Points 1-4 were discussed in the previous literature review. It now remains to explore point 5: *the self-assessment of political interest is dependent on how someone relates and positions themselves to their meaning of politics*. When self-assessing political interest, people may actively consider their meaning of politics and how they 'fit in' with this interpretation, or alternatively there may not be this reflexivity. An individual may assess that they are interested in politics but may not think about what politics means to them and how they relate to politics. In other words, someone may be interested without a sense of what has influenced this assessment. My point here is that even when there is an absence of conscious reflection, the assessment of political interest still arises from the way that the individual relates to their meaning of politics.

The chapter will now proceed to apply the underexplored dimensions of agency developed by Akram to the self-assessment of political interest. First, the unconscious,

as situated by Akram within Bourdieu's concept of habitus, will be considered before then detailing the contribution of Akram's internal political conversation to our understanding of self-assessed political interest. The application of both of these characteristics of agency opens up the possibility that people may relate to their meaning of politics consciously and unconsciously.

Understanding how people relate to their meaning of politics: Bourdieu's habitus and a sense of belonging

In developing the theory of practice, Bourdieu aimed to understand human behaviour without calling upon rules-based approaches (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In other words, why people behave in particular ways when not regulated by overt rules. The theory of practice is focused on three concepts or 'thinking tools' (Yang, 2014, p. 1523). Firstly, the field, an abstract social arena which encompasses 'a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions' of agents (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). The second is the concept of capital, or the level of resource an individual has at their disposal within a field, or social space. Third is habitus, a 'generative principle' (Maton, 2008, p. 55) which influences but, importantly (and as will be discussed later), does not determine, the individual's position in the field. The theoretical framework on which the thesis is based considers how habitus can progress our understanding of the self-assessment of political interest. In doing so, I recognise that there is a continual interaction between habitus, field, and an individual's level of capital. Higher levels of resource, or capital, will likely inform someone's sense that politics is open and is something with which they can engage, increasing the likelihood of the individual self-assessing as being interested

in politics. However, within this project, I only consider how habitus can progress our understanding of assessed political interest.

Akram (2019, p. 57) notes that Bourdieu's study of practice, the way the individual interacts within the social world, is dependent on recognising the contribution of the unconscious. To Bourdieu, practice occurs without recourse to overt rules and individuals are not always aware as to why they act in a particular way – it is just the done 'thing' (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The unconscious is then 'deeply implicated in the way that habitus operates' – even if Bourdieu does not engage directly with the unconscious (Akram, 2019, p. 61). Agents' habitus influences their disposition to act, feel, or think in a particular way. These dispositions can be cognitive, affective, or corporal, however, the agent will not always be aware of these tendencies (Akram, 2013; Reay, 2015; Wacquant, 2016). Habitus 'generates practices, beliefs, perceptions, [and] feelings' (Maton, 2008, p. 50) and it is structured by past experiences which structure future experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). This moulding by past experiences renders the 'appreciation of the possibilities and impossibilities…provided by a set of social conditions' (Yang, 2014, p. 1525). To add further clarity, previous actions, as mediated by habitus, then go onto influence future (in)action. The influence of habitus extends and projects the past into the present and future.

An often-repeated critique of Bourdieu is that the theory of practice denies the individual agency. To Bourdieu, an individual's social position and the resources accrued via this social position (particularly the agent's economic capital) influence the

individual's habitus. However, it is argued that there is little scope for habitus to influence the field (or the structure of social positions) (Jenkins, 1992; Archer, 2010). Therefore, critics of Bourdieu have argued that the agent is viewed to be a product of the social structure, or the social space of relations (known by Bourdieu as the field), but the agent is viewed to lack the capacity to exert any influence over this structure. This has led Bourdieu to be charged as a theorist of social reproduction whose work has little to add to the study of social change (Jenkins, 1992).

In response to this charge, there have been several attempts to explore how reflexivity, or the ability of the individual to consider their thoughts, feelings, or actions, viewed to be the precursor for social change, can be incorporated within habitus (see for example, Sweetman, 2003; Adams, 2006; Elder-Vass, 2007; Decoteau, 2016)**.** Here, the purpose of highlighting work to restate Bourdieu's theory against counts of determinism is to highlight that there can be both unconscious and conscious, or reflexive, dimensions within people's interactions with the social world.

To Akram (2019, p. 65), there is scope for reflexivity within Bourdieu's theory but this reflexivity should be viewed 'as an ability to rethink the 'unthought'' and occurs within the broader social context (or field) in which the agent is positioned. In other words, reflexivity may, or may not, influence the social conditions in which habitus operates. This is also identified by McNay's (1999) exploration of gender relations; whereby reflexive awareness may not necessarily lead to social change due to entrenched power relations. Therefore, it is not as simple as to suggest that conscious awareness demonstrated via reflexivity will lead to social change. Reflexivity can still be

influenced, or conditioned by habitus (Akram, 2019, p. 65). However, to highlight the unconscious and habitual elements of agents' actions does not preclude the capacity to be reflexive, or suggest that agents cannot be conscious as to the reasons why they acted in a particular way (Akram, 2019). Rather, the unconscious and reflexivity are elements of agency.

To return to the subject of this thesis, it has been contended that self-assessed political interest will be influenced by the way in which people relate to the meaning of politics that they hold. My point is that there is the potential for there to be both conscious and unconscious elements to the way in which people relate to politics. This point will be developed throughout the rest of the chapter. We now turn to consider how Bourdieu's concept of habitus can assist this study by exploring how some people may be more inclined than others to assess (or recognise) their interest in politics. Laurison's (2016) discussion of inequality in political participation uses the work of Bourdieu to highlight how individuals may have 'preferences' towards political engagement and notes that some people may perceive that they lack 'political competence' (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 400). Furthermore, Shani's (2009) study of inequality within political interest, as discussed in the literature review, references the work of Bourdieu and the concept of habitus. Shani notes that some people may feel a greater 'ease' (p. 197) in response to politics and so are more likely to express that they are interested in politics. The idea that there can be particular preferences towards politics can be explored further with reference to Bourdieu's work on political participation.

Bourdieu's writing on politics is concerned primarily with examining inequality within political participation and how the French political system is geared to favour the participation of some people over others (Bourdieu, 1992; Wacquant, 2005). Political participation is framed as access to politics, such access is 'socially determined and differentially allocated' (Wacquant, 2005, p. 21). The first section of this chapter argued that the exploration of political (dis)engagement and, in relation, political interest can be furthered through acknowledging the interaction of both supply-side and demand-side accounts as mediated through an individual's meaning of politics. Bourdieu's writing on the political system similarly seeks to transcend a 'supply' or 'demand' dichotomy (Swartz, 2013, p. 78). Bourdieu's work is characterised both by exploring agents' response to the political environment through their propensity to engage with politics, along with exploring how the political environment generates this response. Rather than explaining political disengagement as a result of a lack of comprehension or knowledge of the individual, to Bourdieu (1992, p. 184), political withdrawal is a by-product of the 'social relations that are constitutive of the political field'. To put it another way, Bourdieu presents a more developed account for political (dis)engagement which progresses from reductive and individualised explanations towards a more socially-situated position which foregrounds how someone positions themselves in relation to politics.

In a similar vein, I am arguing that the self-assessment, or recognition, of political interest is dependent on how individuals interpret politics, what they see politics as being and how they view themselves in relation to politics. In doing so, I am making a case that habitus and the projection from past to future experiences contributes to how someone relates to their meaning of politics. In other words, how an individual views

themselves in relation to politics is informed by social relations and levels of privilege and disadvantage. Political interest then is not simply a reflection of what is 'going on' within the political system. Instead, the process of self-assessment and recognition of interest is mediated by an agent's meaning, or interpretation, of politics and whether they feel that they have a place within, or are connected to, politics.

While Bourdieu's writing on politics has received quite limited attention within political analysis (Swartz, 2013, p. 1), there are examples of how Bourdieu's ideas have been deployed in the analysis of political engagement (McFarland and Thomas, 2006; Harrits, 2011; Lamprianou, 2013; Akram, 2014; Mascheroni, 2017; Mascheroni and Murru, 2017). Of particular note to the subject of this thesis is Harrits' (2011, p. 244) study which identified that participants held different conceptualisations of politics, with those identified to be socially privileged expressing a more 'abstract', or procedural reading of politics described as the 'ability to engage in strategic relations, struggles of power and rational discussions' (p. 244). By way of contrast, those who were identified to be socially disadvantaged held a more 'concrete' conceptualisation of politics rooted in, for example, pieces of legislation, or the 'institutions of the welfare state' (p. 247), if they held a conceptualisation of politics at all. Frequently, participants who held a more concrete notion of politics also discussed a sense of being 'outsiders' within the political system (p. 248). Harrits' work demonstrates that people can conceptualise politics in different ways and that habitus helps us to appreciate why some people may be more inclined to participate than others. This thesis attempts to progress Harrits' findings and consider specifically how individuals' meaning of politics may influence their assessment of their interest in politics.

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu (1992) discusses the links and associations between power, language, and politics. Central to this work is Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power, described as the capacity to assign the labels and classifications which are used collectively to interpret the social world. These labels and classifications are the basis of social 'inclusion and exclusion' (Swartz, 2013, p. 39) in that they influence the level of capital, or resources an agent can access. In other words, these labels reflect judgements that are made about you as individual and affect your social position which then can influence your access to resources. For those who are excluded, the assignment of this categorisation, or label, forms a type of violence (known as *symbolic violence*). Bourdieu identifies that agents may accept this exclusion as legitimate, or justified, and can exclude themselves and not 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63), in other words, people may choose not to pursue particular courses or directions in life. Such acceptance of this exclusion is classed by Bourdieu as *misrecognition* (Bourdieu, 1992; Deer, 2008, p. 121). As summarised by Yang:

> *[p]eople who are inherently disadvantaged in a particular field would naturally adjust their aspirations…and very often turn to self-elimination without consciously assessing the real chances of success* (2014, p. 1527).

To Bourdieu (1992, 2005), politics is characterised as something that is accessed, rather than built or constructed, by citizens (for Bourdieu did discuss politics in terms of the political system). There is a tendency for citizens to delegate their 'power to their representatives' (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 173) and representatives then 'manifest', or construct, and express the interests of the group (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 59–61). To Bourdieu, those who are dissatisfied with this process of representation are likely to

have few options other than to withdraw from institutional politics. Apoliticism is thus a ‘protest against the monopoly of politicians’ (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 175) and political ‘indifference is only a manifestation of impotence’ (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 407).

To bring this back to the study of political interest, my point is that there is the potential for people to associate certain representations or feelings with the word ‘politics’ which may mean that individuals can be more or less inclined to identify that they have a ‘right’ to be interested in politics. Therefore, if the individual experiences the in-the-moment state of being interested in relation to politics and if they perceive that politics is ‘not for them’, they may not actively assess themselves to be interested in politics. Bourdieu’s analysis of political (dis)engagement is concerned with identifying how shared ideas, or a dominant discourse, about what politics ‘is’ can lead some people to ‘exclude’ themselves from the political system (Bourdieu, 1992, 2010). Bourdieu is not so much concerned with identifying the character of discourses but instead focuses on the effects of these discourses (Sayer, 2017) on the way in which people interact with others. In using Bourdieu within the theoretical framework, I am noting that exploring individuals’ meaning of politics and their relationship with this meaning can capture underlying power relations. As noted by Steans (2021, p. 7), exploring personal meanings can still represent the ‘structural, often invisible forces that shape lived experience’.

Bourdieu’s critique of opinion polls offers a compelling example of the way in which political (dis)engagement is a product of how individuals position themselves, or relate to the ideas, or discourses, of politics. Bourdieu (2010) identifies that women and those

who report lower levels of formal education are more likely to state that they ‘don’t know’ when asked to express a political opinion. Bourdieu argues that this finding cannot be explained with recourse to differential levels of ‘theoretical and practical knowledge’ but is attributed to the a ‘sense of being entitled’ (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 410) to have the ‘right’ to engage in politics, or to have an opinion. This explanation could be linked to ‘who’ tends to recognise or assess their political interest, as has been considered within the literature review. I would extend this analysis to note that the reported sense of entitlement is an example of the way that individuals relate to their meaning, or interpretation, of politics. However, there may or may not be conscious awareness of this sense of entitlement. As identified by Wacquant (2005, p. 19), Bourdieu is concerned that analysis of political action must consider ‘not only institutions…but also dispositions’.

Exploring what it is to belong allows us to develop further Bourdieu’s argument that some people feel entitled to participate in politics whereas others do not. To belong somewhere is to feel a sense of acceptance, of fitting in with the wider context. Yuval-Davis (2006; 2007) has discussed the idea of belonging with reference to the nation state and citizenship and the way in which the ‘politics of belonging’ constructs boundaries which can include or exclude, noting the intersectionality of such exclusion. While the focus of this thesis is not on conceptualisations of citizenship, thinking about belonging adds flesh to the contribution of Bourdieu’s habitus to help us to understand how someone can perceive a sense of belonging within their meaning of politics and how this can inform the self-assessment of political interest.

The concept of belonging progresses our understanding of how an individual may relate to their meaning of politics. Belonging offers a way to describe how an individual positions themselves to their meaning of politics – whether or not they feel included within their meaning of politics. Belonging is a sense of a connection or attachment to something. In the words of Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 197), belonging is 'about feeling 'at home'' and can be self-identified or identified by others and is not fixed. There are both cognitive and emotional dimensions to perceived belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202). In the literature review, I argued that political interest should not be viewed to be an identity as it was difficult to appreciate how the self-assessment of interest assists people to interpret the world. However, habitus, and the accumulation of resources, or capital it enables, helps us to appreciate how some people may feel like a 'fish in water' and have a sense of the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 67–69; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 98–100). In other words, some people's social position as mediated via habitus can mean that they feel more comfortable with politics – that they feel they would be 'accepted' within the political realm. Puwar (2004 p. 178, fn 8) positions Bourdieu as 'a theorist who is able to offer us sense of how those at the margins are made to feel odd, inadequate, stupid, lacking'. My point here is that Bourdieu can assist us in appreciating why some people assess themselves as interested and others do not. In other words, why some people feel able to claim interest and others do not.

Within this project, I suggest that political interest emerges from the way in which people associate with their meaning of politics. In a move away from Bourdieu's work, rather than suggesting that there is a dominant discourse of politics to which people align, I am suggesting that there are multiple meanings, and different accounts, of

politics. Bourdieu's writings on politics are based on the interactions between citizens and the political system. However, the exploration of political (dis)engagement can be affected by a disconnect between the researcher and participants' accounts of politics (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007). A more developed discussion of the interpretations, or meanings of politics, is explored in chapter four. While people may hold different meanings of politics, I suggest that people are likely to perceive a sense, or lack, of belonging within their meaning of politics. To apply Akram's developed account of agency, there can be both unconscious elements to the way that people relate to, or position themselves towards politics, but there may also be reflexivity as an individual reflects on their meaning of politics. It is Akram's internal political conversation that the chapter turns to next.

Political interest and the internal political conversation

Akram's (2019) concept of the internal political conversation explores the ongoing deliberations and conversations that people have internally, or the discussions people have within their heads, in relation to politics. These conversations involve 'an interaction of thought or communication' (p. 83) and may not reflect external conversations on a topic. Akram develops Archer's (2003) exploration of the internal conversation by arguing that Archer places too much of an emphasis on the purposive intentions of agents. Akram (2019, pp. 81–86) argues that Archer views agents to be goal-driven with internal conversations directed to the rational pursuit of these goals. Akram's internal political conversation is a broader conceptualisation and involves individuals reflecting on and making sense of their own political behaviour and thoughts and feelings on politics. To Akram (2019, p. 84), internal conversations are 'subject to breaks, interruptions and meanderings that are not strictly attuned to

achieving goals' and can also include an emotional dimension and elements of the unconscious.

The conceptual difference within the internal political conversation lies in Akram's (2019, p. 76) argument that Archer 'overplays agential reflexivity in the internal conversation, but downplays the unconscious dimension of the internal conversation'. To Akram (2013, 2019, pp. 43–45; Akram and Hogan, 2015), there is an unacknowledged pre-social quality to Archer's internal conversation which positions conscious deliberation as being prior to all social action, a position difficult to maintain given the routine of day-to-day living. The key distinction in Akram's development of the internal political conversation is that there is the potential for the unconscious conditioning of habitus to influence deliberations within the internal political conversation. In other words, habitus may steer the internal political conversation in particular ways. This is not to deny the capacity to be reflexive, there is the potential for reflexivity, but Akram (2019, p. 82) recognises that the deliberations within our internal political conversations can be influenced by habitus and the wider 'structural context'. An upshot to this is that there will be a potential assortment of the unconscious and reflexivity within the internal political conversation. A novel scenario may require reflexivity which may not be demonstrated when dealing with the everyday mundane details of life (Akram and Hogan, 2015; Akram, 2019).

The introduction of the concept of the internal political conversation to the theoretical framework both assists this study's understanding of political interest but also complicates it at the same time. It has been proposed that people can hold different meanings of politics and that political interest is a product of the way someone

associates with their meaning of politics. Introducing habitus to the theoretical framework highlights that there may be an unconscious element to this association. As in Bourdieu's discussion of political participation, there is the potential that people have internalised the idea that politics is not 'for them', that politics is a distant entity in which there is little purpose engaging. On the flip side, there is also the potential for someone to identify that politics is something that they 'do' and have never questioned whether they have a 'right' to engage with politics. Habitus opens up the potential for the relationship someone has with their meaning of politics to go unquestioned and to be assumed to be a 'natural' state of affairs. By way of contrast, the internal political conversation opens up scope for an individual to question and challenge how they relate to their meaning of politics.

The deliberations within the internal political conversation hold the potential that both the relationship people have with their meaning of politics, or their meaning of politics itself, are subject to change. For example, greater exposure to political information through social media has the potential to lead a previously uninterested individual to begin to question whether they are interested in politics. As a further example, efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic led to far-reaching restrictions which may have increased individuals' awareness of the effects of political decisions on their lives. The result of this internal political conversation may be that they identify that they are interested in politics. Furthermore, an individual's internal ruminations may lead to a shift in terms of the meaning of politics. For example, someone may identify politics solely by the actions of the Government and members of parliament. However, they may find that they receive a service from a local organisation which is subject to local authority funding cuts. Experiencing the effects of political decisions on a local level

may then precipitate a change in the meaning of politics to the individual – how politics is interpreted and perceived. The internal political conversation opens up space for the individual to contemplate and revise what they think about politics and their relationship with politics. A similar point is made by Akram (2019, p. 68) who calls on the work of Marsh (1971) to challenge the idea of political socialisation being a process that occurs between adolescence to young adulthood. Instead, Akram and Marsh each argue that there is the potential for political socialisation to be ongoing, people may find themselves in changed circumstances which may then lead them to learn more about politics and results in a transformation of their internal political conversation. Therefore, the internal political conversation allows us to account for change within people's self-assessed political interest.

Incorporating the internal political conversation within the theoretical framework does not serve to pitch the effects of habitus against reflexivity. Following Akram, this thesis puts forward a more nuanced approach in which the deliberations of the internal political conversation will be subject to the effects of habitus. While an individual may start to actively consider their relationship with their meaning of politics, these considerations may still be subject to habitus. In other words, there will be a tendency for the way people relate to politics to still be affected by the 'feedback' of habitus linking previous to current perceptions and experiences. For example, someone may have joined a new workplace where politics is frequently discussed which has increased their 'exposure' to politics. While this individual may find the topics of conversation engaging and start to identify that they find these topics absorbing within their internal political conversation, they may not feel comfortable with the idea of having a connection, or stake in politics, and so may not assess an interest in politics.

This hesitancy is informed by habitus and their previous experiences and rejection of politics still have an influence on how the individual sees themselves in the present. The internal political conversation cannot be directly observed but will influence political engagement (Akram, 2019). Furthermore, the deliberations within our internal political conversation may not match our external political behaviour. Consequently, there may be a disparity between our internal deliberations about politics and whether someone expresses an interest in politics. The theoretical framework within this study provides a starting point which sensitises us to consider what may influence someone to recognise their political interest. The analytical framework discussed in chapter seven builds on this starting point to outline the theoretical and practical considerations which should inform the future study of political interest.

It is important to note at this stage that I am not saying that people who say that they are uninterested in politics are, in fact, interested. As discussed previously, Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition is centred on the effects of symbolic power which masks the effects of power-relations and individualises the perceived 'failings' of the individual. The concept of misrecognition has been criticised as it has been argued to result in the researcher presupposing that they have access to a greater depth of knowledge than the participant (Jenkins, 1992, p. 95-97). To apply such criticism to this thesis could lead to my argument being misinterpreted to suggest that people are unaware of their 'true' level of interest in politics and are more interested than they think. Such misrecognition has been argued to position the agent as being unaware of their own interests (Jenkins, 1992). Misrecognition has been noted by Akram et al. (2015, p. 352) to be positioned similarly to the concept of false consciousness, yet misrecognition 'works at a deeper level'. To Hay (1997, p. 48), the concept of false

consciousness is highly problematic, the agent is positioned as an ‘ideological dupe’. Within such a reading of false consciousness, it is not so much that the actions of the disempowered to improve their lot are frustrated, but rather that the disempowered do not know their lot in the first place. Consequently, theories built on these contentions are argued to disempower further those they seek to emancipate.

To claim that people’s political interest is greater than they identify is difficult to justify methodologically and ultimately comes down to a disagreement between the researcher and participant. Instead, the focus of the study is on the factors that can influence someone to assess that they are interested in politics, rooting political interest in the relationship that the individual has with their meaning of politics. This focus is reflected in the three research questions structuring this project which consider: 1. how we understand political interest, 2. the meanings of politics that people hold, and 3. how these meanings of politics influence individuals’ self-assessment of their interest. As Akram et al. (2015, pp. 352–356) identify, there is a difference between the researcher challenging the veracity of individuals’ preferences and the examination of the way in which these preferences are formed. To examine the way in which preferences are formed does not suggest that these preferences are ‘wrong’ but aims to consider what has influenced the development of these preferences (Akram, Emerson and Marsh, 2015) and that is precisely the intention of this thesis.

Conclusion

A key contention of this project is that to understand political interest, it is necessary to understand how someone relates to their meaning of politics. The theoretical

framework informing this thesis establishes that the assessment of political interest is an agential process. Applying Akram's developed account of agency, in particular the under-developed elements of the unconscious, and the internal political conversation, encourages us to consider what may influence the individual's assessment of their interest. Bourdieu's concept of habitus encourages us to consider how this self-assessment may be informed by the individual's sense of what politics 'is' and their previous experience of politics. People may or may not be aware of the way in which the relationship they have with their meaning of politics can inform their political interest. The internal political conversation enables us to account for the deliberations which may inform the self-assessment of interest but also considers how these interior discussions may be rooted within wider societal power-relations which may, or may not, be acknowledged by the individual.

Bourdieu's writing on political participation highlights the idea that some people may self-exclude themselves from political processes due to their beliefs about politics and whether they perceive that they comply with what is 'required' to be interested in politics. It may be that some people experience in the moment interest but do not self-assess themselves to be interested. This is not to say that these people are, in fact, interested, but directs us to explore what may have led individuals to assess themselves to be interested. Therefore, it is necessary for this thesis to establish whether people do hold different meanings of politics, as well as how these meanings of politics may inform the assessment of their political interest. The next chapter will build on the theoretical framework to outline the research methods that will be used to do this.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter outlines the research design and associated methods which informed this thesis. A Q-study was conducted to identify participants' meanings of politics and semi-structured interviews were used to examine participants' relationship with politics. First, the research questions which structure this thesis are outlined. From here, a developed introduction to Q-methodology is supplied which provides a foundation on which to explore how this method was administered within my study, as well as developing a defence of the approach. Following from the focus on Q-methodology, the chapter then progresses to discuss the use of semi-structured interviews. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of the project's ethical considerations and limitations.

Research questions

The literature review identified that there is a greater tendency for some groups to express higher levels of interest in politics – namely men, those who are older, and people with higher levels of formal education. It was also suggested that, as interest must always be directed towards an object, it may be the case that people's conceptualisation of politics influences the extent to which they acknowledge that they have an interest in politics.

As has been explored in chapter two which detailed the theoretical framework, the self-assessment of an interest in politics is considered within this project to be an agential process. The decision to identify oneself as being interested in politics has

been suggested to be a product of the meaning of politics that someone holds, and also how they relate to this meaning of politics. Akram's internal political conversation and the unconscious, as mediated through Bourdieu's concept of habitus, allow us to explore how people can relate to their meaning of politics.

At the centre of this project is the suggestion that politics can mean different things to different people. It is the intention of this project to explore this proposition and how the meaning of politics could influence the propensity of the individual to identify as being politically interested.

The project therefore aims to respond to the following research questions:

1. How can we understand political interest?
2. What types of meanings do people hold about politics?
3. To what extent do individuals' meaning of politics influence the self-assessment of their interest?

This research project will be built on abductive logic, which sits in contrast to deductive and inductive logic. Research structured by deductive logic is guided by a formal theory and hypotheses which are tested through the collection of data (Blaikie, 2007, pp. 71–79; Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 38–41). By way of contrast, inductive logic analyses data in order to generate theories which describe a phenomenon. Research which is built on the logic of abduction starts with an observation of the unexpected (Blaikie, 2007, pp. 89–91). From this observation, a theory is developed based on the researcher's initial thoughts (Brown and Robyn, 2004) as to '*why* [italics in the original]

the observed phenomenon is manifesting itself in this particular way' (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 39). Data are then collected in order to explore the researcher's initial thoughts, with these observations framed as 'clues' which are developed into an explanation (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 39). Blaikie (2009, p. 89) identifies that there are two stages to an abductive approach, the first is the description of 'activities' which are to be explained and the second is to develop categories and concepts to progress understanding of the phenomenon to be explained.

Within this project, the literature review unearthed the proposal that people hold different meanings of politics and these meanings of politics can influence the way in which people assess their political interest. The theoretical framework suggests that people may relate, or position themselves, in response to their meaning of politics. However, at this initial stage, it is unclear the process by which the meaning of politics may influence the assessment of political interest. The study has avoided developing formal hypotheses to be tested. Abduction is not centred on a definitive 'test' of theory, rather it is a more open and cyclical approach in which theories, or explanations for observations, are developed and then refined with reference to data (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). Analysing data collected via this research design has informed the refinement of the theory and has sought to understand the processes by which an individual's meaning of politics may affect their assessed level of political interest. It is not possible to draw direct causal links between individuals' accounts of politics and the recognition of interest. What will be demonstrated is whether there is an association, or pattern, between the meaning of politics and participants' assessment of their interest. Following the abductive approach, any findings drawn from the data will remain uncertain and open to further refinement.

The emphasis placed on the meanings and interpretations that people have of politics roots the project within a moderate social constructionist approach, a term used by Elder-Vass (2012, pp. 6-8) to distinguish between a moderate approach and a more radical form of social constructionism which denies a separation between the world we inhabit and what we think of it. Instead, while knowledge is identified to be the production of 'the collective generation and transmission of meaning' (Blaikie, 2007, p. 22), the social world is not interpreted to be comprised solely of people's interpretations and thoughts. Identifying the range of meanings and accounts that are directed to politics, along with considering how people relate to these meanings, allows us to explore such generation and transmission. Q-methodology will provide a unique way in which to explore the variety of meanings directed towards politics.

There are examples of Q-studies which have been conducted in political analysis, however, up to now, Q-methodology has not been applied to explore people's conceptualisation of politics. Q-methodology has been used to study how people conceptualise, variously: citizenship and democracy (Dryzek and Berejikian, 1993; Andersen, Schulze and Seppel, 2018), citizenship and patriotism (Theiss-Morse et al., 1991), perceptions of politicians (Lobinger and Brantner, 2016), and women's political representation (Coffé, 2012). The literature review also discussed Riddle's (2016) exploration of the multi-dimensionality of political interest which applied Q-methodology. In order to set out how Q-methodology was used within this study, the chapter will proceed to summarise first the distinctiveness of Q-methodology, while also examining the suitability of this approach for the project.

Q-methodology and subjectivity

Briefly, Q-methodology gives scope to participants to express their subjectivity by asking them to sort and rank a series of statements on a particular topic (this ranking is known as a Q-sort). Participants' rankings are then compared (or correlated statistically) with one another in order to identify shared accounts of a particular phenomenon. Through the process of correlation, a Q-sort is identified to be more or less like the other Q-sorts. Those Q-sorts which are seen to be similar to one another are identified to be a factor, or a specific viewpoint or account. The researcher then interprets these accounts and identifies areas of commonality and difference across the factors. As such, Q-methodology provides a sense of structure to the study of people's interpretation and preferences directed to a particular topic (Akhtar-Danesh, Baumann and Cordingley, 2008; Sneegas, 2020).

Q-methodology offers a systematic way to explore subjectivity or, alternatively, the meanings and accounts that are expressed towards a particular topic (Brown, 1993). It is this juxtaposition of the systematic and subjective which is at the heart of the distinctiveness of the approach, in particular, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods (Stenner, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative methods are not just distinguished in terms of whether they have a 'basis in words and…numbers' (Ramlo, 2015, p. 74). Instead, research in the qualitative vein is usually focused on capturing the depth of participants' experiences, data collection is usually focused on methods that allow the participant space to explore the themes that are relevant to them. By way of contrast, quantitative approaches are more concerned with the measurement of a phenomenon. Within Q-methodology, these two approaches are joined together. The distinctiveness of Q-methodology is demonstrated by Stenner

and Stainton Rogers' (2004, p. 99) positioning of Q-methodology as a hybrid of qualitative and quantitative methods, as captured in the 'monstrous new word', qualiquantological. While undeniably an awkward term, this description does help to clarify some of the confusion that arises through describing Q-methodology as a mixed-method. Ramlo and Newman (2011) position Q-methodology on a continuum of qualitative and quantitative methods. This notion of a continuum argues that most research should not be considered to be either strictly quantitative or qualitative and is likely to be comprised of elements of both. However, Stenner (2011) criticises the idea of a continuum as this is suggested to maintain a dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is seen to evoke the idea that the qualitative and quantitative elements within Q-methodology can potentially be separated and limited to the addition of 'a qualitative dimension to a quantitative study or vice versa' (Stenner and Stainton Rogers, 2004, p. 101; Stenner, 2011). Instead, the qualitative and quantitative are integrated.

While using statistical techniques, Q-methodology is often positioned as distinct from quantitative methods. The use of quantitative methods has been referred to as R-methodology (Brown, 1980, p. 9; Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 179; Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 10–14). In the statistical techniques of R-methodology, factor analysis is carried out on variables, or in Watts and Stenner's (2012, p. 12) words, 'specific *bits* [italics in the original] of people'. Comparisons are made based on discrete measurements rather than on the respondents' complete responses. However, in Q-methodology, the 'whole' response of the person is compared with other participants. In this sense, the participants are compared with each other rather than their responses to particular questions, as is the case in R-methodology. The aim of R-

methodology is to measure a sample of the population in order to make inferences to a wider population. This aim of generalisation is not shared by Q-methodology, instead, the emphasis is to identify the scope of the range of accounts that are directed to a particular topic (Brown, 1980, p. 67). The emphasis is placed on ensuring a mixed group of participants who are likely to have diverse opinions of the subject under study.

Arguably, Q-methodology does not impose the researcher's interpretations on the participant (Cross, 2004, pp. 211–212; Barker, 2008, p. 918), however this will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. Q-methodology is seen to provide a means by which participants are able to construct and express their subjectivity. This quality is identified to set the stage for 'marginalised' (Brown, 2006), or hidden, meanings, those that are not widely recognised in mainstream analysis, or may not be clearly articulated, to be discovered (Baker, Thompson and Mannion, 2006; Capdevila and Lazard, 2008; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008, p. 487; Burke, 2015). The study is focused on the exploration of different meanings of politics. As will be discussed in chapter four, the meaning of politics has often been studied in relation to issues that are viewed to be 'political', or via top-of-mind associations with the word politics. By way of contrast, Q-methodology is an innovative approach which can unveil hidden interpretations or meanings of politics which may be missed through the use of other methods such as participant interviews and thus provides a suitable approach for this study. As will be explored later in the chapter, Q-methodology has the ability to reveal holistic accounts which, hitherto, may not have been identified.

This brief description of Q-methodology has highlighted its role in capturing subjectivity directed towards a topic. However, there can be a lack of clarity as to what is meant

by subjectivity within Q-studies (Wolf, 2009). At this early stage of the chapter, it is helpful to explore debates around subjectivity as it clarifies the character of Q-methodology findings. Broadly, there are two camps in terms of what is being 'done' within a Q-study (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990; Wolf, 2009). In other words, there are two accounts of what Q-methodology captures. Some identify that Q-methodology surfaces the individual's self-referential viewpoint (Brown, 1980, pp. 4–5), namely that Q-methodology identifies the individual's own interpretation of the subject matter. The other account suggests that Q-methodology identifies areas of common understanding (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990) or 'shared viewpoints, bodies of knowledge or discourse' (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 42). To put it another way, does Q-methodology capture individuals' interpretations, or are these interpretations rooted in collective understandings of a topic? The distinction is made clearer by considering Wolf's (2009, p. 21) assertion that the individualistic view of subjectivity sees participants as projecting, or 'put[ting] meaning upon the statements', whereby the social constructionist view sees participants 'drawing meaning' from the statements in order to construct their own account of the subject. This subtle difference indicates a distinction as to whether the meaning is 'owned' by the individual or whether the meaning resides in wider social relations.

Subjectivity within Q-methodology has been understood as a form of individualised behaviour which comes into being through interaction with an object (Brown, 1980). To clarify this understanding of subjectivity, Q-methodology does not facilitate an individual to communicate pre-existing thoughts in their head, rather Q-methodology captures how the individual responds to the topic under study in real time. By way of contrast, some applications of Q-methodology have been built on a social

constructionist approach (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990) in which subjectivity is a 'process not an outcome or state' (Wolf, 2009, p. 10). This process identifies that the ranking of statements within Q-methodology equates to the construction of an account of a topic. These accounts are forged in relation to others' interpretation of the subject and so these meanings are collective in scope. The distinction between an individualised, or collective, approach demonstrates that within Q-methodology there can be different conceptualisations of what is being studied, or, to put it another way, the unit of analysis. It is either the individual's viewpoint or the identification of 'already-out-there themes', whose construction are not necessarily dependent on the direct involvement of the individual (Wolf, 2009, p. 8). Wolf (2009, p. 8) identifies a further 'in between' position through noting that some studies emphasise the way in which 'people's attitudes align with discourses', or collective meanings. Nevertheless, Wolf highlights that these studies ultimately focus analysis on either individual attitudes or collective meanings.

As previously noted, Q-methodology involves the ranking of a set of statements. Wolf's (2009, p. 26) position is that when a participant is ranking these statements, they are both 'imposing' and 'drawing' meaning from the statements. Therefore, it is possible for the two seemingly different approaches to subjectivity within Q-methodology to be aligned. To Wolf, the participant completing a Q-sort is rooted in the social, in other words they do not just happen upon their viewpoints but these views are a product of their experiences. Furthermore, Wolf (2009, p. 22) argues that within a social constructionist reading of Q-methodology, there remains a sense that a Q-sort is undertaken based on the preferences of the participant and therefore, the Q-sort remains an 'expression of a person'. Reflecting on the work of Stenner (2009),

subjectivity is ‘constructing meaning done by a person’ (Wolf, 2009, p. 25). In showing how an individualised view of subjectivity and a social constructionist reading of subjectivity in Q-methodology can be brought together, Wolf highlights the interplay between the individual and the social world around them. This project takes a moderate social constructionist approach. Q-methodology is used to identify the range of meanings of politics which are in circulation and this project views that it is the individual that is ‘*fusing* and *adopting*’ [italics in the original] (Wolf, 2009, p. 25) these meanings which emerge within their Q-sort.

Calling upon Wolf’s argument of the compatibility between the individualistic and social constructionist applications of Q-methodology demonstrates how individuals’ accounts can be influenced by their experience of social relations. The interaction between the individual and the social is at the centre of the theoretical framework that informs this study. Akram’s (2019) account of agency is positioned as a challenge to Archer’s (2003) conceptualisation of agency that is pre-social, or prior to the social structure. As explored in chapter two, there are multiple elements which can inform an individual’s (in)action. There is scope for reflexivity within the internal political conversation but there is the potential for this reflexivity to be informed by the ‘generative principle’ (Maton, 2008, pp. 51–55) of habitus. Furthermore, the unconscious, via Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ (Wacquant, 1989, p. 50) (in particular, habitus), can also influence how someone relates to their meaning of politics. The key point here is that the study proposes that there are collective meanings of politics but that, as noted by Wolf, it is the individual who ‘draws’ and ‘imposes’ meaning from the statements used in a Q-study. Similarly, the individual positions themselves in relation

to their meaning of politics when assessing their political interest. This positioning is not pre-social, but rather is rooted within social relations.

Describing the steps in a Q-study

Following the rationale for the application of Q-methodology within this project, this chapter can now progress to consider the different steps that make up a Q-study. A glossary of terms used within Q-methodology has been included in appendix 1. These steps include:

1. developing the Q-set (the groups of statements which participants sort),
2. recruiting participants and administering the Q-sorts, and
3. analysis and interpretation

Developing the Q-set

The Q-set refers to a series of statements which are sorted by participants and acts as a vehicle for them to express the meanings and interpretations directed towards a topic (Watts and Stenner, 2005; Stenner, Watts and Worrell, 2017). The Q-set is sampled from the concourse. Within Q-methodology, the concourse refers to the range of views or opinions that can be expressed on a topic and so represents the breadth of interpretations that can be made on a particular subject (Brown, 1980; Watts and Stenner, 2012; McKeown and Thomas, 2013). The concourse is theoretically limitless. In Wolf's terms, it is 'emergent in the sense that there is nothing there, apart from potential, until a situation is brought to mind' (2009, p. 17).

Despite the emergent quality of the concourse, Stainton Rogers (1995, p. 180) identifies that there is ‘finite diversity’ and consequently there will not be a ‘chaotic proliferation’ in the interpretations and meanings that people hold. Rather, it can be expected that ‘several…ordered patternings of cultural understanding’ (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 180) will be found.

The first step in generating a Q-set (or the statements to be sorted by participants) is to establish the concourse in relation to the topic of study. There is not a prescriptive technique to create the concourse and the literature recommends that a variety of approaches are used, including variously: consulting the academic literature, conducting interviews and focus groups with people whose viewpoint is of interest, and more informal approaches such as noting down opinions expressed in the media, overheard in conversation, or seen in social media (Akhtar-Danesh, Baumann and Cordingley, 2008, p. 762; Watts and Stenner, 2012). The aim is to generate a longlist of statements (or opinions directed to the topic in question) that are then reduced into a set of statements which participants rank.

When developing a Q-set, the researcher has to decide whether to use a structured or an unstructured Q-set (Brown, 1980, pp. 28–29; Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 59–60; McKeown and Thomas, 2013). Within a structured Q-set, themes within the concourse are identified and statements are grouped according to these themes. The aim is to create a balanced Q-set which has adequate coverage across the range of identified themes. Each theme should encompass as much variety within the statements as possible. In other words, each theme should capture a range of viewpoints (Brown, 1980). It is suggested that the generation of themes should be

informed by theory and the use of a structured Q-set has been suggested to be a form of theory testing (Ramlo and Newman, 2011; McKeown and Thomas, 2013). By way of contrast, an unstructured Q-set and the related lack of restrictions placed on the selection of statements has been linked to an inductive approach and the generation of theory (Ramlo and Newman, 2011; McKeown and Thomas, 2013). The abductive approach seeks to cycle between theoretical propositions and data to refine and develop theory (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). As will be detailed in chapter four, a structured Q-set was developed. However, the aim in developing the Q-set was not to 'test' theory but develop and refine an appreciation for the different elements which comprise the meaning of politics.

Within this project, a number of methods were employed to understand the boundaries, and content, of the concourse concerning the meaning of politics. Given the emergent character of the concourse (Wolf, 2009) these methods only produce a snapshot of the concourse at a particular time. As a first step, the academic literature was consulted. This included literature which considered the theoretical definitions of politics, along with empirical studies of how people define and relate to politics, including those focused on political (dis)engagement. While this study of the literature was not a systematic review, each 'meaning' of politics was noted down to produce an initial longlist of statements (appendix 11).

This list was then supplemented with reference to Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) data (Winters and Carvalho, 2011; Carvalho and Winters, 2015, 2016; Carvalho, Winters and Oliver, 2017, 2019). The QESB is a longitudinal study in which group and individual interviews have been conducted to coincide with three previous

General Elections in the UK (those held in 2010, 2015 and 2017), in addition to the referenda in 2014 concerning Scottish independence and 2016 regarding the UK's membership of the European Union. Within the QESB, participants are asked to discuss their thoughts about the campaign and, more generally, the political system. Some waves of the QESB (2010, 2015 and 2017 General Election waves) feature both pre- and post-campaign group interviews, as well as some individual interviews. The Scottish referendum wave was comprised of group interviews after the campaign and the EU referendum wave was made up of individual interviews. The QESB transcripts (summarised in figure 2) are readily available online and so proved an easily accessible resource for this project. The number of participants interviewed in each wave has been listed, other than for 2015 and 2017 where these data are unavailable.

Figure 2 QESB data breakdown

Wave	Total interviews completed (n = number of participants)
2010 General Election	14 Group interviews n = 71
2015 General Election	22 Group interviews 1 Interview
2017 General Election	23 Group interviews (6 online) 7 Interviews (2 online)
2014 Scottish referendum	5 Group interviews n = 27
2016 EU referendum	15 Individual interviews n = 15

QESB interviews ask participants broad questions and covered their thoughts about electoral politics and voting intentions, in addition to the conduct of campaigns and perceptions of leaders. An obvious limitation of employing these data within my project is that the interviews focused on electoral politics only. Nevertheless, QESB proved a relevant data source for the construction of the concourse as participants' thoughts

and feelings about electoral politics are captured in their own words. A further limitation of QESB data is the recruitment of participants through convenience sampling (Blaikie, 2009, p. 177). Therefore, it may be reasonable to expect that participants were motivated to join the interviews by a likely pre-existing interest and engagement in politics which may limit the variety of experiences and opinions captured within the data. Nevertheless, QESB data still contained participants discussing politics across several timepoints and so made a useful contribution to the generation of the concourse.

Interviews with community organisations

The Q-set was also informed by holding face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with those who either worked or volunteered with community organisations. Here, community organisations were defined broadly as those groups who work towards improving the wider community (as defined by the group) and included organisations working to address environmental concerns, community cohesion, and equality, diversity, and inclusion. Bang's (2009) concept of the Everyday Maker suggests that there has been a shift in the way in which people participate in politics. Specifically, there is a greater tendency for people to form their own opportunities to engage with politics. Involvement with these community organisations could be identified to be examples of political engagement that lie 'outside' of the political system.

Contact details for community organisations were initially gathered from online resources and an invitation to participate was emailed out to a selection of groups. The interviews were carried out face-to-face (with the exception of one participant who preferred to be interviewed by telephone) and so only organisations based in

Birmingham were contacted. A purposive sample (Blaikie, 2009, p. 178) was used and the aim was to invite a range of organisations to participate in an interview. During the interview, participants were asked to outline the activities of their community organisation and whether these were seen to be political. Participants were also asked how they define politics. Furthermore, questions were posed to capture participants' perspectives on what could facilitate or obstruct people's involvement with their organisation. Participants were also invited to reflect on their own political engagement. The interview schedule which informed these interviews has been included in appendix 6. In total, nine interviews were conducted with eight community organisations between May and July 2019. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes with the shortest interview 28 minutes and the longest interview 56 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed in full and sent back to participants to offer them the opportunity to clarify or amend any points raised in the interview. Thematic coding (Braun et al., 2018) of both the QESB and the community organisations transcripts was undertaken using the NVivo 12 software package (*QSR International Pty Ltd.*, 2020). A sample of ten transcripts across the five waves of the QESB data and four transcripts of the community organisation interviews were coded to develop an initial coding frame. A reiterative process of coding was used to refine the coding frames for the QESB data and community organisation interviews. These coding frames were then applied to all transcripts and have been included in appendices 8 and 9 respectively.

Recruiting participants and administering the Q-sort

When this project was devised originally, it was intended that I would meet all participants and administer the Q-sorts face-to-face. Following the completion of a Q-sort, I would then interview the participant. However, the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the second stage of data collection, the administration of Q-sorts, which was originally intended to start in April-May 2020. The introduction of social distancing measures meant that I had to adjust vastly how I would collect data and administer the Q-sorts. Rather than meeting participants face-to-face, the Q-sorts were administered online. Interviews were then conducted via telephone, with one participant preferring to be interviewed via video conference technology. More detail about the online administration of the Q-sorts, in addition to the wider implications for the study, will be detailed later in the chapter. However, the shift to online methods is important context when discussing the recruitment of participants.

As has already been stated, Q-methodology is concerned with identifying the breadth, or the scope of accounts related to a particular topic. Q-methodology does not aim to make generalisations about how prevalent a particular account is to a wider population (Brown, 1980, p. 67; Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 73–74). Consequently, this frees a Q-study from having to recruit a representative sample of participants. Instead, participants – known in Q-methodology parlance as the P-set – should be recruited through purposive sampling (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 182; Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 70–71). The aim is to include a range of people who could be reasonably expected to hold different views in order to increase the prospect of previously concealed meanings and accounts being uncovered.

A purposive sampling technique (Blaikie, 2009, p. 178) was used by asking community organisations to distribute an invitation to participate in the study to their contact list. A potential weakness in this research design is that, similar to the QESB, participating in the study may only appeal to those who are already interested and engaged in politics. To attempt to counteract this, a range of community organisations were contacted to ask if they would consider distributing an invitation to participate. To ensure compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation, I did not receive personal contact details from these organisations. Instead, organisations were asked to distribute a link to the study, along with a brief message explaining the purpose of the study. To ensure a mixed range of participants, the link was also posted on online message boards inviting contributors to participate in the study. Some message boards do not allow invitations to participate in research studies to be posted, whereas others ask for a fee to be paid to post a link. Consequently, I was unable to contact some of the message board communities I would have liked to have targeted. Nevertheless, this approach was fruitful in increasing the number of completed Q-sorts.

In terms of the number of participants to be recruited, Brown (1980, p. 192) advises that the aim is to ensure there are enough participants to identify the range of accounts that are directed towards the subject in question. As Stainton Rogers (1995, p. 182) notes, identifying ‘the manifold of discursive diversity’ is the focus of a Q-study. While there are no stringent rules on the number of participants, the general advice is that the number of participants should be less than the number of statements which are sorted (Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 72–73). Stainton Rogers (1995, p. 182) suggests a range of about 40-50 participants which is supported by Watts and Stenner (2012,

p. 73) who propose that around 40-60 participants would be adequate but recognise that a Q-study can be completed with far fewer participants. Therefore, this study aimed to achieve 40 completed Q-sorts. Originally, it was intended that 40 post-sort interviews would also be completed. However, given the move to online methods, it was likely that there would be a loss of sample between the completion of Q-sorts and follow-up interviews. Therefore, the target number of completed interviews was revised from 40 to 20. At the end of fieldwork for this project, 38 Q-sorts were completed between May and October 2020. Nineteen post-sort interviews were completed between June and October 2020. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes, with the shortest interview 27 minutes and the longest 56 minutes. As with interviews with community organisations, all interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed in full. Transcripts were sent to participants for confirmation. While the number of achieved interviews was below the target amount, it was felt the depth of data was sufficient to allow for analysis.

The first page of the online Q-sort presented information to participants about the project and how their data would be used. Participants were asked to consent to participate by progressing to the next page. As this study focuses on political interest, it was necessary to recruit participants who were both interested and uninterested in politics. Having completed the Q-sort, participants were then asked to provide some data about themselves including: interest in politics, gender, ethnicity, age, region, household income, political engagement (measured by the activities the participant had completed over the previous twelve months based on a question posed in the British Election Study (2015)), and level of formal education. Participants who were willing to be interviewed at a later date were asked to leave their contact details.

Participants could refuse to answer any of these questions, apart from the 'political interest' question where a don't know option was provided. There was no compulsion to supply contact details to be contacted for a follow-up interview.

A limitation of the online approach was that there was less control over the sample. While strong attempts were made to ensure a mixed range of participants were recruited to the study, it was not possible to control who would see the link to the study, or who would decide to complete a Q-sort. Nevertheless, collecting socio-demographic data allowed me to monitor the profile of those who had completed a Q-sort.

Participants' demographic data are noted in appendix 13. Participants reported a high level of interest in politics (84% out of 38 participants were very or fairly interested in politics) and there was also an overrepresentation of participants who had attended higher education (87%). Over half of participants were aged 34 years or younger (57%, n=35), of these 14% of participants were aged 18-24 years. Forty-seven per cent (n= 38) of participants reported a household income of £30,000 or less and over half of participants identified as men (57%, n=37). Participants' ethnicity was collected via an open-ended question and resulted in a range of responses. Some participants reported their ethnicity as 'British', 'Scottish', 'Irish', or 'West European'. Seventy-three per cent (n= 37*)* of participants reported their ethnicity as White and 8 per cent reported their ethnicity as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British. All participants noted that they had completed some form of political activity and a range of different behaviours were reported. Voting was the most common form of participation and 92% (n= 38) reported voting in the 2019 general election. Furthermore, 82% of participants reported signing an internet petition, 68% of participants noted they had been involved in a

boycott or buycott and 26% reported that they had attended a demonstration. Despite limited control, a relatively mixed sample was achieved. However, there was an overrepresentation of participants who reported being interested in politics and participants who had experienced higher education. This was also the case for participants who were interviewed. The recruitment of participants will be discussed as a limitation of the thesis later in the chapter.

Administering the Q-sort

Easy-HtmlQ (Banasick, 2015) online software was used to administer the Q-sorts. I and three others tested the platform to ensure the clarity of the instructions. Amendments were made where necessary. Having given their consent to participate in the study, participants were provided with a set of directions which inform how the statements in the Q-set should be ranked in relation to one another (Brown, 1980, p. 196, fn 2; Baker, Thompson and Mannion, 2006; Barker, 2008, p. 920; McKeown and Thomas, 2013). Screen shots of these instructions have been included in appendix 12. Participants were asked to rank the statements according to those to which they most strongly agree or disagree (known as the conditions of instruction). As this study focused on the exploration of the different meanings of politics, the following condition of instruction was used:

> *What does politics mean to you?*
>
> *Please order the cards from those that you most strongly agree to those which you most strongly disagree.*

Here, the emphasis was on the extent to which participants agreed or disagreed with each of the statements. These instructions were available for participants to consult as they were ranking the Q-set. The phrasing of the instruction avoided defining

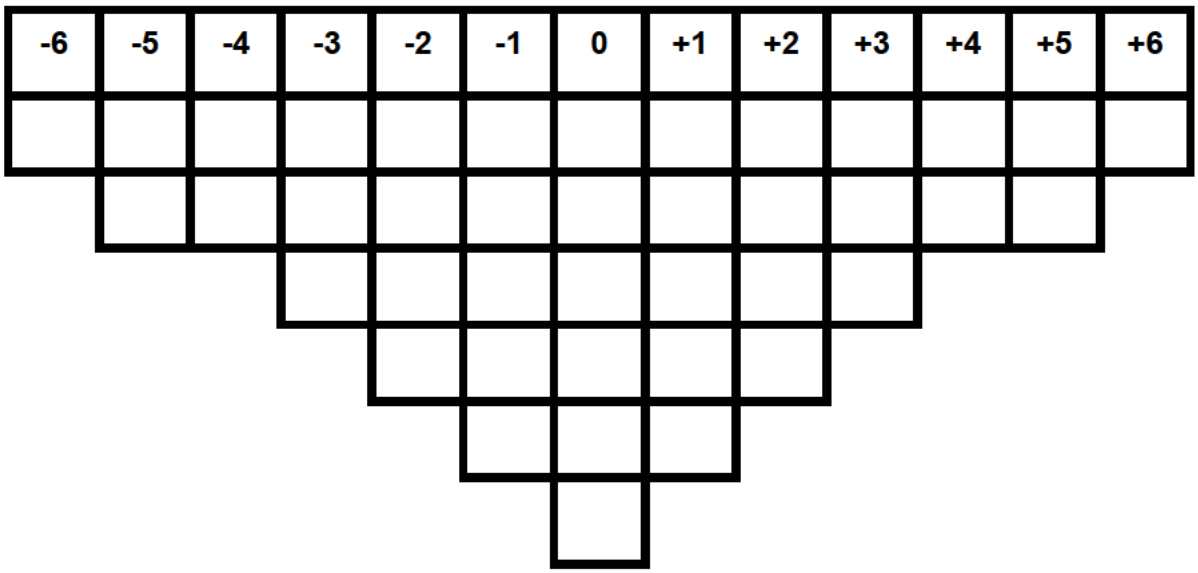
politics in a particular way and also focused participants towards their own personal interpretation of the statements. Chapter four considers the generation of the Q-set in more detail. It will be noted that an individual's meaning of politics comprises of both definition and orientation dimensions. The definition of politics refers to how an individual describes politics, whereas the orientation to politics denotes the evaluative assessments that someone makes in response to politics. This distinction will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. By including the term 'mean', the instruction encompassed both the definitional and orientation dimensions.

Following usual practice within Q-methodology, participants were asked to first read each statement shown on their computer screen and were then asked to sort the statements into three piles: statements with which they agree, disagree, and feel neutral towards (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 182; Watts and Stenner, 2012). Once participants had completed this, they then clicked onto the next screen and were provided with a grid to position their statements. The shape of the grid used can be seen in figure 3 and is structured as a quasi-normal distribution (Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 79–81). The grid runs from -6 to +6. Compared to other ways of structuring the sorting grid, this arrangement provides a shallower grid which allows for greater discernment at the two 'poles' (agree or disagree) of the grid (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 80). Within this grid there is no neutral point indicated, in other words, participants are not limited by the number of statements with which they can agree or disagree.

Participants were asked to place the statement to which they most strongly agree in the furthest column on the right (+6). Participants were then asked to position the

statement with which they most disagree in the furthest column on the left (-6). Then, participants were asked to place the statements they next most agreed / disagreed with in the columns labelled ±5. Next, the instructions asked participants to repeat this procedure, working inwards on the grid, until all statements had been positioned. Finally, participants were asked to fill in the remaining gaps with the statement to which they felt neutral towards (Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 83–84). Asking participants to complete their ranking (or Q-sort) in this way is known as a forced-choice distribution as participants are given a 'shape' which guides their sorting. Watts and Stenner (2012, p. 78) suggest that an unforced distribution, in other words where participants rank statements relative to one another without the use of a grid, places an undue burden on participants. By way of contrast, a forced-choice distribution has been argued to promote consistency and encourages participants to consider the statements to which they feel most strongly in greater depth. Having ranked the Q-set, participants were asked to provide written feedback on the statement with which they most agreed and most disagreed. As noted in the second empirical chapter (chapter five), gathering these qualitative data added greater depth to the analysis and supported the interpretation of participants' Q-sorts.

Figure 3 Forced-choice distribution used by participants. Adapted from Watts and Stenner (2012, p. 81)



While 38 Q-sorts were completed online, 37 Q-sorts were included in the final dataset. Participants had the option to leave further comments when completing their Q-sort. When reviewing these comments, it was clear that one participant had misunderstood the sorting instructions in a way that would compromise the validity of their Q-sort. Consequently, this Q-sort was not included in the analysis, however, the participant was still interviewed and their transcript was analysed. A small number of participants mentioned their frustration with their sort and noted that there was an overspill of positive statements into what was perceived to be neutral, or negative positions. Despite these concerns from participants, their comments offered reassurance that they had sorted the statements according to the instructions. Nevertheless, this does suggest that the online sorting instructions could have been improved.

Analysis and interpretation

Participants' Q-sorts (noted as the position of statements on the grid) were then downloaded and uploaded to the KenQ software platform (Banasick, 2018) to facilitate

analysis. A benefit of using KenQ software is that calculations and file downloads are completed via the internet browser, this means that no data are stored on external servers and all data remained within the university computing infrastructure. Further detail on the analytical decisions and the interpretation of the accounts identified via the Q-study are included in chapter five.

In defence of Q-methodology

The integration of qualitative and quantitative methods within Q-methodology has led the approach to be assessed according to the standards to which R-methodology pertains – standards which are rejected by the Q-methodology community. Such expectations have resulted in Q-methodology being criticised and assessed negatively against a criterion inappropriate to the aims of the approach (Brown, Danielson and van Exel, 2015). The chapter now turns to consider some of the criticisms of Q-methodology and offers a defence of the use of the approach.

Q-methodology as a systematic (and not objective) approach

The aims of Q-methodology have been variously described as ‘turning subjective statements into an objective outcome’ (Akhtar-Danesh, Baumann and Cordingley, 2008, p. 770), ‘a scientific measure of subjectivity’ (Ramlo, 2015, p. 73), or as participants’ viewpoints being made ‘objective’ via the Q-sort (Ramlo, 2016, p. 32). Equating Q-methodology with ‘objective’ research methods may lead to confusion as to its aims. Further confusion is generated if Q-methodology’s use of factor analysis is described as reducing researcher bias (Brown, 1980; Stainton Rogers, 1995; Ramlo, 2016). As will be demonstrated, rather than making claims towards objectivity, it is

more accurate to refer to Q-methodology as a ‘systematic study of subjectivity’ (Brown, 1993, p. 93).

To suggest that Q-methodology offers objectivity provides an easy opening for the approach to be criticised. This criticism is built on the claim that Q-methodology is too suggestible to the influence of the researcher, a point emphasised by Kampen and Tamás (2014, pp. 3114–3115) who argue that researcher bias is entrenched within Q-methodology. In particular, Kampen and Tamás (2014) argue that the researcher is instrumental in identifying the boundaries of the concourse and the sampling of the Q-set from the concourse. Here, the researcher directly creates the stimulus which participants rank to capture their account. The foundations of a Q-study can therefore be swayed by the researcher and, as such, Q-methodology cannot be called objective (Robbins and Krueger, 2000). As Sneegas (2020, p. 84) states, the construction of the concourse will ‘reverberate throughout each subsequent stage of the research process’. While Sneegas writes in support of Q-methodology, this quotation highlights that the researcher may direct the findings of a Q-study through emphasising, or limiting, aspects of the concourse sampled in the Q-set. This free-reign is argued to continue within the interpretation of factors, or viewpoints. However, the potential for the researcher to conduct poor quality research and unduly influence the research process is not sufficient grounds on which to discard a research method. Instead, what is required is awareness from the researcher, and steps taken to mitigate against this possibility.

A robust Q-study requires multiple sources to be consulted to construct the Q-set (Watts and Stenner, 2012) and it is this consultation that can challenge the

preconceptions of the researcher. Furthermore, the incorporation of feedback from participants on their Q-sort adds greater depth to the interpretation of the identified viewpoints. Consequently, within Q-methodology, there are several intersections in which the researcher is best advised to consult more widely and it is this consultation that can challenge the researcher's pre-existing notions on the research topic (Brown, Danielson and van Exel, 2015). A variety of sources were used to construct the concourse within this study. Furthermore, the following chapter, chapter four, discusses the generation of the concourse and offers transparency as to the decisions that informed the development of the Q-set. In addition, analytical decisions made when applying Q-methodology are discussed in chapter five. The point here is that there should be clarity as to the decisions that have been made when using Q-methodology. However, such clarity has at times been argued to be missing from the write-up of Q-studies (Kampen and Tamás, 2014, p. 3111). Nevertheless, as identified by Brown et al. (2015, p. 529), that the reporting of some Q-studies has not included such details is not a strong enough basis on which to reject Q-methodology in its entirety.

Rather than thinking of Q-methodology as being objective, calling upon the work of Dryzek (2005, p. 197) highlights that all research instruments 'construct the world in a particular way' and require interpretation by the researcher. Dryzek places particular emphasis on Q-methodology as providing a degree of control over the influence of the researcher by offering participants the opportunity to express their own accounts through the Q-sort. Interpretation within a Q-study is built on the process of factor analysis. In this sense, the researcher is 'constrained' (Dryzek, 2005, p. 205) in the

interpretations that could be made as these statistical tests provide almost an audit trail of how the researcher has formed their interpretations and conclusions.

This defence of Q-methodology is predicated on an acceptance that the researcher will always be embedded within the research process and challenges the notion that research can be objective (Robbins and Krueger, 2000, p. 642; Sneegas, 2020). Consequently, Q-methodology offers a degree of constraint on the researcher and also encourages transparency. This position is markedly different to the suggestion that Q-methodology reduces the bias of the researcher. Sneegas (2020, p. 84) further raises our awareness that the researcher, in using Q-methodology, may not only highlight particular accounts, but may have a role 'in producing and reconfiguring' them. The point I wish to make is that the researcher is unquestionably embedded within the social world and the power relations which comprise it. While Q-methodology does bring to bear some sense of constraint on the researcher, and promotes transparency, these power relations remain active. Rather than misguided claims regarding the objectivity of Q-methodology, it is more productive to recognise the entrenchment of the researcher within the research process and to consider how the effects of this involvement can be acknowledged. In arguing against the objectivity of the Q-sort, there is a wider claim to be made that Q-methodology should be assessed according to the standards to which it subscribes (Kennis, 1992). This remains to be the case when considering how Q-methodology responds to matters of reliability and validity (Stenner and Stainton Rogers, 2004).

Reliability and validity in Q-methodology

Reliability, at least in R-methodology terms, is concerned with the replicability of the research findings (Brown, 1980; Watts and Stenner, 2012) and whether the same results can be identified were the research to be repeated. However, within a social constructionist view of Q-methodology, a Q-sort is not a measurement but a construction of an account (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990; Watts and Stenner, 2012). Therefore, Q-methodology acknowledges that such constructions may be subject to change as individuals' accounts have the potential to evolve. The same Q-sort may not be achieved were a participant to rank the statements multiple times. While Brown (1980, p. 244) does defend Q-methodology through demonstrating that the replication of a study did produce comparable Q-sorts, the point here relates to Kennis' (1992, p. 42) contention that 'the same thoughts and feelings may be expressed in different words'. In other words, a replica Q-sort does not necessarily need to be supplied for similar sentiments to be expressed. Emphasising the shift incorporated within Q-methodology away from the 'constructors' to the 'constructions' (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 180) develops this point. The emphasis is placed not so much on how an individual sorts a Q-set (particularly when a Q-study adopts social constructionism) but rather the identification of the *range* of accounts (Watts and Stenner, 2012). The concept of 'reliable schematics' (Thomas and Baas, 1992, p. 21) captures this shift in emphasis. The focus centres on whether similar viewpoints are identified in a replication of a Q-study in a similar context (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 51). This stands in contrast to concerns as to whether an individual identifies with the same factor or viewpoint. Acknowledging this reworked account then defuses criticisms of Q-methodology focused on the approach's lack of reliability. Rather, reliability in Q-methodology is configured differently to that within R-methodology.

Such a stance has subsequent implications for how generalisability is assessed within Q-methodology. A focus is placed on 'substantive inference' rather than 'statistical inference' (Thomas and Baas, 1992, p. 22). In other words, Q-methodology does not aim to infer how prevalent particular accounts are, but rather seeks to capture the character of these accounts. This intention of Q-methodology also has implications for the way in which validity is conceptualised. The Q-sort is an expression of an individual's account of a particular topic. Therefore, it is difficult to see how the accuracy of this account can be assessed (Brown, 1980, pp. 174–175, 1992, pp. 45–56). There is no benchmark upon which this account can be judged as it is the participant's own account. To reiterate, a Q-sort is not a *measure* of subjectivity but is a *construction* of how the participant views the subject matter (Stainton Rogers, 1995). The moderate social constructionist approach taken by this project suggests that subjectivity reflects shared accounts (Stenner, 2009). The viewpoints identified via Q-methodology are valid if they are found to be present in that multiple people load onto a viewpoint (Brown, Danielson and van Exel, 2015). Again, there is no measure which can be used to assess the validity of the accounts identified within Q-methodology.

Participant interviews

As noted, participants who completed a Q-sort were also invited to take part in a follow-up interview. When Q-sorts are conducted face-to-face, the researcher is free to ask participants for their responses to particular statements (Burke, 2015, pp. 70–71). Furthermore, a face-to-face post-sort interview can allow the interviewer to probe how the Q-set was interpreted, as well as asking whether particular items have been missed (Watts and Stenner, 2012, pp. 81–83). The aim is to generate a greater depth of data which then supports the analysis of the Q-sorts. Initially, the intention was to

interview participants to gather more insight on their Q-sort and also to discuss their relationship with politics. However, due to the shift to online administration there was a time-lag between participants completing a Q-sort and their follow-up interview. Consequently, rather than gathering data on participants' Q-sorts, these interviews focused on discussing participants' relationship with politics. The implications of this are considered later in the chapter when the limitations of the study design are discussed.

Chapter two discussed the theoretical framework which informs this study and centres on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and Akram's (2019) internal political conversation. A difficulty in studying habitus and the internal political conversation is that it is not possible to observe the two concepts in action. The internal political conversation is not a clear-cut occurrence which can be easily observed or measured (Akram, 2019). Similarly, habitus cannot be studied in isolation but only through its effects (Costa, Burke and Murphy, 2019, p. 23). Q-methodology offers a way in which to identify these effects through allowing participants to construct their own account of their meaning of politics and reveal aspects of their thoughts that may not be captured in an interview. However, the study is not just interested in identifying the potential range of meanings of politics but also in how these meanings may influence the self-assessment of political interest. Consequently, the third phase of data collection, semi-structured in-depth interviews, sought to examine participants' relationship with politics in order to reveal how the meaning of politics may be associated with the self-assessment of political interest.

An interview schedule (appendix 7) was prepared with the aim of encouraging participants to discuss their relationship with politics. Consequently, the interview schedule was used as a guide with the conversation directed by the participant. Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) free association narrative interviewing technique was identified to be one way in which inklings of the ramification of habitus may be revealed and may encourage participants to disclose the contours of their internal political conversation. Free association narrative interviewing uses open questions to encourage participants to discuss events they deem relevant (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, pp. 32–33). The aim is for the interview to uncover participants' narratives or stories. To do so, the researcher is advised to pose an initial open question and allow the participant to direct the conversation. This entails the researcher avoiding 'why' questions and following participants' phrasing and participants' own ordering of their narrative.

Using free association narrative interviewing could offer a way to explore participants' self-conception and elicit their own account of their relationship with politics. To do so may have revealed the structuring quality of habitus, as well as providing indications of participants' internal political conversation. While I called on elements of the free association narrative interviewing technique within this study, I did not apply Hollway and Jefferson's approach wholesale. This study was focused on understanding the meanings of politics that people hold and the relationship that people have with politics. There was a concern that applying a free association approach within an interview about politics may result in participants discussing the intricacies of policy issues rather than constructing an account of their relationship with politics.

Consequently, a semi-structured approach, where there is greater involvement from the researcher, was thought to be more appropriate for the topic of study.

I started the interview with an open question: *'tell me about a time in your life when you first became aware of politics?'*, allowing participants to define politics in whatever way they wished. This question led some participants to launch into discussions about the role of politics in their formative years and set the direction for the rest of the interview. The semi-structured approach also meant that there were key themes which the interviews aimed to cover. I felt the most important thing when conducting the interviews was to explore participants' relationships with politics. Consequently, at times, I directed the conversation more than would be expected within the free association narrative technique. Nevertheless, space was given to participants to go off on tangents when discussing their relationship with politics. In opposition to the free association narrative interview technique, participants were probed by asking 'why?' in response to their answers where it was felt that this would elicit further information (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, pp. 32–33). In a further move away from Hollway and Jefferson (2000, pp. 40–41), I only completed one round of interviews rather than conducting further interviews to test analysis.

The interviews took place via telephone, except for one participant who preferred to talk over a video call. Compared to face-to-face methods, relying on telephone interviews means that the researcher cannot read participants' body language. However, as identified by Holt (2010, p. 116) the lack of non-verbal cues means that all points need to be articulated by the participant and researcher alike which may lead to richer data. A further challenge for the researcher is how to demonstrate to

participants that they are listening without being perceived to be attempting to interject (Holt, 2010, p. 118). Furthermore, participants had the freedom to conduct the interview within their own space and may be more comfortable being interviewed by telephone (Holt, 2010, p. 116). In further support of the use of telephone interviews, Novick (2008, p. 395) highlights the lack of evidence that data quality declines when interviews are conducted by telephone, but does concede that further study is required to compare telephone with face-to-face interview methods. Furthermore, the use of telephone interviewing did mean it was easier to schedule interviews with participants across Great Britain. I would not have been able to achieve this geographical spread of participants were I using face-to-face methods.

In a similar vein to Q-methodology's emphasis on establishing a holistic account of a participant's interpretation of the topic under study, Hollway and Jefferson (2000, pp. 63–65) propose that interview data should be analysed as a whole account of a person. This holistic approach is set in opposition to the 'fragmentation' of data that occurs when computer-assisted qualitative data analysis is used. Pen portraits were developed to capture a holistic account of a participant which, in the words of Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 65), aimed to 'write something which made the person come alive' and summarises the raw data (an example has been included in appendix 16). Developing pen portraits allowed a focus on the person behind the responses and offered one way for analysis to be sensitised towards revealing the effects of habitus and the internal political conversation.

Thematic coding was also applied to identify shared topics across the transcripts. Fragmenting the data in this way complemented the holistic accounts of the pen

portraits and allowed coding to provide a broad overview of the theoretical framework. Following Akram (2019, pp. 99–101), examples of the shape, tone, and temporal character of the internal political conversation were identified. This enabled the contradictions which may unveil habitus in operation to be revealed. The emphasis within the semi-structured interviews was on collecting participants' perspectives of their relationship with politics. I take the position that the validity of the study rests on the participants' account of their relationship with politics. The abductive approach meant that there was a continual comparison between theory and data.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Birmingham (reference: ERN_18-0640). All fieldwork was conducted on the basis of voluntary informed consent, with participants free to leave Q-sorts incomplete, or stop participating in an interview at any point, without giving a reason. The shift to administering the Q-study online meant that a non-notifiable amendment to the ethical review was sought. Data gathered through the Q-sorts were sent to a linked database. All data were stored on a server based in the United Kingdom to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation. The database was checked on a daily basis and the Q-sorts transcribed into an Excel spreadsheet which was saved on University of Birmingham computer servers. Any personal data were deleted from the database on a daily basis.

Consent was gained from each interview participant for their interviews to be recorded and all data were retained on University of Birmingham computer systems using pseudonyms to ensure confidentially. Copies of information sheets and consent forms have been included in the appendices (2-5). All interview participants were also

informed that there was a one-month window in which they could contact me to request that their data are removed from the study. Participants could not be given a similar guarantee that their Q-sorts would be deleted if requested. This was due to the online administration of the Q-sorts which meant that the sorts could be completed anonymously. It was confirmed to all interview participants that their names, and where relevant, their organisations, would not be included in any project outputs. However, it was emphasised that participants could still be identified through what they say during the interview.

A difficulty this project faced was securing the participation of those uninterested in politics. To attempt to counteract this, those who were contacted to participate in a follow-up interview were offered a £10 gift voucher in recognition of their time. It was felt that this amount would not be coercive and participation would remain voluntary. Similarly, while community organisations frequently distributed links to complete a Q-sort, there was no compulsion to participate.

Limitations

There are several limitations which affect the findings of the project. The limitations of the study can be grouped into: 1. the challenges of recruiting participants and 2. the administration of the Q-sorts and follow-up interviews.

To first consider the recruitment of participants. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift towards using online methods. Originally, I intended to attend open community events which I hoped would offer the chance to recruit participants and discuss the study.

However, the introduction of social distancing meant that the recruitment of participants had to be more passive and relied on others distributing information about the study. While the study did achieve a relatively mixed sample, this could have been improved and this would have strengthened the findings of the study.

As this study was focused on political interest, it was necessary to recruit both those who are interested in politics and those who are uninterested. While three participants who completed Q-sorts confirmed their lack of interest in in politics, an interview could only be secured with one participant who was uninterested in politics. Consequently, there is the potential that there are a broader array of meanings and experiences of politics that may have been missed by the study. Nevertheless, the strategy used to analyse the Q-sorts (as detailed in chapter five) was sufficiently broad to allow the identification of a range of meanings of politics. While the analytical criteria maintained rigour, there was also scope for more hidden meanings of politics to come to the fore.

Furthermore, the majority of participants had some experience of higher education. From a theoretical perspective, education has been underscored as influencing and reinforcing habitus (Wacquant, 2016). Consequently, it may be reasonable to expect that participants with similar levels of formal education may have similar experiences which might precipitate into similar interpretations of politics. Nevertheless, as will be highlighted in the study's findings, education was not the only site where people learnt about politics. Additionally, interviews with participants captured a range of experiences with politics. While education may influence people's meaning and subsequent relationship with politics, this association is not deterministic. As will be explored later, people who have accessed higher education held a range of meanings

of politics. While it is certainly the case that the findings of this study would be strengthened were a more mixed sample recruited, a range of experiences and relationships with politics were found.

The move to online methods introduced a lag between a participant completing a Q-sort and then being interviewed. Consequently, interviews did not discuss participants' Q-sorts or the statements with which they most and least agreed. This was to the detriment of the interpretation of the viewpoints. Instead, interview questions focused on participants' relationship with politics, including their own level of engagement and how they learnt about politics. Interview data did not focus directly on the meaning of politics (although participants were asked to define politics). The emphasis within interviews was on how participants perceived politics and, through these interviews, elements of participants' definitions of, and orientations to, politics were captured and fed into the interpretation of the identified viewpoints. However, there was not the same level of depth of exploration that would have been facilitated by a post-sort interview.

In hindsight, interviews could have made greater reference to the participants' Q-sorts. The construction of the Q-set from the concourse establishes the boundaries of the interpretations made via a Q-study. Watts and Stenner (2012, p. 82) suggest that there is the potential for post-sort interviews to ask participants whether they could think of any views and opinions on the subject of study not included in the Q-set. Further information to support analysis may have been missed by not asking participants for their reflections on the Q-set. However, a range of sources were used to generate the Q-set which should minimise omissions. Participants were also asked to supply any

further comments they may have within an open-text box. While not asked directly, this gave participants the opportunity to include any comments they may have on the process of completing a Q-sort.

The collection of data in two stages resulted in some participants completing a Q-sort but not being interviewed. Either the participant did not leave their contact details, or they did not respond to invitations to participate in a further interview. This limited the interview data which could be called upon to interpret the viewpoints. Reflecting on these data would add greater depth to the interpretation and the findings gained from the interviews. Sharing the interpretation of identified viewpoints with participants could have offered a way in which to validate the study's findings (as noted by Durose et al., 2016, p. 580 and Jeffares, 2021, p. 63). However, it was felt that adding a third stage of contact for some participants might have been too demanding given the additional pressures created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, completing this additional stage may have strengthened analysis.

Interview data were used to respond to the final research question which explores the extent to which an individual's meaning of politics influences the assessment of their political interest. As discussed, the study does not seek to challenge participants' interpretation of their own interest but considers the factors which may have influenced the self-assessment of interest. It is difficult to observe the cornerstones of the theoretical framework, habitus and the internal political conversation, in action. While the lack of direct empirical observation is not a limitation in and of itself, the identification of habitus and the internal political conversation is dependent on the acknowledgement of subtle cues and inconsistencies in accounts.

This study employed the analytical approach of free association narrative interviewing (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) and created holistic accounts of participants' relationship with politics. Developing holistic accounts cohered with the 'whole-person' approach of Q-methodology. Undertaking thematic analysis of the interview data as a second stage then allowed key themes across the interviews to be identified. While it may be difficult to observe habitus and the internal political conversation, the analytical approach of the study used multiple stages to uncover indications of the theoretical framework. This is not a limitation of the approach but more of a defence of the analytical strategy used. The concluding chapter of this study offers further reflection on these limitations and considers how they may be addressed via future research.

Conclusion

Q-methodology offers a systematic way to study subjectivity through the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. It is this integration which gives the approach its distinctive character. The novel use of Q-methodology facilitated the study of the potential differences in participants' meanings of politics. Q-methodology allows the unveiling of different meanings of politics which emerge from the way in which participants sort a series of statements. Holistic accounts are revealed which may have been missed if the project relied only on interviews. While the research design had to be adapted to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting follow-up interviews captured participants' reflections on their account of politics. The chapter has explored the strengths and limitations of the research design and, in particular, has sought to mount a defence of the application of Q-methodology to the study. The abductive approach of the study allows initial ideas to be explored and then revised based on available data. Consequently, this study is not testing a theory but is

developing an analytical framework to inform the study of political interest. Having considered the research design upon which this study is based, we now turn to explore the development of the statements that comprise the Q-set.

CHAPTER FOUR: Q-METHODOLOGY: DEVELOPING THE Q-SET

The research design chapter established that a Q-study will be conducted to identify the potential range of meanings of politics. As discussed within the last chapter, Q-studies have been criticised for lacking transparency about the development of the concourse, and related Q-set (Kampen and Tamás, 2014, pp. 3114–3115). This chapter aims to provide a roadmap which outlines how the Q-set has been generated.

A longlist of 270 statements capturing the variety of meanings of politics (or, to use Q-methodology terminology, the concourse) was first generated through consulting the literature, Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) data, and interviews with community organisations. Capturing the concourse relating to the different meanings of politics is no easy feat given the breadth of what can be considered politics and its abstract character. Politics as a term is in everyday circulation, but there is often limited exploration of what politics implies, or the practices or events to which it relates. No prior restrictions were placed on generating the concourse, the word politics was used to reflect both the political system, and a broader conceptualisation which recognises that politics can also be found outside of the political system (Leftwich, 2004a).

The longlist of statements which represented the concourse was initially coded and this process revealed two main domains within the recorded meanings of politics: definitions of politics and orientations to politics. The statements were coded again and revealed four sub-themes under each of the two main domains which will be discussed later in the chapter. As identified within the research design detailed in

chapter three, a structured Q-set was used to ensure there was balance across the different elements of the meaning of politics. This chapter will first discuss why an individual's meaning of politics can be thought to comprise both their definition of politics and their orientation to politics. I will then outline how the statements were developed and refined and the chapter will close with a discussion of the eight identified sub-themes.

The meaning of politics is made up of definitions and orientations

A limited number of studies have directly considered how members of the public define politics. This small body of work can be broadly split into two themes: one which considers how people interpret the word 'politics' (White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000; Henn, Weinstein and Forrest, 2005; Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006, p. 110) and another which reflects on what issues are seen to be 'political' (Fitzgerald, 2013). These studies focus primarily on capturing respondents' top of mind associations with politics. However, this literature is often descriptive in tone, focused on what can be ascribed as being 'political', or the manifestations of politics, rather than shedding light on the criteria, or what is required for something to be labelled as political. These empirical studies are in contrast to debates surrounding the definition of politics (Leftwich's (2004c) edited volume summarises these debates). In other words, there is less of an emphasis within these studies on exploring the 'characteristics' of politics, or what makes something political – an emphasis which, admittedly, is outside the scope of these original studies.

Considering the ‘meaning’ of politics requires a more developed exploration of what is politics and how the characteristics of politics can be captured. Consulting the literature identified two interrelated domains with regards to the meaning of politics: 1. the *definition of* politics and 2. the *orientation to* politics. A strength of Q-methodology is that it is able to capture the interaction between these two domains. In other words, there is equal space given to the participant’s definition and orientation to politics, and the interplay between these two dimensions is captured via a Q-sort. An individual’s understanding of politics encompasses both what they identify politics to be, but also their evaluations of politics. The two domains are related to one another. The definition of politics captures how someone views the scope of politics, what is it that politics refers to, and what are the boundaries of politics. By way of contrast, an orientation to politics is used to refer to the assessments that people make in response to politics. Akram (2019, p. 38) notes Almond and Verba’s (1963, p. 15) and Norris’ (2011, p. 31) use of the term of orientation to refer to citizens’ attitudes towards the political system. Three categories of orientation are identified: cognitive orientations, affective orientations, and evaluative orientations. Similarly, when I use the term orientation, I am referring to the positive or negative beliefs, thoughts, or feelings generated by politics. Orientation then refers to the ‘mindset’ someone directs towards politics.

The two domains of definition of, and orientation to, politics are interrelated. Orientations need to have a target. For someone to have an orientation to something, it is necessary to also consider the ‘thing’ to which they are orientating themselves. Understanding an individual’s definition of politics also requires an exploration of how they orientate themselves to politics. Focusing only on the definition of politics will lead to a descriptive account which omits how an individual evaluates politics. An

individual's orientation to politics captures the implications of their definition of politics. To put it another way, our understanding of how someone defines politics is developed if we also consider how they orientate themselves to politics. Consequently, when discussing an individual's meaning of politics, it is necessary to consider both how they define politics, as well as how they respond to this definition – their orientation to politics. To focus only on either the definition of politics, or individuals' orientation to politics, risks missing important areas of nuance and distinction within the different meanings of politics.

Each statement in the initial longlist was coded according to whether it captured a definition of politics, or an orientation to politics. These two domains were broad enough to encompass all of the statements identified via the literature, QESB data, and interviews with community organisations. All statements coded as 'definitions' of politics were then coded again to identify further sub-themes and this process was repeated for the orientation statements. This exercise revealed eight sub-themes, as summarised in figure 4.

Figure 4 Sub-themes used to structure the Q-set

		Sub-themes	Description
Dimensions of meaning of politics	**Definition**	The where of politics	Where does politics take place? What sort of phenomena or events can be labelled as politics?
		The what of politics	What does politics allow us to do?
		The why of politics	What are the expectations of politics? What are the normative accounts of politics?
		Identifying political activity	What are the boundaries of political activity? What agencies, repertoires, and targets (Norris, 2002) relate to political activity?
	Orientation	Self in relation to politics	How distant or close does the individual feel in response to politics?
		Views on politics	What are the perceptions and observations of politics as it is carried out?
		Perceptions of citizenship duties	Does the individual recognise a sense of duty to engage with politics?
		Facilitators and barriers to engagement	What factors can promote or obstruct people from engaging with politics?

A core set of statements were honed following the identification of the eight sub-themes. When developing the Q-set, there is a balance to be struck between achieving adequate coverage of the concourse and the practicality of administering the sort without overburdening participants. In total, 40 statements were established with five statements falling under each of the eight sub-themes to ensure balance across the structured set. This number of statements cohered with Watts and Stenner's (2012, p. 61) advice that a balanced Q-set comprises around 40 to 80 statements. The statements were developed to avoid repetition and ensure a broad coverage of each sub-theme.

The statements within a Q-set should avoid technical language and, where possible, reflect natural speech that would be recognised by participants (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 62; Jeffares, 2021, p. 59). The longlist was developed with reference to the academic literature and this often prohibited incorporating direct quotations within the statements. Furthermore, it was difficult to quote QESB and community interview data directly as, often, identified meanings of politics were discussed in relation to wide-ranging themes covered during the interview. However, efforts were made to ensure that the statements were accessible and could be understood by a broad range of participants. Statements were drafted so that they included only one proposition and ensured that the participant was clear as to what it was that they were being asked to sort (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 62). Statements were also piloted with five people known to me who were asked to supply feedback on the language used and whether any statements were missing from the Q-set. Minor edits were made to the statements as a result of the feedback. As a further test of comprehension and following Burke (2015, p. 70), I applied a Flesch-Kincaid readability scale test using Microsoft Word to ensure the statements were written in clear and accessible language. A score of 61 was achieved which equates to a United States school grade of 7.5. The statements had a reading age of around 12-13 years and were deemed to be appropriate for use within this study. The final statements within the Q-set are included in figure 5.

Exploring the eight sub-themes

The rest of the chapter provides a summary of the statements within each of the sub-themes. Where appropriate, references are made to data collected via interviews with community organisations and via analysis of QESB data. Key debates across each of the sub-themes are also reflected upon to root the statements within the academic

literature. Due to limitations of space, the intention here is not to provide a comprehensive summary of each statement. Instead, an outline of each of the sub-themes is established. Appendix 11 provides a longlist of statements mapped to the meanings of politics found within the literature and analysis of data collected via interviews with community organisations and QESB transcripts.

Figure 5 Q-set on the meaning of politics

		No.	Statement
Definition of politics	The where of politics	1	When I think of politics, I think about what the Government does to run the country.
		2	It's impossible to escape politics. Politics can be found everywhere in society.
		3	Politics takes place locally, as well as nationally.
		4	Politics takes place internationally, as well nationally.
		5	There are some areas in life that should be protected from politics. For example, we should keep politics out of sports.
	The what of politics	6	Politics is about making compromises to get something done and to make a change. It's a messy and complicated affair.
		7	Politics is about people trying to get what they want. This means that there will always be conflict in politics and there will be winners and losers in politics.
		8	Politics is about the Government getting its way and forcing their policies through. Often, it's difficult to have influence as a decision's already been made.
		9	Politics is about making really difficult decisions and the choices we have in society.
		10	Politics heavily influences what people can achieve in their life.
	The why of politics	11	Politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society.
		12	Without politics we'd live in chaos. Politics creates order in society.
		13	Politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in a society.
		14	Politics is how we go about distributing resources in society.
		15	Politics is a way for the powerless to improve their lives.

		No.	Statement
	Identifying political activity	16	Political engagement doesn't necessarily have to target parliament, or local, or national government. You can be engaged in politics in your everyday life.
		17	Politics is about trying to create change in society. It doesn't matter how you do this – whether you connect with people face-to-face or online.
		18	Decisions you make as an individual about your lifestyle can be political, for example, boycotting companies, or reducing how much meat you eat.
		19	Political engagement isn't just about creating change. Knowing about social issues or expressing your identity are also examples of engagement.
		20	You don't have to wait to be asked to get involved in politics. You can create your own opportunities to be engaged with politics.
Orientation to politics	Self in relation to politics	21	I don't feel that I have a say in politics. Politics is something that is done to me and I don't feel like anyone represents me.
		22	I don't want to be more involved in politics – but I'm glad that other people are.
		23	I feel I have a good understanding of politics.
		24	I think there's too much conflict and arguing in politics. I find it off-putting.
		25	I don't have trust in politics. People who are involved in politics are only in it for themselves.
	Views on politics	26	Politics is becoming more difficult than it used to be.
		27	Everyone has an equal chance to have an influence in politics.
		28	People involved in politics make out they have simple answers to complex questions. They should be more realistic with people.
		29	People need to be more empowered in politics. Often politics ignores the issues that are most relevant to people.
		30	The media has too much influence over political outcomes.
	Perceptions of citizenship duties	31	It is important that people vote. I would go as far as to say that people have a duty to vote.
		32	We can't trust people involved in politics and so, when we need to, we should be prepared to take action to hold political leaders responsible for their actions.
		33	Even if you're not directly involved in politics, you should still pay attention to what's going on.
		34	People are more likely to take part in politics if their friends do too. Sometimes you have to be invited to take part.
		35	Politics is important to everyone's lives. Now, more than ever.

		No.	Statement
	Facilitators and barriers to engagement	36	People's opinions are so polarised these days, I think this puts some people off from saying what they think.
		37	Being engaged with politics requires commitment. A lot of people simply don't have the time to engage with politics.
		38	It's difficult to keep track of what's going on in politics. You have to have a lot of specialist knowledge to be engaged in politics.
		39	Certain types of people get involved in politics. This means that people are more likely to engage with politics if they see other people like them involved.
		40	If I wanted to get involved in politics, I would know how to do it.

Definition: The where, what, and why of politics

There are four sub-themes that are identified to be part of a definition of politics. These can be summarised as the where, what, and why of politics (Robison, 2014, p. 35), along with the application of these categories to identify what form of activities constitute political engagement:

1. **The 'where' of politics.** This captures whether there are any perceived boundaries to politics. In other words, where is politics located? Is politics only associated with the political system, or is a broader conceptualisation of politics held?

2. **The 'what' of politics.** Exploring the 'what' of politics considers the processes which can lead to something being described as relating to politics. It attempts to identify the features of politics and what needs to be present for something to 'be' politics.

3. **The 'why' of politics.** This sub-theme examines the normative dimension to the definition of politics. In other words, when politics is 'present', what is it that politics seeks to achieve and what are the desired outcomes of politics.

4. **Identifying political activity.** The final sub-theme is an application of the 'where, what, and why' of politics and considers what forms of behaviour or practices can be labelled as 'political'.

The 'where' of politics

Statements that are focused on the 'where' of politics (figure 5: statements 1-5) consider the limits of politics and whether it is possible to escape, or protect an area from being 'infiltrated' by politics. The statements also consider whether politics is associated with the actions of government, along with considering whether there is a local or international element to politics. Leftwich's distinction between 'arena' and 'process' definitions of politics offers a helpful classification of how politics has been defined previously. Here, the arena classification of politics is focused on 'the place or institutional forum where it happens' (Leftwich, 2004b, pp. 13–14). In assuming that politics occurs within a specified, public, space, the arena definition of politics has been argued to reside on a false demarcation between the private and public spheres (Leftwich, 2004a; Squires, 2004) which risks omitting analysis of how both the private and public sphere interact with one another (Honig, 1993). By way of contrast, Leftwich's conceptualisation of politics as process is broader and decentred from a site or location. Politics as process is therefore the 'power, control, decision-making and resource allocation between two or more people' (Leftwich, 2004a, p. 14). As such, politics is not limited to a particular area, there is no sense of 'escape' from politics as it can be found anywhere. There is no opt out from politics.

Analysis of interviews with community organisations also highlighted that politics was conceptualised more broadly than that seen within an arena account. Participants were asked whether they thought the actions of their community organisation could be considered political. In response, a small number of participants made explicit reference to the distinction between 'big P' politics – viewed in terms of electoral competition and the actions of political parties and 'small p' politics which was frequently used to describe grassroot actions to address the fall out and consequences of government policy.

> *Yeah, so I guess there's the system of sort of elected governance, or official governance, in whatever kind of country that you're kind of thinking about. So, obviously in the UK, that's sort of mostly on a party basis and there's different levels of government. So yeah, so yeah, I suppose the interaction of that in some way is what I would define as political and I suppose the closer you are to actually being part of those sort of mechanisms I would say is the big 'P' political and the more you are just sort of interacting with those things as a separate entity, there's another level of engagement outside that.* Community organisation interview 2

One participant discussed how the distinction between 'big P' and 'small p' politics can be blurred, describing this as *'squiffy political'* [Community organisation interview 3]. Other participants frequently implied this distinction without explicit reference to the language of 'small' and 'big P' politics.

Given its timing to coincide with UK elections and referenda, QESB data were found to be focused primarily on the political system. Focus groups were held in Wales and Scotland, as well as England, and so participants' discussions frequently highlight a sub-national dimension to politics, with the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd identified to be 'sites' of politics. Also linked to the 'local' element of politics, community

organisations frequently discussed the effects of political decisions on their local area with some participants specifically discussing the actions of the local authority. Consequently, the statements reflect that politics can be 'found' in different locations.

The 'what' of politics

Statements 6-10 emphasise the what of politics and focus on exploring the process of politics, so what is 'occurring' when politics is in operation. These statements aim to complement the 'where' of politics by examining what is distinctive about politics – by what criteria is something identified to be political (Holland, 2017)? This sub-theme foregrounds the idea of politics as a process by which choices are made and the conflictual character of politics that arises as these choices are negotiated. The statements also reflect the challenges of influencing the decision-making process as well as acknowledging the effect of politics on people's lives.

The emphasis on choice and conflict is also presented in Hay's (2007) and Jenkins' (2011) conceptualisation of politics. Hay (2007, p. 65) centres on four features of politics, including: 'choice, the capacity for agency, (public) deliberation, and a social context'. Jenkins (2011, p. 159) supplements this conception by underscoring 'contingency, conflicts, flows of power, capacities of autonomy and collective life'. Furthermore, Jenkins' (2011, p. 159) conception of politics identifies 'a generative, indeterminate process' with such indeterminacy maintaining an inherent instability to politics. In terms of generating the Q-set, here, both readings of politics share an emphasis on 'agency that impacts on others' (Jenkins, 2011, p. 159) and an awareness that 'actors can make a difference' (Hay, 2007, p. 67). Reflecting Gamble's

(2000) distinction between politics and fatalism, politics is associated with openness whereby there is the potential for choices to be made and different paths taken. Processes of decision-making, therefore, can be complex and protracted as compromises are formed. As described by Weber (2004, p. 93) '[p]olitics means a slow, powerful drilling through hard boards' and the statements reflect the perceived openness of politics in which outcomes are not determined and there is always the potential to influence proceedings.

One community organisation participant also anchored their understanding of politics via its fluid and indeterminate character. Politics was seen to entail the free exchange of ideas and opinions and was positioned in opposition to tribalism:

> *Going to back to how I kind of define politics I think it's almost the opposite of politics. It's tribalism. I don't think that that's politics…. Well, it's not based, it's not based on kind of conversation or understanding, it's kind of the opposite, separation and division.* Community organisation interview 5

Foster et al. (2015, p. 120) challenge an agent-centred concept of politics by highlighting that contestation and the potential for change presupposes the operation of democratic mechanisms which is not the experience 'throughout the current global political world' and such a conceptualisation will tend to identify an '*absence* of politics' [italics in the original] across the globe. Arguably, Jenkins' acknowledgement of 'flows of power' and Hay's noting of 'social context' accounts for the oppression discussed by Foster et al., while maintaining the potential for the status quo to be challenged. One community organisation participant mirrored this discussion within their conceptualisation of politics which foregrounded:

> [*P]eople and its groups and how they interact and sort of the rules, whether they're formal or informal, told or not told, how things go on.* Community organisation interview 3.

When discussing their view as to whether their organisation was political, the participant also highlighted work to disrupt norms and generate change:

> *In my disruption to, or anyone's disruption to the norm, or well, what's seen to be the norm or what has been agreed upon, that's a, that's a political stance. You know. We're daring to challenge the status quo that's a political stance.* Community organisation interview 3.

The participant then goes on to note:

> *Because change needs to happen and I suppose political things are met when change is needed and wanted and is being pushed for. And a link then, I think that politics and change is a big thing too, you know*. Community organisation interview 3

Here, the participant's understanding of politics encompasses the tension between constraints on agency, as well as the potential for these constraints to be disrupted. In other words, both the status quo and challenges to *'how things go on'* [Community organisation interview 3] are encompassed within politics.

<u>The 'why' of politics</u>

In addition to establishing the where and what of politics, the 'why' of politics encompasses perceptions of the functions of politics and normative accounts of what processes of politics should achieve. Statements 11-15 represent a positive reading of politics and are rooted in the perceived benefits of politics. Politics is viewed to offer a way to chart through complexity and generate decisions which can be broadly

tolerated (Crick, 2005). The statements reflect perceptions on the function of politics viewed to be a stabilising force through which solutions to society's problems can be progressed and collective decisions regarding the distribution of resources can be made (Weale, 2004).

Interview participants were asked whether they thought the actions of their community organisation could be considered 'political', in so doing, this unveiled participants' conceptualisation of politics. Frequently, the participants associated the actions of their organisation with attempts to generate social change and this led most participants to identify that their organisation was political:

> *I think that being political is about anything that rebels against what's currently deemed as politically sound. So, it's saying something at the level of policy is incorrect and needs to be challenged.* Community organisation interview 9

> *So, I think in many ways political with a small 'p' is about change. It's about making the world a better place.* Community organisation interview 1

Other participants connected the political character of their organisation with its role to develop *'social cohesion and civic engagement'* [Community organisation interview 7]. Within this conceptualisation, politics is viewed positively and as a force for social good.

> *Because I think for me, politics is about how we work together towards improving welfare for everyone. That's what politics is about, I think. Cohesion and bridging gaps and barriers. That's exactly what it is. So, I think it's completely political, yeah.* Community organisation interview 5

One participant distanced their organisation from politics entirely and emphasised that the organisation had to take a *'politically neutral stand'* and that:

> *We can't be seen to take a particular political stance. Especially if it's supporting one party over another party, that's something we can't do.* Community organisation interview 8

By way of contrast, a further participant distinguished between an organisation being apolitical and political neutrality. The participant identified that while their organisation was politically neutral, it was not apolitical due to its lobbying and campaigning work. Again, to be 'political' was to take a recognisable stand on issues and work towards generating social change.

> *They [the organisation] are not apolitical, they describe themselves as politically neutral purely because they can't be seen to be taking, they're party neutral so they can't be seen to be talking about one party over another.* Community organisation interview 9

The way in which the two participants viewed politics informed how they interpreted the actions of the organisation with which they worked or volunteered. While both participants viewed their organisation as pursing social change, only one identified the actions of their organisation as being political. Community organisation participant 8 suggested a more limited account of politics. It was possible that an organisation seeking social change could be detached from politics if they were not seen to support a political party. By way of contrast, distinguishing between political neutrality and apoliticism demonstrates a broader conceptualisation in which politics is viewed to be more extensive than the actions of political parties. While statements 11-15 are rooted in the functions of politics, actions to pursue social change may not always be perceived to relate to politics.

Identifying political activity

The final sub-theme applies the 'what', 'where', and 'why' elements of a definition of politics to explore the practices considered to relate to political activity, as captured in statements 16-20. The definition of politics has been argued to influence the analysis of political engagement. In the first instance, the researcher's interpretation of politics will influence how political engagement is analysed (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007), both in terms of the topics deemed to be appropriate to study and whether an individual's actions are interpreted to be political engagement.

Similarly, participants' conceptualisations of politics will also influence whether the individual acknowledges that they engage with politics. Analysis conducted by Coffé and Campbell (2020) identified that while there is a general consensus between citizens as to the political character of party activities, there is less agreement as to whether non-party activities are considered to relate to politics. This analysis adds further support to the contention that what is politics can be interpreted in multiple ways. As noted in chapter two, young people's conceptualisation of politics via the political system can lead to their participation in politics being underestimated (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007). Consequently, exploring perceptions of what constitutes political engagement also offers a way in which to tap into participants' conceptualisations of politics.

There has been increased recognition that political engagement can have a wider focus than voting or contacting political representatives. As summarised by Norris

(2002) there has been a shift in the agencies, repertoires, and targets of political participation, although as noted by Marsh and Akram (2015, p.524), Norris' argument retains an emphasis on the consequences of these actions on the political arena. Bang's (Bang and Sørensen, 1999; Bang, 2009) concept of the Everyday Maker denotes a growing shift towards people forging their own opportunities to engage in politics within their day-to-day life. Bang argues that there is a greater tendency for people to pursue their own political projects. Everyday Makers may not necessarily be apathetic towards the political system but they do not root their political identity within the state. The distinction between Everyday Makers' lifestyles and their political engagement may be blurred. However, the boundary between political engagement and social action is not always clear cut, as is reflected by Rowe's (2015; Rowe and Marsh, 2018) acknowledgement that activities can be 'proto-political' whereby social action may evolve into political action within a given context. Rowe's idea of proto-political activities can also be seen in the following quotation from a community organisation participant:

> *So what interests me is that someone said to me once, a resident, 'I [the participant's friend] organise around issues to… protest if there's something we don't like, whereas you [the participant] gather people and talk to them', like I say, how we treat each other on the ground every day is political.* Community organisation interview 1

Here, the participant distinguishes between the act of protest and their attempt to discuss and raise awareness of social issues with others within their locality. These conversations may not start off having a political character but have the potential to shift towards the political when they touch on local social issues and raise awareness with the aim to achieve change. As argued by Rowe and Marsh (2018), language can be proto-political as it functions to express concerns, tensions, and grievances which

may then evolve into political action. In stating that our everyday interactions, and our treatment of others, is political, the participant demonstrates a broad conceptualisation of politics. Politics is not just located within institutions but instead, we are embedded in politics.

The difficulty of identifying what constitutes the 'political' character of different activities and practices has also been discussed with reference to online engagement. The advent of social media has increased the opportunity to engage with politics (Halupka, 2016, 2018b). Bennett and Segerberg (2013) note the personalised and connective quality of online engagement. Studying the motivation and intention behind actions has been suggested to be one way of identifying the political character of action (Flinders and Wood, 2018). However, Halupka (2018a) draws our attention to the potential divorce between motivation, intention, and outcome within online political engagement. For example, someone may interact on social media in a way which they do not perceive as being political, however, social media companies can sell users' data to buyers who may have political intentions. Furthermore, individuals' posts may be interpreted by others as taking a political stance without this being the intention of the user. In addition to the difficulty of relying on intention and motivation as the criteria on which to identify political engagement, individuals may not always articulate their political motivations and an individual may not be aware of what has informed their political action, or indeed that their action could be considered political (Akram, 2014, 2019; Akram and Marsh, 2018). The point here is that distinguishing political engagement is reliant on how politics is conceptualised, both by participants and analysts alike. Statements 16-20 reflect debates regarding what constitutes political engagement and ask participants to consider the extent to which they agree that

political engagement needs to be a collective activity or whether individualised action, such as political consumerism (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005) or online engagement, can be considered political. Debates as to the role of intention and motivation in identifying political activity have also been incorporated via statements which ask participants to consider whether actions have to have a particular 'target', or have an intention to progress social change. In identifying the boundaries of political engagement, participants 'apply' their conceptualisation of politics.

Orientation to politics

To progress to the second domain of the meaning of politics, again, four sub-themes were identified within the orientation to politics and have been summarised as follows:

1. **Self in relation to politics.** The first sub-theme considers how participants see themselves in relation to politics and asks participants to 'gauge' how distant or close they are to politics.

2. **Views on politics.** Participants are asked to evaluate how politics is enacted. This sub-theme asks participants to consider the conduct of politics.

3. **Perceptions of citizenship duties.** This sub-theme examines the responsibility participants feel towards politics and whether they perceive that politics is something that they should do.

4. **Facilitators and barriers to engagement.** The final sub-theme denotes perceived facilitators and barriers to political engagement. These statements reflect participants' evaluations on the accessibility of politics and reflect how the participant perceives politics more widely.

Self in relation to politics

The first identified sub-theme considers participants' assertions as to how they view themselves in relation to politics. Statements 21-26 capture the personal reflections of the participant. In distinction to the rest of the Q-set, 'I' statements are used to focus participants on their own self-assessments.

The literature on political (dis)engagement identifies how some people can feel remote, or distant, from the political system and perceive that politicians do not represent their interests (O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; van Wessel, 2010; Holmes and Manning, 2013; Manning and Holmes, 2013, 2014). Previous studies have explored the sense of disconnect some people feel in response to formal politics and identify that there can be a sense of politicians not representing 'people like me'. This sentiment is also reflected at points within the QESB data:

> *I don't- I'm not registered to vote and I don't know who I would vote for. I don't feel like anyone really completely represents me and I don't know that- I think the seat where I live is a quite safe Labour seat. That is something that bothers me about the election system.* QESB 2010 Glasgow pre-election group 2

Interviews with community organisations also identified that there can be a more generalised sense of mistrust directed to the political system and the *'duplicity of politicians'* [Community organisation interview 7]. A similar lack of trust also featured in discussions within QESB focus groups.

> *I feel very cynical about it all. I just feel they [politicians] care a lot about their image and things, like they're not willing to admit that they'd made mistakes or any of that and, yeah, I don't really trust them.* QESB 2010 London pre-election group 2

One community organisation participant spoke in detail about the potential for people to hold negative connotations of politics which can alienate certain communities.

> *I wonder if the word politics needs a bit of a facelift, bit of a nip and tuck and just cleaning up because in certain groups, in certain communities, if you mention policing, they're like 'Woah, that's way too far'. Public services, 'Woah, what's that', but if you reworded it in a different kind of way, trust comes but I think politics, the word, has a lot of trust issues with a lot of different communities.* Community organisation interview 3

A small number of QESB participants discussed referenda as having the potential to 'reenergise' politics through offering a renewed chance for people to 'have their say' and express their local identity [QESB 2015 Colchester pre-election group 2]. Often, referenda were positioned as being distinct from general elections as they allowed a more direct form of participation.

Nevertheless, the literature raises questions as to the extent to which people want further involvement with the political system. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) concept of 'stealth democrats' notes citizens' preference to be distant from processes of governing. Citizens wish for their interests to be protected but are happy for decision-makers to take the lead as long as they are seen to progress with the task of governing. Stoker and Hay (2017) reconceptualise these stealth attitudes as an expectation that the political system delivers for people without requiring continual engagement. Nevertheless, Stoker and Hay identify a tendency for people to hold positive accounts of democracy which may offer a basis on which to challenge negative views about politics and promote engagement.

QESB participants and, to a lesser extent, community organisation participants, often discussed politics as being synonymous with conflict. Discussions within the 2010 and 2015 waves of the QESB frequently reflected on hung parliaments. In particular, it was noted that there was the potential for this result to challenge the tradition of adversarial politics within Westminster, frequently seen to be too conflictual:

> *Some people feel that there is too much, the aggression of politics turns them off, the bickering and some people really like it. So, people who are not on the bickering side, I just want to see {laughs} more of a discussion rather than, yeah. So, I think it's hard to walk that line 'cause I have heard from some people, "I like when they turn to each other's policies 'cause that's when we know where the truth is".* QESB 2010 leaders' debate group 1.

On a micro, everyday level, one community organisation participant discussed the increasing polarisation of politics which could prevent some people feeling able to express their political opinion:

> Participant: *I think also because politics has become so much more polarised people are perhaps a bit more reticent to say what their politics is.*
>
> Research student: *Why do you think that is?*
>
> Participant: *I suppose people hated the Tories in Mrs Thatcher's time. But I think that there is more of a sense of less of a centre and more of a stronger right wing or left-wing clash, Corbyn is certainly far-left. I just think that there is less of an atmosphere of tolerance for other people's view on anything".* Community organisation interview 4

Statements considering people's self-perception in relation to politics reflect the extent to which people feel a sense of affinity or distance from politics. These statements ask participants to consider whether they wish to be more involved in politics, as well as whether they feel represented in politics. Furthermore, the statements also consider participants' perceptions of conflict in politics.

Views on politics

A further identified sub-theme incorporates observations of politics 'in action'. In other words, the perceptions of politics as it plays out. This sub-theme is reflected in statements 26-30. At points, both QESB and community organisation interview data discussed the way in which politics was changing and foregrounded the growing complexity of issues to which the political system must respond. Interviews with community organisations took place during the summer of 2019 and Brexit negotiations were often raised during the course of the conversation. Party dealignment, the process by which people's political identity is no longer strongly associated with a political party (Dalton, 2014, pp. 194–198), was also referenced by participants. Some participants referenced the media's influence on politics and several QESB participants also discussed biased media reporting in electoral and referenda campaigns:

> *I think the press, especially the newspapers are morality free zones, they just all of them, they just print lies and the people just believe it.* Community organisation interview 6

Politics was viewed by some participants to be structured to benefit the interests of the *'elite'* [Community organisation interview 3]. A small number of QESB participants described the UK political system as being London-centric to the detriment of the quality of decision-making and could discourage engagement with politics.

> *What I always associated with politics with educated men sitting in the Houses of Parliament talking about law and almost soap-boxing between who has done the worst. There's that feel, where people like my family for example who don't have, it's not accessible in any way to find out what it means to be political, really.* QESB 2010 Glasgow pre-election group 1

> *Terrible decisions have been made. And continue to be made by this elite narrow group that are in a club that keep their friends in that club. Like. Open up the club! Open up the club, bring different minds in, bring different opinions in, maybe some of the things can't be mitigated, but if you're constantly going back to the same people and you're expecting different results, that's a problem. To me, that is one of the biggest issues with politics and inclusiveness. It feels excluding. It feels like, if you're not a part of this club, if you don't have this education level, if you don't speak in this sort of way, if you don't have this skin-tone, if you're not, if you don't have a disability, if you do have a disability, it's not for you.* Community organisation interview 3

Statements 26-30 reflect discussions on the perceived inequality of influence within politics and the suggestion that there is scope for people to be more empowered in politics. Broadly, these statements are phrased negatively in contrast to the positive phrasing of statements noting the function of politics. Watts and Stenner (2012) suggest that statements should be phrased in the same positive or negative 'direction' to assist participants' interpretation. However, the format of the Q-sort grid means that there is the potential for the statements to be positioned in either an agree or disagree position. Consequently, participants can still rank the statements to capture their preferences.

Perceptions of citizenship duties

The third sub-theme considers the extent to which people feel a sense of responsibility to engage with politics and is reflected in statements 31-35. Dalton (2008) argues that there has been a shift from duty norms, where political participation is viewed as a citizenship duty, to engagement norms which are more individualised and expressive and may not be targeted towards arena politics. Such normative shifts are captured by Norris' (2011) suggestion that people have become increasingly challenging towards political institutions, however Norris identifies that this shift does not

precipitate in political disengagement but can lead to extra-parliamentary political participation.

Often, QESB participants referenced their sense of duty to vote. These discussions frequently positioned this duty as a way in which citizens could claim power within the political system. Furthermore, participants often discussed turning out to vote as giving people the right to criticise the actions of the Government – if you do not vote then there was a sense that you have recused yourself from the political process.

> *I sort of think that you should vote. I think if you chose not to vote, you shouldn't be allowed to complain. Um, because you, you haven't done anything* QESB Aberystwyth pre-election group 1

One community organisation participant associated their decision to vote with their perceptions of the importance of politics. Politics is the process which facilitates care for the most vulnerable in society. Here, the perceived duty to vote is explained via the function of politics, discussed above to be an element of the definition of politics. The following quotation demonstrates that an individual's meaning of politics should be conceptualised as the interaction between the definition of politics and the orientation to politics:

> *What I personally see as politics is that people take positions of responsibility to care for the vulnerable, in my opinion. That's why I pay my taxes, that's why I vote. I vote as there are people in a less fortunate position than me.* Community organisation interview 1

As noted by Amnå and Ekman's (2014) concept of 'standby citizens', a lack of participation does not necessarily equate to political apathy. Instead, Amnå and

Ekman identify a section of Swedish youth who did not habitually participate but who still engage with politics by keeping track of current affairs and who are willing to step up and participate if needed. Therefore, a sense of responsibility may not result in a decision to participate in politics.

Statements 31-36 consider the extent to which participants are prepared to engage with politics. The statements refer to the importance placed on politics – and whether participants recognise a duty to vote and a similar duty to pay attention to politics. Further to this, the statements also consider the extent to which participants identity with a need to hold political leaders to account.

Facilitators and barriers to political engagement

The final sub-theme considers potential facilitators and barriers to engaging with politics and is reflected in statements 36-40. Perceptions on what can help or hinder political engagement are grounded in observations of politics and the elements which may foster inclusion or exclusion. Drawing on data from interviews with community organisations and the QESB highlighted that engagement with politics was often influenced by and built on the relationships that people have within their locality. The quotation below demonstrates some correspondence with Putnam's (2000) argument regarding the importance of ties to the local community (conceptualised as social capital) to political engagement.

> *I think, from my experience, the most motivating thing is actually relational. So, I think if people don't go to political meetings and the like, I think it's not necessarily that people aren't interested in politics but very often I think 'Oh, I won't go because I won't know anyone'. Just that sense of shyness and as people engage less which they do, they lose their engagement skills. It*

> *becomes all the more daunting to talk to people you don't know... If someone knows someone, they'll do something with them, they'll trust them. Back in the day, you know, 'I'm going to the Conservative Club, do you want to come along?'.* Community organisation interview 4

A small number of community organisation participants discussed a perceived decline in the strength of community relationships. One participant positioned this phenomenon via an individualised frame, noting that people had forgotten how to connect with one another and that there is an over-reliance on technology which has replaced face-to-face communication. Another participant identified that this decline in community ties was more prevalent in areas of high economic deprivation which was attributed to a higher reliance on the state and this was viewed to have fostered a dependency culture. The key point here is that political engagement was noted to be a social process dependent on the strength of community ties. Both participants identified that something had been 'lost' but there are subtle differences in their accounts as to what had led to a shift in intra and inter-community bonds.

When discussing why they thought people became involved in their organisations, participants often noted that there was a *'social aspect'* with some people wanting the *'opportunity to meet kind of like-minded people'* [Community organisation interview 2]. One wave of the QESB focused on the Scottish independence referendum, with focus groups conducted with activists who campaigned during this time. Within these focus groups, participants often discussed a sense of camaraderie that developed with other activists.

Community organisation participants also discussed that political engagement can be contingent on people having access to resources to support involvement and also noted that these resources are unequally distributed. As noted by one participant, engagement requires time and energy and *'if you're serially disadvantaged it's difficult to do, it's just difficult to do'* [Community organisation interview 7], a sentiment also captured in the following quotation:

> *I think one of the dilemmas to be political is almost a privilege, you've almost got to have the time and the energy and some conception and understanding of the importance of it.* Community organisation interview 1

In the extended quotation below, the participant notes how the members of their community organisation mainly have middle-class backgrounds which may be off-putting and can discourage engagement from people who do not 'see themselves' within an organisation:

> *Yeah yeah, so I think that there's potentially a kind of time and energy issue. You know, it's easier if you are doing a kind of job with stable hours each week and sort of general more sort of stability in your life. It's then easier to be able to plan in going along to a meeting and getting involved and that sort of thing. Potentially that sort of issues that I talked about before, that once the group has become more predominantly middle-class then from a more working-class background coming into that that you might not feel as welcome. And that's probably something that campaigning organisations and groups generally need to work on and making sure that we are more welcoming and making sure that we are going out of our way to say like this is for everybody and to listen to people's ideas and things that come in.* Community organisation interview 2

A similar point is also made by the participant below who discussed the need for campaigns to be inclusive to promote engagement.

> *Now outside of [organisation] when we're talking about other campaigns, the successful campaign is inclusive and accessible. By as many as possible so if you're able to think about the most marginalised person, the most disadvantaged person, the most disabled person by society and if they're able*

> *to feel included in your campaign then your campaign is a success and you should always be striving towards that.* Community organisation interview 3

Participants often acknowledged that engaging with politics requires time and energy and demonstrates a degree of correspondence with the civic voluntarism model of political engagement (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). However, the association between resources and political engagement were progressed one step further. Participants often highlighted how people can come to feel excluded from community organisations, or political engagement more widely, and '*not feel as welcome*' [Community organisation interview 2]. This idea of self-perceived exclusion links back to Bourdieu's (1992, 2010) discussion of political competence (Laurison, 2016).

Statements 36-40 have captured the relational and resource-based accounts of political engagement. The statements ask participants to reflect on the level of commitment and resource required to engage with politics and also the extent to which they agree that politics is for 'certain types of people'. Furthermore, the statements build on the previous discussions on perceptions of politics and question whether the 'polarisation' of politics discussed by community organisation and QESB participants can deter some people from engaging with politics.

Conclusion

The chapter has summarised the Q-set used within this study. A structured Q-set ensures that there is balance across the two identified domains – the definition of, and

orientation to, politics – which comprise an individual's meaning, or interpretation, of politics. Consulting the literature, along with analysis of QESB data, and interviews with community organisations, identified a further four sub-themes beneath each of the two domains. This framework was used to generate the 40 statements that form the Q-set used in the study.

This chapter did not intend to provide a rationale for the inclusion of each statement. Instead, the contours of each sub-theme have been sketched out to present a summary of the various elements which comprise an individual's meaning of politics. As discussed in chapter three, the concourse should be considered to be in flux (Wolf, 2009) and the Q-set may not reflect future shifts in the meaning of politics. Having considered the development of the Q-set, the next chapter will turn to the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS: THE MEANINGS OF POLITICS

This chapter describes the findings gained through conducting a Q-study. The second research question directing this study asked: *What types of meanings do people hold about politics?* As discussed in the research design chapter, the study used Q-methodology to identify whether there are variations in the meaning of politics that people hold and, if so, how this variation can be described. Analysis identified five distinct meanings of politics and the description of these five meanings forms a key contribution of this thesis. The chapter will first outline and justify the analytical decisions that were taken within the Q-study, before then describing the different meanings of politics that were found. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the different meanings of politics. The language used to describe the steps of a Q-study can become quite technical and so a glossary of key terms has been included as appendix 1.

Analytical decisions: Creating factors from Q-sorts

We now progress to consider the analytical decisions made within the Q-study. The first analytical step within Q-methodology is for the Q-sorts to be transformed into factors. Factors, also known as viewpoints, refer to groupings of similar Q-sorts – in other words, participants have ordered the statements in a similar way and could be said to hold a similar meaning of politics. The 37 Q-sorts that were retained for analysis were intercorrelated and factor analysed using Ken-Q Analysis software (Banasick, 2018). Following Watts and Stenner (2012, pp. 106–107), seven factors were extracted using the centroid method which is a standard number of factors to first

extract. The centroid technique (a method of factor analysis) was used rather than principal component analysis as the centroid method has been argued to be more appropriate to an abductive analytical strategy (McKeown and Thomas, 2013). Principal component analysis identifies 'a single, mathematically best solution' (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 99) (here, solution refers to the end-point of analysis, or the viewpoints identified) whereas the centroid method offers 'mathematical indeterminacy' (McKeown and Thomas, 2013, p.56) and, in the words of Watts and Stenner (2012, p. 99), allows the researcher to 'defer a decision about the *best solution'* [italics in the original] (the number of viewpoints which best reflect the Q-sorts) until the data have been explored in depth.

Previous chapters have noted that the study of political engagement is often informed by the researcher's interpretation of politics (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007). In other words, it is the researcher who sets the boundary as to what is and what is not politics. By way of contrast, this thesis places participants' interpretation of politics at its centre and is rooted in exploring whether politics can be interpreted in multiple ways. Consequently, by choosing the centroid technique, the analysis avoids foreclosing the emergence of particular accounts of politics and retains an open and indeterminate approach that is fitting with the thesis' focus on exploring the different meanings of politics.

The next step in Q-methodology analysis is to identify the number of factors which should be rotated – a process which ensures factors best capture and reflect the viewpoint they represent. Factor rotation increases the number of sorts which load on

to a single factor (Jeffares, 2021, p. 233) and aids interpretation of the factor. To load onto a factor means that a Q-sort is ‘included’, or considered to be part of the ‘group’ of Q-sorts that comprise a factor. Both statistical and theoretical criteria can be used to inform the decision of how many factors should be retained for analysis (McKeown and Thomas, 2013, pp. 53–54). The factors’ eigenvalues and level of explained variance were noted and informed the decision as to which factors should be retained. The eigenvalue and level of explained variance are associated with one another to some extent. The measures offer a way in which to assess how much variance across the Q-sorts is captured within a factor. Each Q-sort will rank the statements in different ways. Ideally, all of the extracted factors should explain a high degree of variance across the Q-sorts. By capturing a high degree of variance, we have some assurance that the factors reflect the range of different meanings of politics expressed via the Q-sorts – that we have not omitted a meaning of politics. In addition to the eigenvalue and level of explained variance, I also considered the number of statistically significant Q-sorts loading onto a factor.

There are no hard and fast rules for deciding how many factors should be kept for rotation. There are objective criteria that can be called upon, including retaining factors that: A. have an eigenvalue greater than one; B. meet Humphrey’s rule which states that when the two highest loadings (whether positive or negative) are multiplied, the answer should exceed twice the standard error (Brown, 1980, pp. 40 and 223); and/or C. have two or more statistically significant loading factors (Brown, 1980, pp. 222–223; Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 107).

Within this study, Q-sorts with a factor loading of 0.41 or higher were statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 105). A factor is generated by bringing together Q-sorts – it is a data reduction technique. Factor loading refers to the extent to which the viewpoint expressed in a Q-sort reflects the view represented by a factor. If a Q-sort shared the viewpoint of a factor completely, its factor loading would be +1.00 (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 127). Those Q-sorts with loadings greater than 0.41 were similar enough to the viewpoint expressed by a factor to be 'included', or contribute to the interpretation of the factor (this will be explained in more detail later). Across the seven factors extracted, five factors had eigenvalues greater than 1. This means that five factors had a high level of explanatory power (in other words that the factor accounted for a high level of variance across the Q-sorts loading onto the factor). Furthermore, only two factors were found to have two or more statistically significant loading Q-sorts and two factors met Humphrey's rule (within this study twice the standard error is 0.32). Therefore, not all of the statistical criteria were met by each of the factors kept for rotation.

Brown (1980, p. 42) argues against the blanket application of statistical criteria to decide how many factors should be retained as factors of theoretical significance could be discarded at this early stage of analysis. Deciding how many factors to retain can be informed by statistical measures (as discussed above, the eigenvalue, Humphrey's rule, and the number of statistically significant Q-sorts loading onto a factor), however the researcher should feel free to look at the data from multiple angles and this reflects Q-methodology's grounding in both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Watts and Stenner, 2012). As described above, not all of the quantitative criteria in which to retain factors were met. The closest criterion was that five of the factors had eigenvalues

greater than 1. The purpose of this thesis is to reveal and explore in-depth the different meanings of politics. As argued by Brown (2006), Q-methodology has the potential to reveal previously hidden perspectives. There is a risk that discarding a factor at this stage of analysis on statistical grounds would risk missing a 'hidden' meaning of politics – one that had yet to be identified. Consequently, all seven factors were retained for the next stage of data analysis: rotation.

Varimax rotation (a statistical technique) was applied to the extracted factors. Varimax rotation maximises the variance captured by the factors – so individual Q-sorts are more likely to load onto one factor (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 125). To put it another way, varimax rotation is applied to the initial factor extraction to produce the final factor loadings for each Q-sort. Varimax is viewed to be an appropriate approach when a study is concerned with exploring the 'viewpoints that are favoured by our participant *group* [italics in the original]*'* (Watts and Stenner, 2005, p. 81)*.* In other words, varimax rotation maximises the amount of 'difference' across the Q-sorts that are explained by factors. This study's focus is on exploring whether the meaning of politics held by an individual may influence political interest, it is therefore appropriate to explore the range of general meanings of politics which can be found within the wider participant group.

Analytical decisions: Creating factor arrays

The next analytical step is to generate factor arrays. As has been mentioned, factors are groupings of common viewpoints; a factor array is an ideal Q-sort that is an approximation of this shared viewpoint (factor arrays are presented in table 1). Put

simply, a factor array notes how the statements have been positioned within the best estimate (or ideal) Q-sort. All statistically significant Q-sorts that load onto a factor are merged with one another. The included Q-sorts load onto the factor to different degrees. Some Q-sorts will be 'more closely associated' (McKeown and Thomas, p. 60) with the factor (i.e., more closely represent the shared viewpoint captured by the factor) and others will be more distant. The significantly loading Q-sorts that comprise a factor are subject to weighted averaging (Watts and Stenner, 2005, p. 82). In other words, the Q-sorts with higher factor loadings will count for more when the factor arrays are generated. This averaging produces a score (ranging from -6 to +6) for each statement and generates the factor array, a model of the viewpoint encapsulated within the factor (Brown, 1980). These factor arrays form the basis of the interpretation of shared subjectivities identified through a Q-study. The next step is to look at how each statement is ranked within the factor to reveal the interpretation of the shared viewpoint contained within the factor.

Following varimax rotation which supplied the final factor loading for each Q-sort, a five-factor solution was identified to be most appropriate. After being subject to varimax rotation, two factors did not have any statistically significant loading Q-sorts. I discarded these factors as they also had an eigenvalue of less than 1 prior to rotation. One factor only had two statistically significant loading Q-sorts; however, this factor was retained as it could represent a previously 'hidden' viewpoint (Baker, Thompson and Mannion, 2006; Brown, 2006; Capdevila and Lazard, 2008; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008, p. 487; Burke, 2015). A factor array was then generated for each of the five identified factors. Overall, the five-factor solution explained 43% of the total study variance across the Q-sorts. A factor solution which explains around 35% or higher of

study variance is viewed to be robust (Watts and Stenner, 2012, referencing Kline, 1993). Consequently, the five-factor solution explained an acceptable proportion of the variability across all Q-sorts (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 105).

The interpretation of the five factors, or viewpoints, each revealed distinctive positions on the meaning of politics. As presented in table 2, 26 Q-sorts loaded onto a factor at the $p < 0.01$ level and six Q-sorts were confounded. A confounded Q-sort represents a view which is 'close' to more than one of the factors (or meanings of politics). In other words, the view does not clearly align with one factor and so confounded Q-sorts do not usually proceed to the next stage of data analysis (Watts and Stenner, 2012, p. 129). By excluding confounded Q-sorts, we can have a greater confidence that the included Q-sorts more closely approximate the shared viewpoint represented by the factor. This leaves 5 Q-sorts that did not load onto any factor at the statistically significant level and may reflect either outlier viewpoints, or errors within the online sorting of the Q-set (Jeffares and Skelcher, 2011, p. 1261). To put it another way, the viewpoint within these Q-sorts may be so distinctive that it is not a 'shared', or collective, account of the subject in question. Alternatively, if a participant has not understood the sorting instructions, then the positioning of the statements may be almost at random, rather than reflecting their perspective.

Interpreting factor arrays

Watts and Stenner (2012, pp. 150–155) recommend the use of crib sheets to assist factor interpretation. A crib sheet was developed for each factor and an example has been included in appendix 15. The crib sheets noted the statements that were most

strongly agreed/ disagreed with, along with distinguishing statements (statements ranked in a significantly different way) and statements positioned higher or lower than other factors. Q-methodology analysis frequently focuses on the distinguishing statements to identify areas of distinction across the identified shared viewpoints (Brown, 1980). However, following Watts and Stenner and using the crib sheets helped to identify areas of difference across the viewpoints and facilitated comparison. Identifying statements that were ranked higher or lower than other factors, or viewpoints, assisted in isolating patterns and offered a way to contrast the factor arrays with one another. This is not to say that these rankings were accepted uncritically, rather these statements assisted the overall development of the interpretation, or what the factor array communicates. As identified by Brown (1980, p. 257), Q-study findings are often criticised for being 'arbitrary', however, factor arrays provide a foundation in which interpretations are made and provides a record of the researcher's analysis. As noted in chapter three which outlined the research design, Q-methodology provides an audit trail of the researcher's decision-making. The factor array underpins interpretation and is instrumental in identifying the shared viewpoint that is contained within each factor.

The five meanings of politics are described below. When completing the Q-sorts online, participants were asked to comment on the statements with which they most agreed and most disagreed. Reflecting on these remarks assisted the interpretation of the factors and have been incorporated in the write-up of the shared viewpoints where these clarify and develop interpretation. The shared meanings of politics have been drafted using a narrative style (Watts and Stenner, 2012) and include references to Q-set statements to aid understanding. These references are presented within

brackets and include the statement number, in addition to how this statement was positioned within the best-estimate factor array, for example: (S16: -5). Figure 6 provides a summary of the five shared viewpoints.

Figure 6 Summary of shared viewpoints

Viewpoint	Description	Definition	Orientation
1. *Politics impacts people's lives – being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account*	Politics affects people's life chances and the choices they make. It is important to hold people involved in political decision-making to account. To do this, it is necessary for people to have a robust understanding of current events and there is little excuse for being unaware of politics. There is a broad acceptance of the political system and this viewpoint feels empowered by the political system.	Politics is important, resolves problems, and creates solutions for society.	Belief that people have a duty to engage with politics.
2. *We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict*	There is a general recognition of the functions of politics. Politics is complex and this can lead people to question their level of understanding. There is too much adversarial conflict in politics and this detracts from politics achieving its functions. The way politics is practised leads to confusion and incredulity.	Politics has the potential to generate compromises in society but it is messy and complicated.	Adversarial conflict in politics is off-putting.
3. *Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage*	Politics can be found everywhere in society and is impossible to escape – however, some people's personal circumstances mean that they are more affected by politics than others. There are concerns about the accessibility of the political system and the resulting inequality of influence, however, it is important that people still engage with politics.	Politics is a lived experience.	Concerned about the way in which some people are obstructed from engaging with politics.
4. *The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests*	There is a certain level of distance from politics. There is little faith that the political system acts in the best interests of everyone. However, there is not a complete rejection of politics – rather this viewpoint is disappointed with politics in its current form and the influence vested interests have over the political process.	Does not particularly emphasise the functions of politics for wider society.	The political process is difficult for the average person to influence.

Viewpoint	Description	Definition	Orientation
5. *Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics*	The reach of politics on our everyday life is expanding. However, people involved in politics are generally trusted and there is a sense of adequate representation. Overall, this viewpoint is relatively positive about the political system and is satisfied to keep one step removed from politics.	The scope of politics is increasing. The areas of life affected by politics are increasing.	It is possible to have a say in the political system and we should trust politicians.

Analysis identified two consensus statements. Consensus statements are those statements that do not distinguish between any pair of factors, or viewpoints. Just as considering distinguishing statements identified areas of difference across the viewpoints, consensus statements identify areas of commonality across the different meanings of politics. The two consensus statements are: S20 which notes that people can create their own opportunities to be engaged in politics and S36 which states that politics can be polarised which can put some people off from engaging with politics. There was a general lack of strong agreement or disagreement across each of the five viewpoints with regards to the two statements. The chapter now proceeds to outline the five different meanings of politics.

<u>Viewpoint 1: Politics impacts people's lives – being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account</u>

This viewpoint recognises that politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society (S11: +5 distinguishing statement). Politics offers a route for people to improve their lives (S15: +4 distinguishing statement) and there is some agreement that politics heavily affects people's life chances and the choices they make (S10: +2).

Politics, therefore, is important (S35: +3) and this viewpoint references the potential of politics, as can be seen in the following participant comment:

> *Politics, I feel, describes the means with which humankind can engage in positive discussion (with a strong accent on really LISTENING to widespread and even controversial viewpoints), weighing-up peaceful options, to hopefully agree a series of actions to achieve an equitable, safe society for all.* Participant 31

This comment highlights that the viewpoint recognises a normative dimension to politics. It offers a way for us to work collectively for the benefit of society and there is agreement that politics is the means by which we distribute resources (S14: +3). However, the reality of politics does not meet this normative ideal. There is strong disagreement that politics is focused on achieving the best outcomes for everyone in society (S13: -5) and this viewpoint is not committed to the idea that politics creates order in society (S12: 0). However, it is not so much the case that this viewpoint believes that people involved in politics are only in it for themselves (S25: -4) but the importance of political decisions means that we should be prepared to take action and hold people involved in politics to account (S32: +4).

Nevertheless, the viewpoint does acknowledge that people do not have the same degree of influence within politics (S27: -2). As one participant noted:

> *Those many many millions of souls trying to survive without an adequate supply of the basics (water, food, good health, safe shelter, hygiene and sanitation), the un-educated, those living in war or conflict zones, or under repressive regimes, surely have little opportunity to engage IN politics. However, their plight/situation will have an influence ON politics!* Participant 31

To draw this nuance out, this viewpoint recognises the ramifications of policy decisions and identifies that the political system does not represent all people equally. While there is not a sense of suspicion directed towards all people involved in politics, it is important that there is accountability for political decisions.

The strong emphasis placed on accountability can be associated with the value this viewpoint places on having an awareness of current events (S33: +5) and that *'people should be aware of what is going on in our society'* [participant 18]. It is only through following what is going on that we can challenge political decisions and hold people to account.

This viewpoint emphasises thinking critically and not just accepting political messaging at face value. The expectation that people should pay attention to politics can be seen within this viewpoint and its agreement that keeping up to date with what's going on is relatively easy to do (S38: -3) and does not require too much commitment or time (S37: -3). There is very little excuse for people being unaware and not following the latest current events.

Furthermore, this viewpoint identifies that people can have some level of influence in politics (S8: -4). This influence may not be equal but as identified by one participant: '*Everyone has a say at some level in the political sphere'* [participant 18]. The viewpoint agrees that turning out to vote should be considered a duty (S31: +3). Additionally, keeping track of what is going on is a first step in having some (however small) degree of influence within the political system.

In recognising that people can have some degree of influence, the viewpoint shows limited concern about the influence of the media in politics (S30: 0). Nor does this viewpoint show strong agreement to the suggestion that people need to be more empowered in politics (S29: 0) and is not particularly excised by the suggestion that only 'certain types of people get involved in politics' (S39: +1). While there is less of an emphasis placed on empowerment and concern with others' access of the political system, there is some limited level of agreement that political engagement does not only 'occur' within the political system (S16: +2). Nevertheless, the viewpoint is neutral towards the idea that politics can be found everywhere in society (S2: 0) and everyday decisions, to some degree, can be political (S18: 0). Politics is primarily viewed via the actions of the political system.

Although this viewpoint does not necessarily agree that they have a good understanding of politics (S23: -2), they do have a sense of self-empowerment and feel that they are represented and have influence in politics (S21: -6). Conflict in politics is not seen to be particularly off-putting (S24: -3). Furthermore, within this viewpoint people know what to do if they wanted to engage more in politics (S40: +6 distinguishing statement) and show an appetite to get more involved in politics (S22: -5).

There is a general acceptance of the political system within this viewpoint. This viewpoint seems to have a sense of self-belief in their ability to engage with politics. The political system maybe imperfect but there is also pragmatism that we have to

engage in order to hold decision makers to account. The ramifications of decisions are too great for us not to pay attention.

Viewpoint 2: We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict

There is general support for the functions of politics within this viewpoint. Politics involves making difficult decisions (S9: +2) and should resolve problems and create solutions for society (S11: +3). Therefore, politics is about generating compromises and there is an expectation that politics is messy and complicated (S6: +5 distinguishing statement). Nevertheless, there is disagreement that politics allows us to create order in society (S12: -3). Instead, this viewpoint emphasises the complexity of politics (S26: +4 distinguishing statement). In particular, it seems as though there has almost been a shift in politics – in this day and age politics is getting more and more complicated. There is an international element to politics (S4: +6 distinguishing statement), as noted by the following participant:

> *In a globalised world everything is international. The biggest political issue we've had in recent times is Brexit - an international relations issue and the international trade deals that followed.* Participant 2

The complexity of the issues with which politics must contend means that, even if someone wants to avoid politics, it is becoming harder to escape (S2: +3):

> *It's [politics] in every newspaper and on every tv show somehow, you are forced to think about it. Especially with Brexit and COVID.* Participant 37

There is agreement that politics is about trying create change in society (S17: +3 distinguishing statement), nevertheless, the viewpoint appears to have an institutionalised view of politics as there is some disagreement that lifestyle decisions are political (S18: -2 distinguishing statement). Furthermore, knowing about social issues or expressing an identity are not necessarily seen to be a form of political engagement (S19: -3 distinguishing statement). Therefore, when this viewpoint discusses the inability to escape politics, they are likely to be referring to the creeping impact of decisions made within the political system. The following comment from a participant makes this point:

> *Politics and political decisions made by elected representatives (within a system dictated by unelected representatives) result in policy making which impacts pretty much every aspect our life in society. Since most of us live within the 'system' (it being near impossible to completely opt out of the 'system') it is impossible to escape politics.* Participant 27.

Central to this viewpoint is the association between politics and a negative view of conflict. While politics is expected to be complicated and messy, the process of forming compromises should not necessarily generate conflict (S7: -1). Furthermore, there is too much conflict in politics (S24: +5 distinguishing statement) which can be off-putting. As one participant commented, the adversarial character of politics in the United Kingdom detracts from its ability to generate compromise:

> *UK politics is too polarised and adversarial… If politics really is about solving society's problems it needs to move away from 'winning and losing' and find a way to reach consensus. Our political system does not readily allow for that, particularly with a First Past the Post electoral system, that allows a party enjoying minority support in the country (total votes) to form a gov't based on most seats won.* Participant 20

There is some agreement that it is difficult to keep track of politics (S38: +1). However, people who subscribe to this viewpoint are likely to question their own understanding of politics (S23: -5 distinguishing statement). One participant attributed their lack of understanding to the adversarial character of politics. It is difficult to learn about politics as political discussions revolve around people defending their own position rather than exploring the issue under debate.

There is limited agreement that politics is important (S35: -1 distinguishing statement) and a necessary part of society. For this viewpoint, the way that politics is practised leaves much to be desired. It is not so much that there is a lack of trust in those who are involved in politics (S25: -3). It is more that this viewpoint finds politics perplexing. It is recognised that politics deals with ever-increasingly complex issues, however, politics seems to descend into pointless adversarial disagreement to the detriment of making progress on the issue.

There is some agreement that people should be more empowered within politics and that often the issues that are most important to people are ignored (S29: +2). As one participant notes: *'We seem, regrettably, to be going down the US politics route whereby having influence is determined by how much money you have'* [participant 20]. However, there is only limited agreement that the media has too much power in politics (S30: +1). Nevertheless, this viewpoint notes that not everybody has the same level of influence in politics (S27: -6) and strongly questions whether politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in society (S13: -5). In the words of a

participant, *'this is not true, politics looks after people in power. I don't think the best outcome for every individual can ever be achieved'* [participant 37].

However, this viewpoint is not completely deterred from engaging with politics and there is some limited agreement that people have a duty to vote (S31: +1 distinguishing statement). Furthermore, those who hold this viewpoint are relatively open to being more engaged in politics (S22: -2 distinguishing statement) and holding decision makers to account (S32: +2 distinguishing statement). Nevertheless, the viewpoint is not particularly confident about how to get more involved in politics (S40: -1) and there is disagreement that people should pay attention to politics (S33: -2 distinguishing statement). There is almost a sense that those who hold this viewpoint are puzzled observers of politics. Politics is seen to be important but there is a sense of incredulity and confusion as to the way in which politics is practised. While there may be some agreement about wanting to be more engaged in politics, this is a daunting prospect given the conflictual and adversarial character of politics. At a time of increasing complexity, this viewpoint questions why there must be so much discord in politics.

<u>Viewpoint 3: Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage</u>

Politics is conceptualised broadly within this viewpoint. Politics is interpreted via the political system but we are also embedded within politics in our day to day lives (S2: +2; S5: -5, distinguishing statement). Our everyday interactions are political (S16: +3) and individuals' decisions about their lifestyle are political (S18: +4). However, political

engagement does not necessarily have to generate change (S17: +1 distinguishing statement) and broader expressions of identity can also relate to politics (S19: +3). One participant discussed how they '*try to enact justices in my everyday life about issues I am passionate about*' [participant 36]. Within this viewpoint, politics is a lived experience.

This viewpoint emphasises the importance of turning out to vote (S31: +6). Voting was identified by one participant as being the only way a majority of people *'get to have a voice or involvement in deciding what policies may get passed and decided on'* [participant 9]. However, this support for turning out to vote does not indicate overt support for the political system. Indeed, running through this viewpoint is a strong vein of criticism of the perceived inequality within the political system. There is strong disagreement that everyone has an equal chance to influence the political system (S27: -6 distinguishing statement). Also, there is concern about the barriers that can prevent some people from accessing the political system and there is disagreement that politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in society (S13: -3), or that it is a way for the powerless to improve their lives (S15: -4).

If politics is a lived experience, then this viewpoint also acknowledges that some people are affected more by politics than others. This viewpoint makes a strong association between the political system and the broader power-relations within society within which we are all entrenched. There is inequality of access when it comes to the political system and the decisions made within political institutions have an

influence on our everyday life and interactions, as noted by the following participants' comments:

> *I believe that politics has a huge influence on our everyday lives, some more than others. It is fair to say a lot of decisions that are made in government have negative impacts of different groups of people.* Participant 3.

> *…there is nothing in life where all people have an equal chance at achieving or obtaining anything. If we then put the topic of politics in the discussion, it highlights the fact that most people of certain race, background, gender and age are more likely to have a voice and position in politics.* Participant 9.

> *Everyone should have an equal chance but not everyone does, some people have to fight harder to get their voices heard.* Participant 3.

There is some agreement that it is important to pay attention to politics (S33: +2) and this is seen to be a way to hold decision-makers to account (S32: +5). One participant noted that people have a responsibility to engage with politics:

> *Many people say that they don't follow politics because it's too difficult to follow and they feel disenfranchised. However, we relinquish our power once we give up our ability and responsibility to stay informed and then hold our policy makers accountable.... Every one of us has a duty to pay attention and then act on it because it affects all facets of our lives.* Participant 5

Nevertheless, the same participant highlighted the barriers which can prevent some people from fully engaging with politics:

> *While I do implore people to keep informed, vote and try to hold politicians accountable. I'm under no illusion that this is a difficult task and for someone who's alien to that world, making tangible influence and difference in politics is difficult if you do not have the wealth, resources and connections.* Participant 5

Despite having concerns about the ability of some groups to influence the political process, there is some degree of trust in those who are involved in politics (S25: -1).

The barriers to engage with politics are seen to emerge from wider relations of power within society rather than being solely attributed to the political system.

Political engagement involves a challenge to these wider power relations within society. Politics has always been complicated (S6: +2 distinguishing statement; S26: -3) and this viewpoint expects that there will be conflict within politics (S7: +5 distinguishing statement) and this conflict is accepted by people who subscribe to this viewpoint (S24: -2). Despite concerns about accessibility and equality of influence, this viewpoint is still keen to engage with politics (S22: -5) and feels that they are represented in politics (S21: -2). However, there can be a lack of confidence as to how much is really understood about politics (S23: -2) and there is uncertainty as to how to get more involved in politics (S40: -4).

While there is concern about inequality of influence in the political system, this viewpoint emphasises how politics affects all areas of life and advocates for people to engage with politics. Some people are affected by politics more than others but it is important to take a stand when needed.

Viewpoint 4: The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests

There is a negative account of politics within this viewpoint. Politics is not seen to be a way for the powerless to improve their lives (S15: -5 distinguishing statement) nor does it aim to achieve the best outcomes for people (S13: -3). There is also strong

disagreement that politics is a way for resources to be distributed in society (S14: -6 distinguishing statement), or create order out of chaos (S12: -4). In general, the functions, or benefits of politics are not recognised. Politics is not viewed to be a process by which solutions are generated (S11: 0), nor is politics understood as the choices and compromises we have in society (S9: -2 distinguishing statement, S6: -2). The strongest level of agreement is demonstrated to descriptive statements that politics operates on both a local and national level (S3: +6; S4: +5). The strong agreement with these descriptive accounts again serves to show a lack of identification with the functions of politics.

While the viewpoint may not identify a 'purpose', or function, this does not equate to a lack of concern for politics. In other words, this viewpoint is disillusioned by politics. There is a general sense of disappointment with the actions of the political system. The viewpoint disagrees that everyone has an equal chance to have an influence in politics (S27: -5) and the media is seen to have too much influence (S30: +3). Participants' comments noted that the process of politics was influenced by vested interests. Participants related politics to '*ambition and posturing*' [participant 25], *'a charade'* [participant 11] and others noted the difficulty for the average person to influence the political process:

> *Politics is all about large capital getting what they want. The majority of us are an afterthought. The winners and losers have already been decided.* Participant 11.

> *From differing constituency sizes meaning some votes 'count' more than others to the barriers to entry that exist, both visible and invisible. Not even on paper is there equality. But then is their equality on paper of anything?* Participant 10

Additionally, this viewpoint notes that people in positions of power in politics are there due to their personal networks (S39: +4 distinguishing statement). Participants' comments suggested that politics was viewed as almost a closed shop for some people:

> *… it's harder for some people from some strands of society to be in contact with politics, thereby reducing the diversity of those at the forefront and therefore politics becomes homogenised and some may feel that they have no place within the political world or within political action as they don't think it's for them.* Participant 10.

> *No chance, if you're not an active member of a local political party you only ever get asked for your opinion when its election time when you're suddenly their best friend ever.* Participant 23.

This discontent is also represented in the disagreement that there is a duty for people to vote (S31: -2 distinguishing statement) and the viewpoint is neutral as to whether people should be prepared to engage to hold decision makers to account (S32: 0 distinguishing statement). There is also some agreement that conflict in politics can be off-putting (S24: +2 distinguishing statement). There is little purpose engaging with the political system if decisions have been made already and there is some lack of trust in those involved in decision-making (S25: +1 distinguishing statement).

There is still some sense of hope, or belief, in politics. This viewpoint somewhat agrees that people need to be more empowered in politics (S29: +2) and there is some willingness to engage more with politics (S22: -4). Additionally, this viewpoint identifies that they have a good understanding of politics (S23: +4 distinguishing statement) and there is some limited agreement that people should pay attention to politics (S33: +1). Still, this viewpoint can feel that they are not represented by the political system (S21:

+2 distinguishing statement). For this viewpoint there is little to be gained by engaging with the political system in its current form. The system is there to be gamed by those who have greater influence and so 'ordinary' people are unlikely to get anywhere.

While the discontent within this viewpoint is directed to the political system, there is some level of limited agreement with a broader conceptualisation of politics. Everyday life and interactions are seen to be political (S18: +3, S16: +2). As one participant comments: *'An individual may take politics into his/her own hands in many instances'* [participant 15]. Nevertheless, this broader account of politics has not translated into active attempts to garner influence. Again, this viewpoint is distinguished by its distance from politics.

Viewpoint 5: Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics

This viewpoint is unperturbed by, and relatively positive about, the actions of those within the political system. It is not possible to escape politics (S2: +5) and there is some acknowledgement that people's decisions about how to live their life can be political (S18: +4). There is a preference for politics to be limited in scope and for some areas in life to be protected from politics (S5: +5 distinguishing statement). The viewpoint appears to suggest that it is possible for boundaries to be placed on politics and there is almost a sense that politics has gone 'too far' (in that it is impossible to escape politics). The following participant comment highlights that politics is having an increased effect on people's lives. It would appear that in referencing *'this difficult*

time', the participant is discussing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of social distancing measures:

> *Particularly at this difficult time, politicians are making a lot of decisions about our lives and therefore their decisions have huge impact on us all. There is no way of getting away from the fact that politics is everywhere at present times. I think in the past politics wasn't as prevalent and although it would impact on people's lives, you could escape it to some extent.* Participant 32

This viewpoint foregrounds an institutional reading of politics. While it is acknowledged that lifestyle decisions can be political, there is less support for the idea that people can create their own opportunities to get involved with politics (S16: 0; S19: +1). By way of contrast, this viewpoint strongly agrees that voting is important and that people have a duty to vote (S31: +6 distinguishing statement). As demonstrated by the following participants' comments, voting gives you a stake in the system and enables you to express dissatisfaction:

> *If you don't vote, then you cannot say you haven't been given a chance to air your view.* Participant 30

> *If you don't vote then you can't complain about what happens. Voting is the best way the public can influence what happens in parliament. People fought for the right to vote - that right should not be wasted.* Participant 33

There is a general level of satisfaction shown towards the political system. Politics is identified to create order in society (S12: +3). However, it is notable that this viewpoint does not centre the functions of politics (S11: +1; S6: 0; S9: 0; S14: 0) and there is disagreement that politics offers a way for people to improve their lives (S15: -2). Fitting with the positive account, there is a general level of trust in politics (S25: -4). Furthermore, this viewpoint disagrees with the idea of having to take continuing action

to hold political leaders to account (S32: -3 distinguishing statement). While voting provides a method to hold people to account, this viewpoint does not automatically distrust the actions of politicians. There is also some agreement that people have an equal ability to influence the political process (S27: +2 distinguishing statement) and this viewpoint feels represented and notes that they can have a say in politics (S21: -6). One participant commented on their sense of representation in the political system and noted the different routes available for them to express their opinion.

> *I do have a say because I always use my right to vote whether its locally or nationally. I can make choices about my which political group I support and live my life along the lines of their policies. I can protest against issues I disagree with therefore it is not done to me. There are politicians that share my views on life therefore I do feel represented.* Participant 32

Continuing the positive account of politics, there is an appreciation that if someone attempts to raise an issue then they will be listened to – at the local level at least.

> *It is fairly easy to communicate with local politicians so you can get involved and have your say at that level even if it is not always possible to do so at national level.* Participant 33

Politics is also perceived to be accessible. There is disagreement that politics is only open to people of a similar background (S39: -5 distinguishing statement; S34: -3). Nevertheless, those that subscribe to this viewpoint do not necessarily believe that they have a good understanding of politics (S23: -2), or really want to get more involved in politics (S22: +1 distinguishing statement) and they are also uncertain as to how they would get more involved (S40: -3). Despite this uncertainty, this viewpoint does not necessarily believe that people need to be more empowered (S29: -1). This viewpoint appears to indicate a sense of distance from politics. It is important to vote but there is a willingness to step back and this viewpoint is relatively sanguine about

politics. Politics increasingly is permeating all areas of life. However, there is a general willingness to leave politics to the politicians and there is a level of trust that the political process will at least try to achieve the best outcomes (S13: +3 distinguishing statement) – even if it does not necessarily attain this objective.

This view of politics places a primacy on the political system; however, few demands or expectations are placed on politics. There is a general sense of satisfaction with politics, even if there is not a close affinity with the political system.

Discussion

Five shared subjectivities on the meaning of politics have been identified. In response to the second research question directing this project, there is the potential for people to interpret the concept of 'politics' in different ways. Retaining the five viewpoints captured the different interactions between definitions and orientations and enabled a deeper understanding of the meaning of politics. The position of statements was compared both within and across viewpoints. Each of the five viewpoints offer a distinct meaning of politics. Table 3 notes relatively weak correlations between the factors which suggest that the shared viewpoints represent distinct meanings of politics. The highest correlation was between viewpoints 1 (*Politics impacts people's lives*) and 3 (*Politics is important*) at 0.43. The two identified meanings of politics both emphasise the importance of engaging in politics. Nevertheless, there is a distinction in that viewpoint 1 identifies this engagement as a way in which to hold decision makers to account. By way of contrast, viewpoint 3 (*Politics is important*) expresses

greater concern about the accessibility of politics and the barriers which can prevent some people from engaging with politics.

Exploring areas of similarity across the viewpoints also helps to develop a nuanced account of the different meanings of politics. Both viewpoints 3 *(Politics is important)* and 2 *(We need politics but it's off-putting)* dispute that people hold an equal ability to influence the political system. However, these two meanings of politics take a different approach when it comes to conflict within politics. Viewpoint 3 accepts that engaging in politics will engender conflict as a way in which to progress towards a compromise. By way of contrast, viewpoint 2 *(We need politics but it's off-putting)* can be distinguished by its aversion to adversarial conflict which can discourage further involvement in politics. There is also a clear distinction between viewpoint 4 *(The political system gives too much influence to vested interests)* and 5 *(Politics should be left to the politicians)*. Viewpoint 4 is critical of the political system and there is little recognition of the potential benefits of politics. To some extent this viewpoint does not hold expectations of politics as there is little point in expecting anything from politics. Viewpoint 5 also places little emphasis on what politics can do for society. Nevertheless, a greater satisfaction is expressed towards the political system than identified in viewpoint 4. Furthermore, viewpoint 5 seems content for politics to take place without much ongoing engagement. There is a sense that politics is infiltrating all areas of life, but that is only because the world has got so much more complicated. There is also a greater belief that people can influence the political process than seen within viewpoint 4.

Drawing out some of these areas of similarity and difference across the viewpoints helps to characterise the distinctive meaning of politics unveiled within each viewpoint. While two participants did not provide any written feedback on their Q-sorts, there was sufficient comments from participants to assist in the analysis of the viewpoints. Nevertheless, the online administration of the Q-sorts means that some caution should still be shown when interpreting the results. Interviews with participants did not ask directly about participants' Q-sorts and instead captured a more general account of their relationship with politics. Nevertheless, these data assisted in exploring the association between an individual's meaning of politics and self-assessed political interest, although it should be noted that interviews were not secured with each participant who completed a Q-sort.

The findings from the Q-study demonstrate that any exploration of the meaning of politics should consider both the definition of politics and the orientation people have towards politics. Key distinctions between the meanings of politics found by this project would be missed if only focusing on how people define politics. For example, viewpoint 1 *(Politics impacts people's lives)* and 4 *(The political system gives too much influence to vested interests)* both define politics via the political system, however we can only understand the differences between these two meanings of politics by considering participants' orientation to politics. Both viewpoints have different views on the duty to engage with politics. There is a greater sense of disillusionment from viewpoint 4 than viewpoint 1, even though both are critical of the political process.

Similarly, to only consider orientations to politics and ignore the definition dimension risks missing areas of nuance within the meanings of politics. This can be seen within viewpoint 2 *(We need politics but it's off-putting)* whose position as 'puzzled observers' can only make sense with reference to their account of politics as being complex. Politics deals with difficult topics and there is a sense of frustration that the adversarial character of politics obstructs progress on these difficult issues. Viewpoint 1's *(Politics impacts people's lives)* concern with staying abreast of political developments can be explained by their sense that politics has a great effect on people's lives and the related need to hold decision-makers to account. Furthermore, viewpoint 4 *(The political system gives too much influence to vested interests)* has a detachment from politics which should be read with reference to their dissatisfaction with the actions of the political system. Viewpoint 3's *(Politics is important)* concern with the inequality of influence can be read with reference to this viewpoint's acknowledgement of a broad conceptualisation of politics. Everyday interactions are political and power-relations within society also affect the access of politics.

Previous chapters have argued that an individual's interpretation of politics is comprised of how they define politics and their orientation to (or their evaluations of) politics. The project's focus on political interest has so far argued that an interest in politics is a product of the relationship people have with the object. Consequently, if the object (here, the meaning of politics) has the potential to shift from individual to individual, as the findings suggest, then it can be assumed that people will relate to this object differently. It is no surprise that people make different evaluations of politics, or that politics can be defined in different ways. However, applying Q-methodology has provided a holistic account of the meanings of politics which explores the

interaction of both definitions of and orientation to politics. It is these holistic accounts that people position themselves when expressing their interest in politics.

Conclusion

Five distinct shared subjectivities concerning the meanings of politics have been identified. In response to the second research question, there is the potential for 'politics' to be interpreted in different ways – namely that there are distinctions within definitions and the orientation to politics. The holistic character of findings drawn from the Q-study distinguishes this project from previous literature. Comparing the five identified meanings of politics has also exposed the nuances between these meanings of politics. However, so far, this analysis has only provided a description of the meanings of politics. Before proceeding, it is important to distinguish between someone's orientation to politics and the way that they relate to politics. Orientation to politics has been used to refer to the general evaluations made of politics. By way of distinction, the relationship someone has with politics is more personalised and captures how the individual personally associates with their meaning of politics. Making this distinction progresses analysis from the descriptive accounts of shared subjectivities (as identified through the Q-study) towards exploring how people relate to their meaning of politics. The associations between an individual's meaning of politics and their expressed political interest will be explored in the next chapter.

Table 1 Ideal factor scores

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
1	When I think of politics, I think about what the Government does to run the country.	-1	0	0	-1	2
2	It's impossible to escape politics. Politics can be found everywhere in society.	0	3	2	0	5
3	Politics takes place locally, as well as nationally.	-1	4	0	6	2
4	Politics takes place internationally, as well nationally.	1	6	1	5	3
5	There are some areas in life that should be protected from politics. For example, we should keep politics out of sports.	0	0	-5	-1	5
6	Politics is about making compromises to get something done and to make a change. It's a messy and complicated affair.	-1	5	2	-2	0
7	Politics is about people trying to get what they want. This means that there will always be conflict in politics and there will be winners and losers in politics.	-1	-1	5	-2	-2

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
8	Politics is about the Government getting its way and forcing policies through. Often, it's difficult to have influence as a decision's already been made.	-4	2	-2	5	-1
9	Politics is about making really difficult decisions and the choices we have in society.	2	2	1	-2	0
10	Politics heavily influences what people can achieve in their life.	2	-2	0	0	-1
11	Politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society.	5	3	3	0	1
12	Without politics we'd live in chaos. Politics creates order in society.	0	-3	-3	-4	3
13	Politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in a society.	-5	-5	-3	-3	3
14	Politics is how we go about distributing resources in society.	3	0	-1	-6	0
15	Politics is a way for the powerless to improve their lives.	4	-4	-4	-5	-2
16	Political engagement doesn't necessarily have to target parliament, or local, or national government. You can be engaged in politics in your everyday life.	2	0	3	2	0

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
17	Politics is about trying to create change in society. It doesn't matter how you do this – whether you connect with people face-to-face or online.	-2	3	1	-3	-4
18	Decisions you make as an individual about your lifestyle can be political, for example, boycotting companies, or reducing how much meat you eat.	0	-2	4	3	4
19	Political engagement isn't just about creating change. Knowing about social issues or expressing your identity are also examples of engagement.	2	-3	3	1	1
20	You don't have to wait to be asked to get involved in politics. You can create your own opportunities to be engaged with politics.	1	-1	0	-1	-1
21	I don't feel that I have a say in politics. Politics is something that is done to me and I don't feel like anyone represents me.	-6	-4	-2	2	-6
22	I don't want to be more involved in politics – but I'm glad that other people are.	-5	-2	-5	-4	1

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
23	I feel I have a good understanding of politics.	-2	-5	-2	4	-2
24	I think there's too much conflict and arguing in politics. I find it off-putting.	-3	5	-2	2	0
25	I don't have trust in politics. People who are involved in politics are only in it for themselves.	-4	-3	-1	1	-4
26	Politics is becoming more difficult than it used to be.	-1	4	-3	-1	0
27	Everyone has an equal chance to have an influence in politics.	-2	-6	-6	-5	2
28	People involved in politics make out they have simple answers to complex questions. They should be more realistic with people.	1	1	1	3	1
29	People need to be more empowered in politics. Often politics ignores the issues that are most relevant to people.	0	2	1	2	-1
30	The media has too much influence over political outcomes.	0	1	4	3	1
31	It is important that people vote. I would go as far as to say that people have a duty to vote.	3	1	6	-2	6

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
32	We can't trust people involved in politics and so, when we need to, we should be prepared to take action to hold political leaders responsible for their actions.	4	2	5	0	-3
33	Even if you're not directly involved in politics, you should still pay attention to what's going on.	5	-2	2	1	2
34	People are more likely to take part in politics if their friends do too. Sometimes you have to be invited to take part.	-2	-1	-1	0	-3
35	Politics is important to everyone's lives. Now, more than ever.	3	-1	2	1	4
36	People's opinions are so polarised these days, I think this puts some people off from saying what they think.	1	1	0	1	-1
37	Being engaged with politics requires commitment. A lot of people simply don't have the time to engage with politics.	-3	0	-1	0	-2
38	It's difficult to keep track of what's going on in politics. You have to have a lot of specialist knowledge to be engaged in politics.	-3	1	0	-3	-5

Statement		Identified factors				
		1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	3.Politics is important…	4. The political system gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians…
39	Certain types of people get involved in politics. This means that people are more likely to engage with politics if they see other people like them involved.	1	0	-1	4	-5
40	If I wanted to get involved in politics, I would know how to do it.	6	-1	-4	-1	-3

Table 2 Factor-defining Q-sorts for the five study viewpoints

Viewpoint	Participant number	Total	Cumulative total
1. Politics impacts people's lives – being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	18, 31	2	2
2. We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	2, 14, 20, 21, 27, 37	6	8
3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 12, 16, 19, 22, 36	10	18
4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	10, 11, 15, 23, 25	5	23
5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics	30, 32, 33	3	26
Confounded	4, 17, 28, 29, 34, 35	6	32
Non-significant	1, 7, 13, 24, 26	5	37

Table 3 Correlations between viewpoints

	1. Politics impacts people's lives…	2: We need politics but it's off-putting…	3. Politics is important …	4. The political system…	5: Politics should be left to the politicians…
1. Politics impacts people's lives…	1	0.13	0.43	0.00	0.29
2. We need politics but it's off-putting…	0.13	1	0.39	0.32	0.06
3. Politics is important…	0.43	0.39	1	0.33	0.14
4. The political system…	0.00	0.32	0.33	1	-0.08
5. Politics should be left to the politicians…	0.29	0.06	0.14	-0.08	1

CHAPTER SIX: FINDINGS: THE MEANING OF POLITICS AND POLITICAL INTEREST

This chapter discusses the findings gained from analysing 19 semi-structured interviews and will explore the extent to which an individual's meaning of politics influences the recognition, or self-assessment, of their interest in politics. These findings consider participants' relationship with politics and their reflections on their political interest. The chapter discusses a major contribution of this thesis and demonstrates that an individual's self-assessment of their interest in politics is dependent on them inferring 1. the salience, or relative importance of their meaning of politics, and also 2. a sense of place, or belonging, within their meaning of politics. This important finding will be discussed in depth. The chapter concludes by integrating the findings from the Q-study and the semi-structured interviews to explore the link between people's meaning of politics and the self-assessment of their interest in politics.

Chapter two detailed the theoretical framework on which this thesis is structured. The chapter outlined Akram's internal political conversation, and also discussed Bourdieu's concept of habitus and how this may assist us to appreciate the processes by which someone assesses their own interest in politics. When discussing the findings from analysis of interview data, references will be made to the theoretical framework and how it allows us to position participants' comments and explore how they relate to politics. The subsequent discussion chapter will develop a more thorough connection between the theoretical framework and the findings.

Participant interviews were completed prior to the analysis of the Q-sorts and interviews were not secured with all participants. Furthermore, some interviews were completed with participants whose Q-sorts were not included in the generation of the five identified meanings of politics. Data from these interviews were still analysed as they provided a valuable insight into participants' reflections on their relationship with politics. Therefore, this section reflects analysis of all 19 completed interviews.

As discussed in the literature review, the examination of political interest is fraught with definitional and methodological complications. Interest has been contended to be an 'in the moment' experience and has an affective dimension and linked to a sense of curiosity and wanting to find out more about a topic. Viewing interest as a reflection of the relationship that an individual has with the object of interest, offers a course across some of the difficulties inherent to this research area. The first research question asks *'How should we conceptualise political interest?'.* Within this thesis, the assessment of political interest is viewed as emerging from someone's relationship with their meaning of politics. Relating to politics is defined as the way someone associates and connects with their meaning, or interpretation, of politics and is distinct from an orientation to politics which refers to the evaluations an individual makes about politics**.** For example, someone may hold a very negative account of the political system (which would be an evaluation, or orientation to politics) but may still recognise the importance of engaging with politics and so always votes. Similarly, someone may perceive that the political system does not represent their interests and so discerns that there is little point paying attention to politics. What I mean by relating to politics then is the way people think, feel, and position themselves in response to their meaning of politics (what they see politics 'to be'). In response to the second research question: *What*

types of meanings do people hold about politics?, we have seen through the findings of the Q-study that there are a range of meanings of politics and distinctions in the definition of, and orientation to, politics. It remains to tackle the third research question: *To what extent do individuals' meaning of politics influence the self-assessment of their interest?*

Exploring the connection between individuals' meaning of politics and their political interest is the focus of the second part of the chapter. Analysis of interview data demonstrates that the assessment of interest is influenced by an individual acknowledging the *salience* of their interpretation of politics, as well as identifying that they have a *place* in politics. The idea of salience captures the relative importance the individual places on politics – whether their meaning of politics is viewed to have significance and consequence. Having a sense of place refers to whether the individual perceives that they 'belong' within their meaning of politics and that they 'fit-in' and can meet the demands of politics. This key finding will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.

In order to get to that point, first the chapter will consider briefly how participants discussed their interest in politics which will call upon Akram's concept of the internal political conversation. The internal political conversation explores the process by which someone relates to their meaning of politics and how this may influence the self-assessment of political interest. Directly asking participants to discuss their interest in politics and, in particular, how they defined political interest began to reveal this process. Additionally, participants were asked whether they thought about politics 'in

their heads'. In doing this, participants started to implicitly reveal their conceptualisation of politics and how they related to their meaning of politics.

Following from this, the discussion will move on to consider the elements (salience and place) that influence the self-assessment of interest. Next, the chapter will consider how participants identified that they learnt about politics and whether their political interest had changed across the course of their life. This discussion again emphasises the contribution of salience and place to self-assessed political interest and reinforces the argument that politics is not encountered as a neutral entity. As identified in the theoretical framework, people will bring their pre-conceptions of politics when assessing their interest.

Finally, the chapter will close by identifying how elements of place and salience may be identified across the different meanings of politics revealed within this project. This again supports the argument of the thesis – that the self-assessment of political interest is dependent on how individuals relate to their meaning of politics. The finding supports the main contribution of the thesis. Our understanding of self-assessed political interest will be progressed if we place a greater emphasis on exploring the different ways in which politics can be interpreted and how people relate to these meanings.

What do people think about when they think about politics?

Participants were asked whether they have ‘internal thoughts about politics’. The question was sometimes rephrased to ‘is politics something you think about?’ if participants asked for the question to be clarified. The work of Akram (2019) has demonstrated that it is possible for people to identify their internal political conversation, however, some people may articulate this conversation with greater clarity than others. Asking participants to discuss their internal thoughts about politics aimed to identify the extent to which participants engaged in internal questioning and deliberation about politics and also how participants viewed themselves in relation to their thoughts about politics.

Participants confirmed that they did think about politics and frequently referred to their broader personal opinions on current affairs. Some participants referenced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty surrounding Brexit negotiations as examples of how it was impossible to escape thinking about politics. Other participants discussed specific policy areas and their concerns about the effects of policy on the wider population. Several participants spoke of the importance of hearing a range of different viewpoints to strengthen their own opinions on particular topics with this being viewed as a way of avoiding ‘*groupthink*’ [participant 5].

In addition to responding to the specific question on internal thoughts about politics, participants also frequently referenced their political deliberations. At times, this deliberation was expressed overtly as participants talked through their thought processes and how they came to hold a particular opinion. Other participants did not

provide a commentary of how they came to hold a particular opinion but their responses demonstrated that they had reflected on their relationship with politics. For example, one participant reflected on the intrinsic link between being interested in politics (here identified as being 'political') and their role as a faith leader. The participant is not outwardly questioning their own position in relation to politics, but demonstrates reflection when saying that someone from their faith community would be '*missing the point*' [participant 18] if they were apolitical. Within this quotation, there is not explicit deliberation, or uncertainty, that would be indicative of the internal political conversation. Nevertheless, their sense of self as a political person is understood as a reflection on the coherence between their faith and the way that they interpret politics or, their meaning of politics. The self-assessment of their interest arises from the reflexivity of the participant. They are tying their assessment of themselves as politically interested to their account of politics.

> *There is a perceived opinion within certain sectors of society that people in my position as a leader of a faith community shouldn't be political and I kind of understand that, I don't agree with it but I kind of understand it, but actually I don't see, when I reflect on it rationally, I don't see how you could be apolitical. Certainly, from my faith tradition, you would be missing the point really.* Participant 18

Several participants questioned their own level of political engagement, with one participant describing this as an *'internal conflict'* [participant 36]. All participants identified that there was a purpose to engaging, however, participants also reflected on some sense of questioning of their role within politics. They are '*totally disillusioned*' [participant 27], at times '*switch off*' [participant 32] and ask '*[a]m I the right person'* [participant 36] to get involved in campaigning:

Although like, and again this is me being totally contradictory, to say that I'm totally disillusioned but at the same time, for a long time now, I've thought about joining the Green Party, partly, and more recent in more recent years, because I've been so inspired by what I've seen some Green Party councils doing and pushing and driving for. Participant 27

Yeah, I switch off sometimes, I think 'oh, what's the point' and then other times I think well we need to stick together and do something or somehow show what we support and what we don't support. Participant 32

The internalised conflict doesn't relate to my decision making, they relate to how much I feel that my voice is valued within what I have to say because I think there's two parts, one is adding to it and just being another person that has a particular viewpoint, which is a positive when it comes to a certain issue, and then the second part is, is what I have to say any different from what everyone else has to say and should I just take a step back and let someone else speak. Participant 36

The purpose of discussing how the internal political conversation was represented within the interviews is not to replicate Akram's work and explore the qualities of the internal political conversation. Instead, the point here is to demonstrate that participants' deliberations about their political engagement and, in relation, their interest in politics, are informed by their account of politics. In other words, participants positioned themselves in relation to their meaning of politics – how they see politics to 'be'. The internal political conversation is active and is suffused across participants' discussions of their political engagement. To repeat the findings detailed in chapter five, people do not have the same response when they hear the word politics, it is not a neutral term, but one that is embroiled in individuals' own interpretation of the concept of politics. Participants' discussions of their interest in politics further support the idea that political interest should be viewed as a self-assessment based on the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics.

The complexity of political interest

Across all interviews, participants provided a rich account of their relationship with politics. As can be seen in appendix 13, a high proportion of participants rated themselves as very or fairly interested in politics. When it comes to those participants who were interviewed, only one participant expressed that they were 'not at all' interested in politics. Participant 37 identified a lack of interest in politics and also distanced themselves by identifying that they have a '*barrier*' when it comes to politics and this was a recurrent theme during the discussion. However, there appeared to be a discrepancy between how some participants rated their interest in politics and how they related to politics throughout their interview. Some participants acknowledged this discrepancy between their self-assessed political interest and their discussion of their relationship with politics, whereas others did not. The theoretical framework and its grounding in the work of Bourdieu and Akram discusses how accounting for the unconscious allows us to explore further how people conceptualise their political interest. A number of participants seemed to 'expect' that they would be interested in politics and it was almost as though they could not identify any alternative other than being interested.

The interviews with participants 38 and 25 revealed a more detached relationship with politics than may be expected to coincide with a high rating of interest. Here, the participants demonstrate reflexivity as to their relationship with politics. The participants are aware that particular forms of behaviour, or outward expressions, are perceived to be in accordance with holding an interest in politics. The participants consider their own behaviour and how this coheres with their self-assessment of their interest. Participant 38 expressed clearly that they did not want to have an in-depth

involvement with politics. They were highly critical of the role of political parties and, as a rule, the participant no longer voted – although they did vote in the 2019 UK General Election as they supported the local candidate. Despite this criticism of political parties, the participant identified that *'by and large, the system has worked'* [participant 38] as the political system facilitates debate and allows decisions to be made. The participant noted that they had a general awareness of current events but did not see that there was much point in engaging in political conversations as *'people won't change their opinion'* [participant 38]. Similarly, participant 25 discussed how they had become less interested in politics as they aged. The participant noted that they did pay attention to the news and felt that they had a good understanding of politics. Their decline in interest was attributed to a growing sense of cynicism towards the actions of politicians, along with a sense that people are less likely to be enthused by politics as they age, with those who are still interested in politics identified as *'naïve'* [participant 25]:

> *So, if someone was still interested in politics, and they were the same sort of time in life that I am, I would, I would assume that there was something wrong with them.* Participant 25

The two participants both expressed that they were very or fairly interested in politics. The higher rating of political interest would perhaps have been expected to coincide with a more positive relationship with politics. Instead, participant 38 portrayed a more distant relationship whereby they characterised themselves as a detached observer of the political system. Participant 25 demonstrated a more negative relationship with politics, actively questioning why people remained interested in politics when they had seen how the political system, and politicians more specifically, operate. This hints at the nuance within the assessment of political interest. Someone with self-assessed

interest may not necessarily identify positively with politics. The vast majority of participants associated negative connotations to the word politics and, in particular, referenced their grievances with the UK political system and the actions of politicians:

> *I'm looking at the political landscape, I realised that politicians can be bought and when I say bought. I mean, like they're very much influenced by those that have money.* Participant 9

> *Whether it's Boris saying something or Keir Starmer saying something. I just tend to have very cynical thoughts about their motives, I no longer, I just tend to be very cynical, I tend to think that they're more interested in their own ambitions rather than doing the right thing.* Participant 25

The quality of discussion within interviews revealed that the participants had reflected on, or related to, their meaning of politics. Participants still identified that they were interested in politics despite these negative connotations which demonstrates that someone can hold positive or negative accounts of politics and still self-assess as being interested. By way of balance, two participants (including participant 37, the one participant who rated themselves as 'not at all interested') discussed the actions of politicians in a more positive way and viewed politicians as mostly having good intentions:

> *At the end of the day, they are just people as well, you wouldn't go into politics, I don't believe, if you didn't want to do something that would help other people. I don't think politics is a selfish thing, to be interested in politics you've got to have some understanding of people with a different life to your own and want to make a difference, to make people more equal, to solve some issues that are present.* Participant 36

> *Because, I mean, I personally, I don't like to think that people are lying. Because why would they? But then again, it's like, if Jeremy Corbyn was promising, x, y, and z at one point, he's just going to pluck it out of thin air. So, I kind of, I don't know, I think there's a line between being realistic and just plain face lying, if that makes sense?* Participant 37

Participants' discussions allow us to conclude that the association between an individual's self-assessed interest and the meaning of politics is not linear. Participants' interest in politics was not attributed solely to them holding a positive account, or vice versa, a negative account of politics. Indeed, the relationship between the meaning of politics and an individual's assessed political interest is complex and requires a more developed approach which grants us the space to consider the processes by which people relate, or position themselves in response to this meaning of politics.

Participants broadly acknowledged the value they place on voting (aside from the one participant who reported that they usually did not vote). Voting was viewed frequently to be a communication channel whereby people can convey their preferences to the Government. However, the identification of a sense of citizenship duty did not automatically lead to interest. Two interview participants discussed the value they placed on voting but one rated themselves as being 'not at all interested' in politics and the other reported that they were unsure of their level of interest in politics.

Furthermore, the complexity of political interest can also be seen in the responses of two participants who identified that completing a Q-sort had made them reflect on their own level of interest. This reflection suggests that, to some extent, ranking the statements within the Q-study encouraged reflexivity from the participants. Participant 27 identified that they were 'unsure' of their level of interest, however, during the interview the participant identified the following incongruity:

> *Actually, reflecting on, doing the questionnaire, the online survey, and one of the final questions asks 'have you taken part in any of these actions?' or something like that, in the past month, or something. Well actually, I've done nearly all of those things but I don't consider myself political.* Participant 27

The quotation identifies how participating in the fieldwork had started to inform their internal political conversation and the extent to which they considered themselves a 'political' person. The participant's discussions suggest that their assessment of their political interest was in flux. The question then emerges as to why the participant had taken actions considered to be political but had not assessed themselves as being interested in politics.

Similarly, participant 32 also acknowledged that participating in the study had made them reflect on their interest in politics:

> *Yeah, you've certainly made me think about it, if someone had said to me, are you interested in politics before I answered your questionnaire and obviously before I spoke to you, I would have said no… Yes, it's made me think about things more.* Participant 32

Again, this suggests that completing the study had informed participants' internal political conversation. One participant discussed how someone may not recognise their interest due to the negative connotations associated with politics. Here, having an account of the unconscious exposes us to the idea that negative associations with politics may influence how an individual relates to politics. In other words, an individual may be engaged with politics in a way that would suggest that they are interested, but they do not perceive themselves to be interested in politics. In the quotation below, the

participant makes a clear link between the dependency of an individual's interest on their relationship with politics:

> *I was talking to my friend about how they didn't realise how they've been engaging with political situations or acts because it's not something, because in their heads, it's such a negative thing because in their heads they're like 'no, I'm not political.* Participant 3

A small number of participants discussed the difficulty of defining what it means when someone describes themselves as being interested in politics, noting that there are multiple dimensions of politics in which to be interested. Here, the participants demonstrate reflexivity through suggesting that an interest in politics can be determined by an individual's account of politics.

> *Well, I would immediately be asking some follow-up questions because that's a very broad statement, right? Presumably, my interpretation would be that they wanted to have a conversation with me, and then I would immediately want to know, well which kinds of politics are you interested in?* Participant 17

> *And I'd probably ask how heavily into politics they already are and like what kind of opinions they have. Like. I would guess they would kind of make me think that they were probably not that clued up on politics, I guess…because it's almost like a really innocent statement, 'I'm interested in politics'. If I went up to a chef and said, 'I'm interested in cakes', that chef would probably think I've no idea what to do, but I'd like to learn.* Participant 28

Some participants described political interest as an awareness of current events, or taking active steps to keep informed about politics. Frequently, this awareness was associated with the importance of questioning the media's presentation of current events and that attempts should be made to get *'behind the headlines'* [participant 23].

> *I don't think an interest in politics is part of personality, I would say it's a positive thing to be interested in, I feel like having an awareness of politics means I'm not uninformed or ignorant.* Participant 5

> *Well, I think that an interest in politics for me has to mean that you're aware of the issues beyond the reporting of them, or beyond at least one level of reporting of them.* Participant 18

Other participants defined political interest as an expression of care for other people and being concerned about the experiences of others.

> *I think they're saying that they care about what's going on because when someone says that they're not interested in politics, for me, that kind of signifies that either they're willingfully ignorant, or that they just don't have the time or the resources to be engaged in politics. But when someone says they are engaged with it, I instantly think OK, this person cares about what's going on and they may have a completely different view point from mine, but they still are showing that they care about what's going on in our society and I think that that's important and that should be a type of value that everyone should have. To care about society and how they want it to look like.* Participant 3

> *To be kind of interested in society and an active member of society and taking an interest in what goes on around me and in the community and other people. So, what's it mean to me to be? Someone else yeah, I think that about someone else as well, if they were interested in politics, they would be interested in making a difference, potentially changing society, being involved in issues that come about in society, that's what I would think.* Participant 10

Furthermore, one participant suggested that political interest should be viewed as operating on a spectrum and challenged the idea that anyone can be truly uninterested in politics.

> *So, I feel like with everything there's always a spectrum, in the sense that you can be extremely political or you can be like just a little bit political. I wouldn't say that you can't be political at all because I don't necessarily think that's true because, as I said before, there are ways that we interact with politics and we don't realise that we're doing it, it's just we haven't given it that label of this is a political act, I'm doing something political.* Participant 3

Participants' discussions of political interest highlighted that there was no shared external benchmark which someone could use to measure their interest in politics.

Indeed, the phrase political interest was frequently used interchangeably with engagement with politics. This mirrors the earlier discussion in the literature review whereby political interest was argued to be antecedent to political engagement. Interview data add further support to the argument that the assessment of political interest (saying 'I'm interested in politics') should be viewed as a self-reflection based on the individual's interpretation of politics. The internal political conversation allows us to examine the process by which someone comes to make this assessment. Asking participants to discuss the way in which they think about politics begins to uncover elements of the internal political conversation.

So far, analysis of interview data has established the complexity of political interest. In response to the first research question, self-assessed political interest emerges from the way that an individual relates to their meaning of politics, as mediated via the internal political conversation. The third research question asks what influences the assessment of political interest. To answer this, we now turn to consider how individuals relate to their meaning of politics and the impact of this on self-assessed political interest.

Political interest: Conditional on perceived salience and place in politics

The previous chapter identified that people can hold different meanings of politics. The five identified shared subjectivities demonstrate differences in the definition of, and orientation to, politics. As discussed in previous chapters, there is a distinction to be made between the 'in the moment' experience of being interested in politics and an

individual reflecting and classifying themselves as politically interested. For someone to label themselves as being interested in politics requires a transition from the experience of interest to someone identifying their interest. Analysis of interview data revealed that the assessment of political interest is dependent on participants seeing the salience of politics, along with holding a sense of place within politics. These two conditions of political interest will now be explored in greater depth. First, I explore how participants conceptualised the salience of politics and how perceiving the salience of politics influenced the self-assessment of interest. I then go on to explore participants' account of their sense of place in politics. To do this, I consider how participants discussed the accessibility of politics, in addition to how some participants perceived a level of self-doubt and lack of confidence when it came to politics. Participants' reflections on how they learnt about politics, or their political socialisation, considers how this sense of place may surface. I again make references to the theoretical framework of the internal political conversation, as well as the unconscious via habitus, throughout this section. These pointers will be explored in greater detail in the subsequent discussion chapter.

Perceived salience of politics and acknowledging political interest

Across all interviews, participants' discussion of politics demonstrated the potential for people to hold different definitions (as previously described, the what, where, and why) of politics. While politics was primarily identified through electoral politics or '*mainstream politics*' [participant 36], the majority of participants also discussed the potential for politics to affect all areas of life and, in doing so, reflected on the salience of politics. Salience refers to the importance, or relevance, of politics. To acknowledge

the wide-ranging impact of politics suggests a corresponding acknowledgment of the salience of politics.

Politics is salient because you cannot escape it

Turning first to perceiving the salience of politics, all participants discussed the significance of politics and raised topical issues and discussed the impact of these on either themselves or wider society. When asked how they would define politics, all participants' accounts included reference to electoral competition, political parties and politicians, or, in the words of one participant *'in your face politics'* [participant 10]. Participants frequently discussed the potential for politics to infiltrate all areas of life and characterised politics as an ongoing process in which a start and end could not be discerned:

> *Even, for example, recreational sports something like that, there's direct policy links to improving participation from BAME communities or improving awareness of LGBTQ+ issues within sports or blah blah blah or disability rights or things like that. So even something you would think, you know, it's just a Sunday league kick around in a park, there's so much that's gone before that but it has been impacted upon by politics and politics will potentially shape that in future.* Participant 10

> *Politics, I think, it doesn't ever stop, but equally, it doesn't really start. It's from when you're born, before you can make your own decisions, I think you're already engaged in politics. Participant 36*

Three participants directly referenced how politics can have different effects depending on people's life circumstances which may influence how people relate to politics. Some participants suggested that there may be a passive acceptance of

politics if people were unaffected by political decisions. The way in which people related to politics could be influenced by the extent to which politics impacted their life:

> *…[I]t doesn't affect some people as much as it directly affects me and it's also true that it directly affects some people more than it directly affects me, just based on material circumstances and presumably that leads to lots of people not thinking about politics as much. Thinking about it in so far as who they're going to vote for and not thinking about it again for years.* Participant 17

> *If anything, if something happened to affect rules, the Government made a rule, a new law or something that they [participant's parents] weren't pleased or happy with they just said 'Oh, have to live with that'. Acceptance really that that is what the Government is for…I don't remember my parents being particularly, my family being particularly affected by rules, they weren't particularly well off. And they weren't particularly poor. Generally, at that level, laws tended to pass them by.* Participant 38

One participant reflected deeply on the vast effects of politics on their life. Not thinking about politics is positioned as a 'privilege' and reflects a similar sentiment to the above quotation which acknowledged that politics affected some people more than others. Therefore, some people can 'afford' to distance themselves from politics. However, the participant identified that by being a Black woman they had an almost constant awareness about how politics affects them. Of note, the participant identified that there could be a sub-conscious element to this awareness. In other words, the participant noted that their personal decisions were intertwined with politics. The participant noted that the closeness of this association may mean that some people do not recognise the political character of everyday interactions. However, the participant's political consciousness led them to feel that their life cannot be distinguished from politics and the participant expressed a high-degree of reflexivity on the effects of politics on their life. There appears to be a feedback loop whereby the individual's everyday experiences cycle back and influence their meaning, or interpretation of politics.

Similarly, their meaning of politics can influence how they perceive and understand their everyday interactions. Here, the internal political conversation allows us to explore the process by which the participant acknowledges the salience of politics.

> *For me because I'm a Black woman, I don't have the privilege to not think about politics because a lot of areas of my life are ruled by politics. Like even if we're talking about the circumstances that are happening at the moment with George Floyd's murder and the protests that are going on, for me anyways I was always taught from a young age that there is a big difference between me and other races and I have to work 10 times harder and because of that, that made me have to be aware of what's going on in politics, so that I make sure that I'm not on the wrong side or that I'm not doing the wrong thing. So I guess even if I'm not consciously thinking about politics, subconsciously I am because it might just be even the way that I do my hair, it would be a political statement, if I wear my natural hair, or if I do a different hair style because of what the stereotypes might be in certain environments and I think that's something that people don't recognise because a lot of the time, our personal decisions in our lives can't be separated from politics because they are so intertwined, so for me because politics is, it's a part of who I am, as a Black person, I can't be separate from politics.* Participant 3

While the majority of participants discussed the lack of boundaries within politics, one participant reflected how some policy issues were '*beyond politics*' [participant 27] – in other words that the importance of a policy issue (here, environmental issues) was such that it should be considered beyond the realm of contention and debate. The importance the individual placed on the policy issue led to it being kept distinct from politics. In contrast to other participants, it is not politics but the policy issue that is viewed to be important and relevant. The internal political conversation has an emotional element (Akram, 2019) and the participant's strong concern for the environment offers an anchor upon which the participant assesses politics. Associating politics with conflict and contention affected how the participant reflected on the salience of politics:

> *To make it a political issue to me is just bizarre because for me it transcends all that, it's just beyond politics…So, yeah, it's something that no matter who*

the political party is, whatever the policies are, whatever the politics are, that's our habitat and should be something that is protected. I'm not explaining it very well. Participant 27

Salience via a normative account of politics versus politics in practice

In addition to discussing 'where' politics can be found, several participants' discussions revealed a normative account of politics. These participants had clear expectations of what politics should achieve, or how politics should be played out and frequently identified a disconnect between what politics should be like, or a 'pure' form of politics, and what they observed. This was often framed through distinguishing between politics and the conduct of politicians:

Politicians themselves, which is getting slightly away from politics, politicians themselves are only interested in the people when election time starts nearing, or opinion polls indicate that they are doing a terrible job and that they might lose the next election that's what it feels like…. Politicians by and large tend to tow the party line, whichever party they are from, whereas politics, if you get them behind the scenes, put them behind a curtain and you don't know who you're talking to, I think their opinions would be somewhat different on many different subjects. So, on one hand, they are politicians because they are affiliated to a particular party and they have got to promote that party line whether they like it or not, and then you've got politics which is slightly different because you can perhaps try and take the bias and the party political stuff out of it and you might come up with a better answer. Participant 23

It's a case of you have to be a bit cynical, don't you, about other people. Well, not politics, the House of Parliament and officials, MPs, you just have to be a little bit cynical about what the reasons they're giving for stuff. Participant 11

I have opinions on it [politics], and the way, about the way it works, so I don't, I don't think about it a lot. No, because the opinions are there. And if they, if anybody raises the issue, I bring them up again, I haven't changed my opinions in quite some time. I still think the way it's done is right in theory, wrong in practice. Participant 38

Other participants viewed politics as a route to challenge injustice and achieve social change. Again, this normative account of politics was often contrasted with the actions of '*self-serving*' [participant 18] and *'corrupted'* [participant 3] politicians.

> *This is why I've always seen politics is supposed to have been a progressive system to help people become better within societies and to move forward. So, like, obviously, with that, you would choose the side of stuff, where people would give their opinions on progressiveness and hope and real change that would make everybody better. So, like you'd kind of veer away from the people who think that politics is about not progressing and just being hateful.* Participant 28

> *Well, I suppose, there are two strands to that in my response. One would be a strand that associates politics with the greater good, a compassionate caring society, and the development of a compassionate caring society. And then there's also a strand of politics where sometimes the reality that you get is selfishness and self-serving. And you can see, for me, when I think about politics, I can see both aspects of that.* Participant 18

> *I just feel that politics, even though it's a great way to make change, it is very corrupted, it's very corrupted and the only way to kind of get rid of corruption is to get rid of the people that are creating it…. I guess I just want politics to be a way of making change. Not a way to control people and get people to do what you want because then we're stepping into immoral territory.* Participant 3

Participant 3 also discussed how they have reframed their meaning of politics to emphasise its potential to achieve social change as they did not want to '*fall down a rabbit hole of negativity*' in the same way as some of their peers. What is notable here is the participant's recognition that their understanding of politics, specifically what they saw as the potential of politics, had the ability to affect how they relate to politics. By foregrounding what is perceived to be the positives of politics, the participant can maintain perceptions of the salience of politics and view politics as something with which it is worth engaging. This discussion captures the reflexivity that is part of the internal political conversation. The participant demonstrates an involved and sustained

internal deliberation whereby the participant monitors their interpretation of politics and reflects on how this meaning of politics influences their relationship with politics. There is a high-degree of awareness from the participant that the gap between the perceived potential of politics and its practice may affect how they relate to politics. Identifying with a negative account of politics and disengaging, in the participant's words, results in *'never be[ing] able to use my power or my voice'* [participant 3], while maintaining a more positive account encourages the participant to uphold their engagement with politics. Again, reflexivity and the internal political conversation alerts us to the process by which participants conceptualised the normative accounts of politics.

The association between the salience of politics and political interest

While the findings of the Q-study and participant interviews have clearly demonstrated that politics can be defined in a multitude of ways, these definitions are descriptive accounts that require further development to respond to the research question – namely how an individual's meaning of politics can influence the assessment of an interest in politics. Participants' explicit and implicit discussions of their definition of politics were framed in terms of the salience of politics. When referencing the what, where, and why definitions of politics, participants often foregrounded the 'effects' of politics. For example, when discussing the 'boundaryless' character of politics, this was associated with the potential for politics to affect all dimensions of life. Similarly, normative accounts of politics demonstrated perceptions of the potential of politics and the related disappointment when these expectations were not met. The assessment of political interest is dependent on people identifying that politics is something in which it is worth being interested. As there are a range of meanings of politics, there

will also be variation as to why politics should be valued, in other words, what it is about politics that makes it salient.

However, the assessment of political interest is not only influenced by identifying the salience of politics. For example, participant 37 was uninterested in politics but still discussed the importance of voting and acknowledged the potential ramifications of Brexit, as a political decision, on their life. To some extent, this would suggest that the salience of politics is recognised but this did not lead the participant to self-assess themselves to be interested in politics. The chapter will now proceed to demonstrate that, along with recognising the salience of politics, the assessment of political interest is also dependent on individuals perceiving that they 'belong', or have a sense of place, within politics.

Perceiving a place in politics and political interest

In addition to the definition of politics, the meaning of politics also encompasses an individual's orientation to politics. In other words, the evaluations that people make, and the feelings they have about politics.

As has already been discussed, participants frequently expressed negative views about the political system, however criticisms of the political system and, in particular the conduct of politicians, did not preclude the assessment of an interest in politics. It was not just participants' opinions about politics that influenced their self-assessed interest in politics, but rather how participants viewed themselves in relation to their

meaning of politics. In particular, whether they perceived that they had a place in politics and, in connection, discerned that they have a right to claim an interest in politics. I discuss three elements demonstrating how a sense of place in politics was identified in interviews: 1. how accessible politics is perceived to be, 2. self-confidence, and 3. the ways in which participants learnt about politics (known as political socialisation). Again, brief references will be made to the theoretical framework to demonstrate how it assists us to appreciate the implications of participants' discussions to our understanding of political interest.

The accessibility of politics

A number of participants highlighted concerns around the accessibility of the political system. Primarily, there were two elements to this sense of accessibility. The first element discussed the perception that the political system is elitist and weighted in favour of particular social backgrounds. Politicians were frequently characterised as being out of touch and unable to understand the concerns of the 'average' person. This perception of politicians was suggested to lead to some people disengaging from politics and to not recognise the potential for politics to be a route to achieve change.

> *I see like, politics is a topic that has remained among the White and the elite and, due to that, a lot of people lack understanding.* Participant 9

> *And when you look at Parliament, I know it's changing, it is predominantly middle-aged White men, which for a majority of the population you can't relate to.* Participant 32

> *And again, it comes back to my interpretation and vision of politics is, it's almost like, it's that Westminster sort of public school educated, not really in touch with people. Well spoken, opinionated, party representatives but I feel that I would be completely out of my depth in trying to engage.* Participant 27

> *I guess when you think about politics you think of high-class people, they speak a certain kind of way, they went to high universities so there's always going to be a disconnect between what politics is. It's like an elite group basically and people don't feel like they have a place to step inside it, when really politics is for everyone.* Participant 3

The second component of the accessibility of politics reflected how people may be put off from engaging with politics due to their self-perception that they lacked the required background knowledge and understanding. Several participants commented that the language and ritual within the political system was often viewed as incomprehensible and can lead some people to feel that they have little influence as a result:

> *Specifically speaking from a British Chinese side, there's a lack of belief or faith that British Chinese views are heard, we're generally a smaller percentage of the ethnic minority group in the UK and so when it comes to issues, they [the British Chinese community] don't think that there's any point in voting. Whereas I think the more voices that can be put into a conversation, the better. Purely, the language barrier too, the fact that so many communities don't feel policies, politics is a part of life that they should get involved in, because they don't see it paying off in what they do. And then I think people who have voted before and not seen the changes they wanted to see. A whole host of other reasons, could be the policy isn't what they wanted for some reason. I think some people just feel that they can't access the system, if the system is not for them. Their votes don't count.* Participant 5

These discussions suggest the participants had reflected on how perceptions of politics may influence people's engagement with politics. Of note, participants framed these discussions in terms of how others may find the political system inaccessible, rather than reflecting on their own experiences. The one exception is participant 37 who discussed their own perception that politics is difficult to understand and assessed themselves to be uninterested in politics.

Self-doubt and a sense of place in politics

Some participants discussed how a sense of doubt or lack of confidence regarding one's place in politics, or a sense of not belonging in politics, influenced the assessment of political interest. Here, I draw out elements of participants' internal political conversations to develop our understanding of political interest.

A small number of participants indicated some self-doubt about their level of influence in the political system, as indicated in the quotation below:

> *I kind of felt as though my voice was important in a sense, because you can always speak up and you can always say stuff, but deep inside sometimes you do feel that your voice doesn't have a place and it's not really needed in certain spaces. Especially when politics isn't very diverse, it doesn't reflect the UK, so you don't necessarily see yourself in those places.* Participant 3

Despite this sense of self-doubt from some participants, as noted above, those who discussed the inaccessibility of the political system frequently referenced the effects of this on other people rather than themselves. Nevertheless, two participants were exceptions as they actively discussed their perception that they did not have a place in politics. Of note, one of these participants identified that they were unsure of their interest (participant 27), and the other (participant 37) rated themselves as 'not at all interested' in politics. When asked what someone meant when they described themselves as being interested in politics, participant 37 responded '*that they're clever*'. Furthermore, the participant discussed how they did not feel that they measured up to the requirements of being interested in politics and reflected that politics is *'really sort of complex. I think it's really wordy… I don't really like the thought of politics if that makes sense'* [participant 37]. The participant also discussed their

hesitancy to get involved in a conversation about politics, despite acknowledging that they do hold political opinions:

> *I think if you're interested in politics, I just think 'OK, good luck, good for you'. But I just think on your own, because I couldn't, I wouldn't want to engage. I think I'd feel a bit sort of panicked if they sort of then wanted to speak about politics, I'd be like 'oh god please don't ask me a question'. Because I'm just so, because I may well know the answer, but I wouldn't have the confidence to back my answer up.* Participant 37

Participant 27 also discussed their lack of place in relation to politics and raised how they find public speaking difficult. To the participant, politics was frequently described as conflictual and the participant held a sense that they were *'not good enough'* to get more involved in formal politics:

> *I think that my vision of politics has been going back to that theatrical, vested interests of the few, environment where I think I feel out of my depth and I thought I'm not good enough to engage with that or I'm not intelligent enough to engage in that, even though I know that's ridiculous, and I think, I don't know how to sum it up really...* Participant 27

Both participants discussed their sense of inadequacy when engaging in politics. As a 'thinking tool' (Wacquant, 1989, p. 50) habitus allows us to explore how these limiting self-perceptions can affect their ongoing interactions with politics. Politics is seen to be for 'clever' people and this view of what engagement with politics requires is projected when the participants think about their own interest. From both participants there was an affective dimension as they sensed that they were not 'entitled' to engage with politics. Despite participant 37 identifying that they do hold political opinions, there are elements of the unconscious at play as they do not appear to challenge or question whether their lack of confidence is valid. By way of contrast, participant 27 indicates that they are questioning this self-perception, calling it *'ridiculous'*. Participant 27's

comments may indicate wider reflexivity and a growing consciousness through this challenge to their self-perception.

The role of political socialisation in developing a sense of place in politics

Participants' discussions of how they learnt about politics also demonstrated the contribution of perceiving a sense of place to the decision to self-assess as being politically interested. Political socialisation is an overarching description of the way in which people acquire an understanding of politics. Broadly, participants identified two forms of political learning: learning that is initiated and directed by others, and learning that was initiated by the participant, or independent political learning.

Participants who identified that their political learning had been led by others frequently spoke of learning about politics while at school or college, or in the family home as they were growing up. Both sites of formative socialisation are likely to influence habitus. Participants who attributed their political learning to their experiences in education frequently highlighted how their exposure to political discussion had increased while in sixth form or at university. One participant identified how their education supported them to feel that they were permitted to hold opinions about politics. This sense of feeling *'allowed to have a say'* [participant 3] represents a change in the participant's relationship with politics and the sense that they had the authority to claim a 'place' in politics:

> *I guess for me, school had a very big impact on my political engagement because there was one teacher that was able to identify that I was very much, that I loved to speak out and I loved to talk about issues. But I wasn't very*

> *knowledgeable. So, they kind of pushed for more, they would give me political resources to kind of look at, or they'll tell me about articles to read, stuff to kind of put myself, put my brain out there kind of thing.* Participant 3

Other participants highlighted how they had learnt about politics within their childhood family home, noting that they had overheard conversations amongst family members which were eventually labelled as 'political'. Several participants suggested that political discussions within the family home had given them confidence that they could navigate, or learn about politics and had meant they felt *'secure'* [participant 10] that they had a place in politics.

> *Yeah, I think it's also, I guess humans don't generally like to do things that they think they will fail at. That they don't think is for them as a person so I think it kind of knowing, or being slightly sure that I can be interested in it and I can know things about it, so I knew I wouldn't fail in that kind of endeavour. But I could kind of see, because I felt kind of secure that, this doesn't really make sense. At first because I felt secure that my family and friends and people I knew were interested in it and therefore I could kind of see myself interested in it and learning about it and stuff.* Participant 10

> *Well, I think that my dad is a very keen social media activist let's say. He is very well-read and can have a very well-reasoned argument which I think I have potentially inherited, as much as have that kind of accessibility there and I think that it has helped me to be able to understand stuff far more than if I had parents who weren't engaged with the process at all kind of thing.* Participant 8

By way of contrast, participant 37, as the participant who identified that they were 'not at all interested' in politics, identified there was a lack of discussion about politics within their family home and noted that their parents were cautious not to reveal their voting intentions. The participant attributed this to their perceived lack of understanding about politics and acknowledged that it was *'really easy to get lost in the wording'* of politics [participant 37]:

> *I mean, like I say, it's not like I've grown up in a family where it's been, because I think that there's some families where they drum it into you. If you've got a mum and a dad that are shouting at the telly and shouting at Boris Johnson and shouting at whoever's on screen, I think that then sort of rubs off on you and you think, 'oh, my God, this must be important'…. But I mean, I've not had someone sort of saying you must vote for this person, because that's who I'm voting for. So, it's not really been a major thing in my household, I suppose. I think that's probably why I'm a bit relaxed on it.* Participant 37

By comparison, participants who described their political socialisation as self-led often could not identify a key moment where they had started to learn about politics. Furthermore, they did not explicitly discuss political socialisation in terms of having a sense of 'place' within politics. Accessing the media was viewed as a significant route to learn about politics and these participants regularly emphasised their awareness of bias in media reporting:

> *I look behind the headlines, whatever the headline might be, whether it be COVID or Brexit or whatever. I don't, I'm not interested in the spin, or the headline, I want to delve deeper and find out for myself, because I don't believe anything a politician says.* Participant 23

Despite not actively identifying a sense of place within politics, some participants did indirectly position themselves as an 'expert' – revealing a positive perception of themselves in relation to politics, albeit one that was not always acknowledged. This lack of acknowledgement may indicate a sense of unconscious ease that some participants experience in response to politics and may hint at the 'effects' of habitus playing out.

For example, some participants reflected on times when they had been consulted to offer thoughts about politics, or had encouraged others to reconsider their political

opinions. Here, participants indicate their sense of capability, even though this is not consciously acknowledged:

> *I'm always quite keen to encourage them [colleagues] to use their vote. They all said they would, so you're thinking what's your view on the benefits system or immigration policy, 'Who are you voting for?'. 'Well, I'm voting for the Conservative candidate'. 'Why?'. 'Because I always have'. 'Why?'. 'Because my parents told me that that's who we vote for'... and I had never considered it really until I encountered it and I thought, wow, how can you engage with this stuff [participant is commenting on the work of their employer], I suppose especially given what we do, where we see the implications of what people vote for and you think, well how can you see the implications and not realise that that's who you're voting for?* Participant 18

> *It probably sounds really arrogant to say it but sometimes I feel that when I talk to certain people, I sometimes feel that I might have a better grasp of the situation than they do. And I tried to convince them of that. Now, whether I have or not, is not relevant. It's just I'm trying to engage someone say, 'Well, I think it's because of this', and if I convince them, great, and if I don't convince them then that's fine as well.* Participant 25

Participants' descriptions of their political socialisation frequently revealed their sense of place in relation to politics. Learning about politics was often discussed in terms of allowing a participant to feel that they could contribute to political discussions and the perception that they had the ability to progress their understanding of politics. Some participants did not provide a clear origin of their political learning, instead reflecting that they had learnt about politics through accessing the media. Nevertheless, participants with a self-led account of political learning still demonstrated their sense of self-belief that politics was 'for them', even if this was not explicitly communicated, hinting at an unconscious dimension to their relationship with politics. The concept of habitus suggests that this ease with politics will project into these participants' assessment of their interest in politics.

Participants' discussions demonstrated that they held different meanings of politics, and similarly that they related to their orientations to (or judgements about), politics in different ways. To put it another way, our understanding of self-assessed political interest is limited if we only consider a descriptive account of people's meaning of politics. In addition, we also need to consider how someone positions themselves in relation to this meaning. Here, the concept of the internal political conversation has surfaced what may influence the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics. This relationship is mediated by habitus but, as noted in chapter two, this does not foreclose the potential for reflexivity.

By way of example, many of the participants were concerned about representation and accessibility within the political system but participants in the main still expressed an interest in politics despite these misgivings. To explain self-assessed interest with reference only to the failings of the political system limits analysis to descriptive accounts of politics that cannot acknowledge differentiation within viewpoints. If most people agree that there are flaws in the political system, why is it that some people are interested in politics but others are uninterested? Instead, it is necessary to also explore how someone relates, or positions themselves, to their meaning of politics. In addition to acknowledging the salience of politics, participants' discussions demonstrate an association between the assessment of political interest and their sense of having a place within politics. It is this sense of place that leads to a perception that people have the 'right' to be interested in politics.

Wavering political interest: Influenced by shifting perceived salience and place in politics

So far, the study's findings have maintained that assessed political interest is influenced by people relating to their meaning of politics. In particular, acknowledging its salience and perceiving that they have a place within politics. While some participants identified that their interest in politics had remained constant throughout their lives, others discussed an increase or decrease in the intensity of their political interest. Exploring participants' accounts of their wavering interest reveals a shift in how they relate to the meaning of politics and so adds further weight to the role of salience and place in assessing an interest in politics.

Participants 8 and 11 both highlighted the influence of their career on their changing level of political interest and, in relation, how they perceived the salience of politics. Participant 8 spoke of how their interest in politics had increased as they had aged, having resisted seeing themselves as being interested in politics. The growing interest in politics was attributed in part to working in the NHS and their developing sense of the implications of governmental decisions on their career.

> *I think it has a lot to do with the career that I was going into and realising how much impact the Government that was in power could have on my ability to continue my career and in the NHS in general. And how the kind of politics of the Government through the provisions as well, and around kind of funding and the types of jobs that would be available and things, so it's kind of, like selfish, I suppose. And it was, so it was kind of gaining the understanding of how much impact it could have on my future. Not just in everyday life, but actually in my career.* Participant 8

By way of contrast, participant 11 discussed how their interest in politics decreased after they had started working in a demanding job, as seen in the quotation below, politics became less salient:

> *And, like a lot of people with tough jobs, they probably just forget about whatever else is going on out there, they're just trying to get through the day and get home in one piece. So, I think that's where that came from, I think I did sort of drift away from politics and take my eye off the ball as it were.* Participant 11

The participant conceptualised interest as having an awareness of developments in the political system and commented on how their life circumstances had meant that they, at times, had not paid as much attention to politics as they felt they should, as seen in their '*utter shame*' [participant 11] experienced in relation to how they had voted during this time. The identification of an experience of shame reflects an emotional element within the participant's internal political conversation. This participant identified that their interest in politics had subsequently returned and this interest was directed to showing concern for others in their local community:

> *So, I wouldn't say that I'm overtly political, I come at it from a, just trying to be nice to everybody. I don't know if that's a really naïve way of looking at life. Participant 11*

In contrast to the effect of personal circumstances on political interest, participants 25 and 28 note how their interest in politics had decreased due to their negative perceptions of the political system. Both participants noted the importance of politicians following their principles and their opinion that this was a rare occurrence in British politics. Participant 25 raised the increasing cynicism they felt towards politicians who towed the party line and did not actively show dissent:

> *There was also a lot of, well, the Members of Parliament were all turned in to sort of robots, you know, they all had to tow the party line down to the last letter and it all became, it just seemed to lose its natural sort of excitement and, you know, the thrill of it. Everybody was just behaving as they were told to behave, and everybody seemed to be doing what it was that would best serve their ambitions rather than, you know, maybe what they went into politics for in the first place.* Participant 25

Participant 28 discussed how their interest in politics had cooled following Jeremy Corbyn's resignation as Labour Party leader and their lack of enthusiasm for Keir Starmer's leadership:

> *No, I absolutely don't relate to Keir Starmer whatsoever. Again, it's such a massive shame because, from my point of view because he said a lot of stuff in the leadership contest to just gain popularity. I remember going to a Rebecca Long-Bailey thing in [CITY], watching her doing a speech and stuff and it was amazing, it was really good, it was genuine, it was amazing. I watched Keir Starmer's stuff and I just thought 'Jesus Christ, welcome back to the age of beige politics again'.* Participant 28

Here, both participants linked their declining interest to their active reflections on the decreasing salience of politics. Such internal deliberations can be seen within the participant's comment that the perceived fresh ideas of Corbyn had been thwarted and there was a return to '*beige politics*'. Politics was also seen to be predictable, politicians conformed to the expectations of their party and there was little challenge to the status quo. By way of contrast, participant 7 conceptualised their political interest with greater fluidity. The participant discussed how paying attention to politics can generate negative affect to the extent that they needed to step back from politics for a short period of time to regroup and maintain a more positive frame of mind.

> *I always feel like when it gets to summer, after like, a uni year, I've kind of had enough and I'm like, so like politics has been like rammed down your brain in every sense like historically and today and I'm just like, 'I'm done. I need a break from the world'. My friends will say, they call it hibernating, like 'I'm gonna hibernate for like a month, like leave me alone, I don't want to know what's*

> *going on'. I feel like that's what I mean by that. And then it's like 'OK, I should probably go and reengage with the rest of the world again now'.* Participant 7

In this example, politics has become almost too salient. The importance of politics means that the participant can be '*really switched on to things and…insanely passionate about things'* [participant 7] to the detriment of their wellbeing. Choosing not to pay attention to politics, conceptualised by the participant as being less interested, demonstrates that the participant is almost construing politics to have less salience (it is not something that they need to pay attention to) until they feel ready to reengage with politics again. Here, the participant is making an active choice informed by their reflexivity. There is an awareness that their interest in politics affects their wellbeing and so the participant chooses to step away from politics when needed.

In a similar vein, participant 27 identified that their interest in politics had come in '*peaks and troughs*'. Politics was discussed in the childhood home and the participant acknowledged being keenly aware of the effects of political decisions on people's lives as a child. However, the participant discussed how they became '*disillusioned*' by the political system and were particularly put-off by what they saw as the '*drama and…theatre*' of politics. The participant also questioned their ability to express their opinions in a conflictual environment and talked about their sense of inadequacy, even though these self-limiting beliefs were judged to be '*ridiculous*'. However, the participant spoke about their strong commitment to volunteering with local organisations, as well as their passion for environmental issues and discussed their growing realisation that their work on a local level to effect social change was political:

> *And then you know, since then getting involved in various different things, and again, meeting people through work, like this colleague who is a Councillor, my interest is really increasing recently…And it's really interesting to take part in this research with you because doing the survey online, really got me thinking and so I think I'm more interested than I've allowed myself to [be] because I'm a big picture thinker and I look at the big picture and I think it's all feels so hopeless when actually it's really not hopeless and I have to keep reminding myself of that because it's important to engage.* Participant 27

Participant 27's interest in politics was in transition. The participant held negative connotations of the political system, viewing it as detracting from environmental issues that are '*too important*' to be subject to debate. However, the participant acknowledged that engaging with politics was a way to enact change – the salience of politics had increased. Furthermore, the participant also demonstrated that they were reassessing their place in politics – it is almost as if they are in a process of 'allowing' themselves to self-assess as being interested in politics. The self-imposed limitations which may have been unconscious are being revealed to the participant through their conscious reflections and deliberations about politics.

The participant spoke of their lack of confidence when public speaking and felt that they would be unable to meet the demands of engaging with politics. However, the participant also discussed how other people had told them that they should get involved in politics and that this had made them '*reflect on politics internally*' and were questioning whether they had a place in politics. Therefore, while participant 27 noted that they were unsure of their level of interest in politics, their discussions suggested that they were undergoing a shift in their view of the salience of politics and their sense of place within politics. Considering the participant's internal political conversation reveals how their relationship with politics is in flux. The individual is actively reflecting

on their meaning of politics. This adds support for viewing self-assessed political interest as emerging from the recognition of the salience of politics and a sense of place within an individual's meaning of politics.

Developing the link between people's meaning of politics and their political interest

Up to this point, the findings have demonstrated that people can hold different meanings of politics and that self-assessed political interest is conditional on the sense of salience and place within politics. The chapter has yet to link how holding one of the five shared subjectivities identified in the previous chapter influences the assessment of political interest. Figure 7 connects the two chapters by advancing how individuals who hold each of the meanings of politics may be expected to identify the salience and a sense of place within politics. The figure demonstrates that there are a variety of ways in which salience and place can be interpreted and captures the distinction across the different meanings of politics. The first column notes the multiple ways in which salience can be identified via participants' meaning of politics. A sense of place in politics (the second column) is viewed to be an individual's perception that they are included or have status within politics. Figure 7 proposes that this sense of place can be articulated in a variety of ways. There are both positive accounts of participants' sense of place, as seen in the first meaning of politics, as well as more negative accounts. The second meaning of politics demonstrates an example of this more unfavourable account of the sense of place, or sense of belonging, in politics as participants questioned their understanding of politics.

The final column of figure 7 suggests the circumstances which may promote the assessment of political interest. This summary was developed via analysis of the transcripts of interviews with participants who loaded onto each factor, or viewpoint. The use of pen portraits afforded a holistic overview of participants' discussions of their political interest. These pen portraits facilitated the exploration of how perceived salience and place can interact to forge the conditions which may promote the recognition of political interest. As discussed earlier in the chapter, a limitation of this study is that interviews could not be secured with all participants who completed a Q-sort. This limited the data that could be called upon to support the analysis. However, the interpretation of each viewpoint was associated with at least one interview. The conditions likely to lead to the assessment of interest have been determined by examining key areas of differentiation across the meanings of politics, along with considering participants' qualitative interview data.

Figure 7 Conditions likely to affect the self-assessment of political interest

	Salience of politics	Place in politics	Interest in politics is likely to be recognised if…
1. *Politics impacts people's lives – being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account*	Politics affects people's life chances and the choices people make.	Perceives that they have the strong understanding of politics needed to ensure decision-makers are held to account.	…views politics as a route to progress social justice and recognises a need to hold politicians to account.
2. *We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict*	Politics should generate compromises that forge solutions to society's problems.	Politics is complex and there is too much conflict. Can doubt understanding of politics.	…recognises politics as functioning to generate compromise.
3. *Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage*	Politics is viewed as inescapable and has a great effect on people's lives.	Feels some sense of representation within the political system but recognises inequality within politics.	... feels a sense of their voice being valued.
4. *The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests*	Unlikely to view the political system as a route to address social injustice.	Feels engaging with the political system is unlikely to achieve social change. Can feel that politics is not representative and may be distant from politics.	…holds a normative account of what politics should be like. The political system does not meet these expectations.
5. *Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics*	The reach of politics is increasing. Politics affects all areas of our lives.	Trusts the political system. Feels represented and that their views would be heard.	…trusts that the political system tries to address society's problems. Is content to let politicians get on with politics.

For viewpoint 3 *(Politics is important)*, their keen interest in social justice is also accompanied by a need to hold those involved in politics to account. However, people who hold this meaning can at times doubt their place in politics. Therefore, interest is likely to be expressed when there is a sense of confidence that their voice is valued within politics. Viewpoint 4's *(The political system gives too much influence to vested interests)* lack of faith that the political system in its current form generates positive

social change may result in detachment from politics. However, people who hold this meaning of politics still have a clear account of what politics should achieve. This can be seen by considering participant 11 who expressed a lack of satisfaction with the political system but whose interest in politics was rooted in acknowledging its effects on people within their local community.

The remaining three viewpoints in figure 7 all emphasise the necessity of politics to address the problems faced by society. However, each shared subjectivity is likely to relate to the necessity of politics in different ways. As demonstrated by participant 18, viewpoint 1 *(Politics impacts people's lives)* stresses the importance of having an awareness of what is going on in current affairs. The assessment of political interest is facilitated by the sense of feeling let down by the political system and the requirement to hold politicians to account. To viewpoint 1, an interest is politics is a necessity. By way of contrast, the assessment of political interest from viewpoint 5's perspective *(Politics should be left to the politicians)* is centred on the effects of politics. Here, there is interest in politics but people who hold this meaning trust the political process without feeling a need to be deeply engaged with politics.

Viewpoint 2 *(We need politics but it's off-putting)* is likely to feel uncomfortable with the level of conflict within politics. Participant 37 who noted their uninterest in politics loaded onto this factor. The participant often spoke of their unease when engaging with politics and noted that they were unlikely to discuss politics with other people. Participant 27, whose interest in politics seemed to be developing, also loaded onto this viewpoint. The participant noted their lack of identification with the 'performative'

aspect of politics but suggested that their appreciation of the salience of politics was increasing.

The preliminary attempt to map the five meanings of politics to self-assessed political interest has demonstrated the multitude of ways in which the salience and sense of place in politics can be interpreted. Nevertheless, these interpretations are rooted in the individual's meaning of politics. The findings support the central argument within this thesis – our understanding of political interest can be developed by exploring individuals' interpretations of politics.

Conclusion

The thesis has argued that 'politics' is not a neutral concept and there is not a unified understanding of politics. As discussed in the last chapter, five meanings were identified through the application of Q-methodology. This chapter has proceeded to explore how these different meanings of politics may influence individuals' assessment of their political interest. In response to the third research question, interview data have demonstrated that the assessment of an interest in politics is contingent on individuals viewing politics as salient and also perceiving that they have a place in politics.

The assessment of political interest is a moment of agency however, it is agency expressed within a structural context. The previous chapter revealed the shared subjectivities on the meaning of politics. This chapter builds on these shared subjectivities by surfacing elements of the theoretical framework – namely Bourdieu's

habitus and Akram's internal political conversation. In doing so, the processes which inform whether someone self-assesses as being interested in politics emerge. What is revealed is that there are both conscious and unconscious dimensions to the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics. Participants demonstrated active reflection on their account of politics and how they positioned themselves in relation to this account. However, this reflexivity was delineated via habitus. There will be a projection of participants' previous perceptions and experiences of politics which will influence their assessment of political interest. Furthermore, participants' discussions also indicated that they related to their meaning of politics in less conscious ways. There was almost an 'effortlessness' to the way in which some participants related to their meaning of politics. Being interested in politics was an obvious thing to be – there was no question for some participants that they would be interested in politics. Other participants demonstrated more doubt and questioning within their relationship with politics.

It is not appropriate to contradict participants' own assessment of their interest in politics. However, it has been possible to explore participants' preferences. One participant in particular did not acknowledge the contradiction between their lack of political interest and their discussions suggesting some form of connection with politics. Furthermore, other participants seemed to be unaware of what had sparked their interest in politics. In both cases, there seemed to be an unconscious element to the way in which individuals related to their meaning of politics. The findings demonstrate that political interest reflects individuals' self-assessment, or their own perceptions of themselves in relation to their meaning of politics. The next chapter will

position these findings within the wider literature and consider the implications for our understanding political interest.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION: TOWARDS AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL INTEREST

This study has focused on exploring the concept of political interest and how people recognise their interest in politics. The first research question asked how we should conceptualise political interest. The second research question asked what types of meanings people hold about politics. The findings have demonstrated that there are multiple meanings of politics. The third research question explored whether there is a link between the multiple meanings of politics and the assessment of political interest. Findings demonstrated that the assessment of political interest is influenced by the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics, principally, the extent to which they imbue their meaning of politics with salience and whether they perceive a sense of place within their meaning of politics.

The chapter will first outline an analytical framework which builds and develops the project's theoretical underpinnings to guide future research on the topic of political interest. Once this analytical framework has been established, the chapter will then detail the thesis' conceptual, methodological, and analytical contributions. Next, the chapter concludes by considering the implications of the findings for policy and practice focused on increasing political engagement. This section will again highlight the broad contribution of this project and how the findings have a wider application which can develop our understanding of political engagement and political socialisation.

An analytical framework to assist the study of political interest

A central theme that runs through this work is the complexity of studying political interest. As a concept, political interest is elusive and it is unclear what informs the propensity for people to say that they are interested in politics. In response to the difficulty of being able to say with confidence what interest is, this project centres on a view of political interest as a self-assessment. When someone says that they are interested in politics, this is an assessment of how someone perceives themselves – whether they are interested in politics or not. Consequently, we have much to gain by taking a step back and considering how someone's interpretation, or meaning, of politics may influence this self-assessment.

This study has developed our understanding of political interest through exploring what can influence someone to recognise their interest in politics. The chapter applies the study's theoretical framework and develops these points with reference to the project's findings. In doing so, an analytical framework is presented which provides a roadmap which can inform the study of political interest. The literature review included a challenge to a quotation from Lazarsfeld et al. (1948, pp. 40–41) which noted that interest is something 'clearly recognizable'. Within the literature on political interest there are frequent assumptions that people 'just know' that they are interested. Although Shani (2009) does begin to explore how some people may be more likely to feel at 'ease' with politics and Robison (2014, 2017) discusses the relationship between political interest and individuals' motives for engaging, there has been limited exploration of the processes by which someone recognises their interest. Instead, analysis of political interest frequently calls upon quantitative research designs which explore the association between political interest and other variables by using pre-

existing measures and definitions. A key aim of this project is to provide depth by exploring our reflective cognitive processes and internal political conversations on which we base our assessments of our political interest.

In response to the first research question, political interest should be understood as a subjective self-assessment. This progresses our understanding of political interest away from a measure of a discrete, external entity and emphasises that an individual comes to recognise and assess that they are interested in politics. My point here is that the state of interest is experienced but that the individual may not acknowledge this experience. They may not recognise that they are interested in politics. This contention is a different position to that of Hidi and Renninger's (2006) model of general interest development. As discussed in chapter one, the model proposes there is a progression from situational interest, or interest that is informed by environmental stimuli, towards individual interest, or a greater tendency for an individual to 'hold' interest independent of wider stimuli. Following Knogler (2017), it has been argued that a distinction should be made between the state, or experience, of interest and the 'forms' (situational and individual) of interest described within Hidi and Renninger's model. This thesis shifts analytical focus away from Hidi and Renninger's (2006) model towards conceptualising political interest as a self-assessment and exploring what can influence someone to recognise that they are interested in politics. Foregrounding the self-assessment of political interest places a greater emphasis on exploring how an individual comes to recognise their interest and will strengthen the field's understanding of both the concept and, more broadly, political engagement. The thesis has explored the complex process which informs whether someone sees themselves as being interested in politics.

The thesis establishes that there is scope for greater theoretical development to explore the factors that influence an individual's self-assessment of their interest. In response, analysis of data collected through this project has informed the advancement of the theoretical framework outlined in chapter two into the analytical framework established within this chapter. The evolution of the theoretical framework into the analytical framework presented here reflects the project's abductive approach whereby explanations for observations were developed and continually refined with reference to the collected data (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014). The analytical framework (represented diagrammatically in figure 8) is made up of five interlocking building blocks which assemble to create a developed account of the self-assessment of political interest and is summarised below:

1. Explanations of political interest have often revolved around either the explanatory power of supply-side or demand-side factors. We can progress our understanding of political interest by acknowledging that demand-side and supply-side factors interact with one another. Isolating demand-side or supply-side factors risks oversimplification and the creation of generalisations which can prevent a full explanation of the variety of responses to politics.

2. Demand-side factors will be influenced by features of the political system considered within supply-side accounts and vice versa. As discussed in the theoretical framework, the interplay between supply-side and demand-side explanations of political interest is mediated by how the individual interprets politics, or, their meaning of politics.

3. The self-assessment of political interest emerges from the way in which someone relates to their meaning of politics (Robison, 2014). People can hold different meanings of politics. However, it is not these interpretations of politics alone that lead to an interest in politics. Interest is a relational concept and arises from what people think and feel in response to the object of interest. Subsequently, the study of political interest should consider what can influence the way in which someone relates to their meaning of politics.

When someone assesses their political interest, they have made a decision that they are interested in politics. This process demonstrates the agency of the individual. To state it clearly, the assessment of political interest is an agential process, albeit one which is informed by structural forces. Employing Akram's (2019) multi-dimensional account of agency, with particular reference to Bourdieu's concept of habitus and the internal political conversation, progresses our understanding of what someone thinks and feels in response to their meaning of politics from which emerges the self-assessment of political interest.

4. The assessment of political interest is conditional on an individual acknowledging the salience of politics, as well as identifying that they have a sense of place, or belonging, within their meaning of politics. People are likely to identify the salience and a sense of place within politics in different ways across the different meanings of politics identified.

5. The findings of this study can contribute to our understanding of political socialisation. Exploring what informs people to recognise the salience and a sense of place within their meaning of politics begins to unveil the processes which inform political socialisation.

The remainder of the chapter will fill out the detail on these summarised elements of political interest before then examining the contribution of this analytical framework to our understanding of political interest. Throughout the chapter, references will be made to interview data in order to elaborate the points discussed and develop connections between the theoretical framework and the study's findings.

Building block 1: Political interest emerges from an interaction between demand-side and supply-side factors

Previous attempts to define political interest often hone in on the concept's motivational quality (Luskin, 1990; Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019; Robison, 2014, 2017). An interest in politics is viewed to spark further action, often depicted as learning about, or following, politics. Close associations are noted between this motivational quality and curiosity (van Deth, 1989). Furthermore, attempts have been made to bring additional clarity to the definition of political interest via arguments for it to be viewed as a multi-dimensional concept (Horner, 2007; Riddle, 2016). However, as has been argued, these attempts conflate political interest with individuals' meaning of politics.

Participant interviews confirmed that there is little to be gained in attempting to portray political interest as a discreet entity that can be understood outside of the individual's assessment of their interest. Participants did not share a unified definition of what it is to be interested in politics. In other words, explanations of what political interest 'is' should avoid suggesting that there is a particular quality to being interested in politics. There is the potential to experience interest. However, to conflate interest with a concept such as curiosity limits our understanding. Such definitions of political interest are reliant on another concept rather than defining interest in its own right. In other words, if we identify interest as curiosity then it is difficult to discern what is specific about interest. In that case, why are we studying interest and not curiosity? Political interest is an abstract and amorphous concept in which there is no clear description of what exactly being interested in politics means. My suggestion is that we can make greater progress in our understanding of political interest if we accept its ambiguity as a concept.

Having noted the ambiguity of the concept, we can still conceptualise two elements within political interest: 1. a psychological state (someone experiences interest) and 2. the subjective assessment of interest (someone says or thinks 'I am interested'). Methodologically, it is very difficult to capture the state of interest within a research design. Therefore, this study has focused on exploring the self-assessment of interest and what informs someone to identify that they are interested in politics. Prior (2010, p. 747) notes that we do not know how political interest develops. However, this statement can be clarified if we shift the emphasis away from attempts to define political interest and acknowledge that we have limited understanding about the processes which inform the assessment of political interest. Rather than trying to

identify with precision what being interested in politics means, the conceptualisation developed in this study prompts a shift in emphasis towards exploring the factors that influence the self-assessment, or recognition, of an interest in politics. In other words, what influences someone to assess that they are politically interested.

Interviews with participants confirmed the complexity of political interest as a concept. Across the interviews, there was no consensus as to how political interest should be defined with participants viewing political interest variously in terms of an awareness of current events, or as being concerned about the experiences of other people and wanting to make a difference. Distinguishing between the experience of interest and the recognition of interest through the self-assessment of being interested opens up the potential for a disparity to occur where the experience of interest is not 'converted' into a self-assessment of interest. This can also run the other way in that someone may assess that they are interested in politics without experiencing the psychological state of political interest.

Analysis of interview data did identify the potential for there to be a gap between an individual experiencing political interest and their recognition, or assessment, of political interest. For example, participant 37 noted that they were uninterested in politics but identified that they followed current affairs when they felt it would have a direct effect on their life. This can be seen when the participant noted that they were thinking of buying a house and discussed the possible effect of Brexit on the housing market and the rate of inflation more widely. Furthermore, the participant noted that they sometimes felt that they were unable to express their opinions on politics. It is not

possible to ascertain retrospectively whether the participant experienced the state of being interested, however there is a fair amount of evidence from their interview that points to this. The participant clearly thinks about politics via the effects of decisions and indicates that they do hold opinions about politics, even if these are not communicated to others. These reflections could be considered indicators of the participant experiencing the state of interest. Nevertheless, the participant did not express their interest in politics. As discussed in chapter two, the thesis does not suggest that people are 'wrong' about their level of interest – rather that we should consider how people's preferences are formed (Akram, Emerson and Marsh, 2015, pp. 352–356). We gain more from trying to delve into what may have informed the participant's decision to self-assess as being uninterested in politics. The participant makes several statements that would suggest that there is the experience of interest, yet the participant does not seem to be drawing on these experiences when discussing their lack of interest in politics.

Furthermore, participants 38 and 25 expressed their interest but their interviews revealed a more distant and detached relationship with politics, as can be seen on the following quotation:

> *I'm very, very indifferent these days, I mean, I am kind of generally aware of what's happening. But I don't really care for the detail or anything these days*. Participant 25

Previous literature has discussed political interest as a subjective self-assessment (van Deth, 1989; Boulianne, 2011; Prior, 2019), however, this definition is employed

to describe what political interest as a variable is measuring, and there is little exploration of the implications of defining political interest as a subjective self-assessment. This gap is addressed by the thesis by proposing that an emphasis should be placed on exploring what influences this subjective assessment of political interest. The second building block of the analytical framework adds further support for this claim by identifying that the study of political interest should not be restricted to only supply-side or demand-side accounts.

Building block 2: The interaction between demand-side and supply-side factors is mediated by the meaning of politics

The literature review identified that there is a frequent bifurcation within the exploration of political interest between supply-side and demand-side accounts. Chapter two called on the work of Marsh et al. (2016; Vines and Marsh, 2018) to argue that separating analysis of the factors that can encourage political engagement into either supply-side or demand-side accounts is a 'mis-specification' (Vines and Marsh, 2018, p. 434) which fails to appreciate the interdependence between supply-side and demand-side factors.

Interview data support the argument that it is insufficient to view political interest as a product of either only supply-side or demand-side factors. Taking first supply-side accounts of political interest, participants' reflections on their interest in politics did not appear to be determined by their opinion of the political system. In other words, there was not a clear-cut association between negative accounts of the political system and a lack of interest in politics and, vice versa, positive accounts of the political system

and expressing an interest in politics. In particular, participant 37, the participant who expressed that they were not interested in politics, spoke about politicians in quite positive terms, framed as a need to give politicians the benefit of the doubt. As noted in the literature review, political interest has been associated with positive accounts of the political system, or system support (Bennett, 1986, pp. 121–122), although Prior's (2019, ch. 14) analysis suggests that it is difficult to establish the direction of the relationship between political interest and positive accounts of the political system. It is perhaps to be expected that a greater sense of trust in the political system would lead to a greater propensity to express interest in politics. However, for the participants within this study, their interest in politics was not attributed only to the actions of the political system but there was an interplay between demand-side factors or accounts which emphasise the individual's response to the political system (Hay, 2007; Marsh, Vines and Halupka, 2016; Vines and Marsh, 2018).

One possible area that might influence political interest could be political events. Some participants did link their interest to political events. For example, participant 28 who described themselves as a supporter of the Labour Party discussed how their interest in politics had declined since Keir Starmer had taken over the leadership of the party. Others linked their burgeoning interest in politics to various events such as the global financial crisis in 2007-2008, the miners' strike of 1984-85, and the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. Studies have suggested that there is little association between political events and levels of political interest (Prior, 2019; Solvak, 2009). While fieldwork did take place during major political events – ongoing Brexit negotiations and the COVID-19 pandemic – participants' discussions revealed that it was not the occurrence of political events alone which coincided with

them recognising their interest in politics. This is in keeping with Prior's (2019, pp. 79–100) analysis which suggests that political interest is little influenced by events. Instead, a more developed association is revealed within this thesis. When participants noted the relevance of events to their interest in politics, these discussions referenced their own responses to these events, as framed in terms of the influence of these events on participants' meanings, or interpretations, of politics. Participant 28 attributed Keir Starmer taking over the Labour Party leadership to their own sense of disappointment as mediated via a perceived return to *'beige politics'*. Other participants framed political events in terms of making them feel more invested in politics through raising their awareness of *'[t]he way politics treats people'* (participant 11) and an awareness of the impact of politics and not wanting to *'feel slightly out of touch or inept'* (participant 5) by not following political events. The influence of events on the meaning of politics suggests that there is not a simple transition from events to the assessment of interest. Rather, we need to examine how political events can influence what politics means to an individual, or, how they interpret politics.

Analysis of interview data also demonstrated the deficiency of demand-side accounts of political interest without recourse to the interplay with supply-side accounts. Frequently, participants discussed their sense of citizenship duty and responsibility to vote. Nevertheless, political interest was not just attributed to a sense of duty but what participating in an election achieves, that is to say, its function. Here, participants identified voting in an election as a way to hold politicians to account and reflected on the importance of the political system as a site to generate social change. In other words, it was not just a strong connection to citizenship values alone which influenced political interest but that there was a purpose to voting. Also reflecting this, one

participant identified that people could be put off from voting due to the limitations of the First Past the Post electoral system and a perception that politics does not generate social change. Here, citizenship values were endorsed via an assessment of politics. Politics is viewed as important and, flowing from this, it is important to participate. Again, the interaction between supply-side and demand-side accounts were mediated by participants' meaning of politics.

Often, participants reflected on how they became more interested in politics as they matured. This reflected Prior's (2019, pp. 143–149) analysis that there can be a 'crystallisation' of interest between late adolescence and people's mid-20s. In particular, some linked their growing interest in politics to accessing higher education. Explanations for political interest rooted in age or levels of formal education only make sense if they are read in conjunction with supply-side accounts. It is not just higher education attendance or the process of ageing that influences political interest, but rather how these occurrences influence an individual's meaning of politics. Participants who discussed the role of ageing on their interest in politics often noted that there had been a change in their personal circumstances, for example starting a family, or an expansion of their social network, which meant that they had greater experience of how politics affects people's lives, including their own. Similarly, participants who considered the role of education in informing their political interest discussed how they had been exposed to new ideas which reinforced the relevance of politics. Again, demand-side accounts allude to participants' meanings of politics but this is often not explored in detail. Here, participants reflected on how their experiences had led to a greater awareness of the implications of politics.

The second building block of the framework makes explicit what is often left implicit within analysis on political interest – supply-side accounts can only be understood with reference to demand-side factors and vice versa. Furthermore, participants' discussions have demonstrated that this interplay is mediated by their meaning of politics. Therefore, our understanding of political interest can be furthered if greater attention is paid to how an individual interprets politics, or their meaning of politics.

Building block 3: Political interest emerges from the way in which someone relates to their meaning of politics

Applying Q-methodology has identified five distinct meanings of politics. In other words, there are multiple meanings of politics in operation rather than a unified and shared understanding of what is politics. As discussed previously, there are a limited number of studies which have explored how variation in the meaning of politics may affect the expression of political interest (Campbell and Winters, 2008; Coffé, 2013). However, these studies often focus on differences in terms of 'where' politics is perceived to occur and the distinction between Leftwich's (2004a) 'arena' and 'process' accounts of politics. Q-methodology has provided a holistic view and has sought to explore the multifaceted meanings of politics. I advance on this claim in the next chapter which concludes the thesis. However, a participant's interest does not arise alone from the meaning of politics that the individual holds, rather interest in politics emerges from the way an individual relates to their meaning of politics.

Interest has been argued to always be directed to something (Ainley, 2017), you experience interest in relation to an object. Similarly, when someone expresses their

interest, they are saying that they are interested in something. The five meanings of politics identified demonstrate that the 'object' of interest can shift from person to person. An example may help to draw this point out. If a group of people are asked whether they are interested in tennis, it can be assumed that they would share a very similar, if not the same, idea of what tennis entails – it is a racquet sport played against a single opponent or between two teams of two players. Tennis is a discrete 'object' of interest – there are clear boundaries to what is and what is not tennis. By way of contrast, the five distinct meanings of politics indicate that the boundaries, what is and what is not politics, can be clouded and unclear. If interest is directed to an object, the idea that this object can represent different things to different people has the potential to affect the recognition and self-assessment of political interest.

However, the findings did not identify a direct association between the five meanings of politics and whether someone assessed an interest in politics. In other words, people who identified that they were interested in politics did not align to the same identified meanings of politics. Each identified meaning had participants who ranged in their political interest. There was not a simple linear transition from an individual's meaning of politics to their political interest. Participants completing a Q-sort online also provided socio-demographic data. Based on Bourdieu's (1992, 2010; Wacquant, 2005; Swartz, 2013) writing on political (dis)engagement, it would be assumed that people with similar levels of capital (as proxied via the socio-demographic data collected, for example level of formal education and household income) would also hold similar meanings of politics. As noted in chapter two, this association was identified by Harrits (2011) who found that participants with higher levels of capital held more abstract conceptualisations of politics than participants with lower levels of

capital. However, this study did not find an association between levels of capital, identified meanings of politics, and self-assessed interest in politics. Exploring the association between the different meanings of politics and the assessment of political interest requires a more nuanced approach – one which takes account of the wider structural context. Participant interviews revealed that an interest in politics is a product of the way that the individual relates to their meaning of politics rather than the character of their meaning of politics. Furthermore, across the five different shared subjectivities of politics identified via the Q-study, people are likely to relate to their meaning of politics in different ways. It is this nuance that the chapter will now turn.

Building block 4: A developed account of agency progresses our understanding of how someone relates to politics

As discussed in chapter two which outlined the theoretical framework, the decision to express an interest in politics can be viewed to be a moment of agency – it is the individual choosing to confirm their interest. Applying Akram's developed account of agency to this study's findings progresses our understanding of the processes by which someone relates to their meaning of politics and whether the salience of politics and a sense of place in politics is acknowledged. Interviews revealed that there are structural dimensions to perceiving the salience and a sense of place in politics.

4a. Salience of politics

Turning first to the recognition of the salience of politics and the influence of this on self-assessed political interest, within the literature, salience is often discussed in terms of issue salience, or the policy areas that the electorate considers important and

how policy areas may inform voter choice (Wlezien, 2005). Bittner and Goodyear-Grant (2017, p. 560) identify that there are ‘slight conceptual differences’ in definitions of salience which foreground ‘importance’, ’prominence’ or ‘strength or intensity’. Within this study, salience is understood to refer to the relevance and importance of politics. Across the identified meanings of politics, salience was discussed via the ubiquitous character of politics. Politics was viewed to infiltrate the everyday and has immense consequences on people’s lives, as well as having the potential to generate compromises and solutions for society.

The interviews also revealed a collective account of salience whereby politics was viewed to be relevant and important due to the impact it has on all of our lives. Prior (2019, p. 338) identified a positive association between political interest and an acknowledgement that politics is important. This study progresses this finding by detailing how participants characterised the importance of politics. When interviewed, participants frequently positioned politics as a route to address social injustice, achieve social change, and as a way of demonstrating care for others – even if participants identified that their observations of politics ‘in action’ did not match the potential of these normative accounts. Participants also discussed the breadth of issues that are affected by politics and noted that there are few areas of life untouched by politics. A small number of participants acknowledged directly that some people were more affected by political decisions and often referenced the way that their own privilege shielded them from the full effect of some political actions. Political salience was rooted in the participants’ understanding of a structural context grounded in inequality. Politics was viewed by some as a way to address this inequality.

Acknowledging this variable level of 'effect' did not appear to influence how the individual discussed politics' salience, or indeed their own interest in politics. In other words, those participants who identified that they had some degree of 'protection' from politics still acknowledged the salience of politics and expressed an interest in politics. This stands in contrast to van Deth's (2000a) examination of the relationship between political saliency and levels of political interest. Those who held higher levels of resource (for example, income, membership of social organisations, and life satisfaction) were found to report lower levels of political saliency. Political saliency was conceptualised to be the '*relative importance of political matters* [italics in original] as compared with other activities' (van Deth, 2000a, p. 116) and was measured via a question which asked respondents to rate a series of items (one of which was politics) according to 'how important it is in your life' (p. 121). This individualised conceptualisation of saliency ('*in your life*') stands in distinction to the collective account of saliency revealed via interviews with participants. The association between the saliency of politics and interest within my study was identified with reference to how politics affects society as a whole rather than the importance of politics to the individual's life. Van Deth's findings do not detract from the identified association between expressed political interest and the acknowledgement of salience within an individual's meaning of politics. Rather, the finding within this project demonstrates that the conceptualisation of political salience should not be limited to the importance of politics to the individual's life, but should have a collective dimension.

Applying Akram's developed account of agency adds further depth to our understanding of how participants identified the salience of politics. Participants' discussions regarding the salience of politics often demonstrated conscious reflection

and clearly articulated expressions regarding the relevance of politics. Each participant acknowledged the importance of politics and often linked this importance to the 'function' and the effect of politics. Participants' discussions often demonstrated how their thoughts had been influenced by observing the implications of social structures on people's life experiences – although these effects were communicated via a language of injustice or unfairness rather than the academic word 'structures'. Akram (2019, p. 33) identifies that there has been a move to consider 'particular characteristics of agency' with emotion being one such characteristic but calls for a greater consideration of how the elements of agency interact with one another. While there was reflexivity as to the salience of politics, this was informed by an underlying emotional dimension regarding the inequitable effects of politics. Akram's developed account of agency has sensitised us to view salience via a collective lens. Participants recognised that politics had an effect on their lives but a greater emphasis was often placed on the effects of politics on how we interact as a society. Akram's (2019) criticism of Archer's work contends that our understanding of agency should be progressed away from one which foregrounds self-interest and rationality. Within this project, the internal political conversation has enabled us to explore how individuals conceptualised the effects of politics via a collective lens. Individuals' deliberations were informed by an account of what was viewed to be right and just.

Turning back to analysis of interview data, there were examples of how racism and sexism had informed the way in which participants related to their meaning of politics. Again, this emphasises how participants' accounts of their relationship with politics reflected the effects of social structures. The agential act of expressing interest therefore is not one based on rationality or self-interest, but positions the individual as

part of wider society whereby the ramifications of power relations and resulting imbalances influence the relationship with politics. Again, political interest did not arise only from the shared subjectivities, or meanings of politics, but emerged from how individuals related to their meaning of politics. The meanings of politics are social constructions. The developed account of agency put forward by this thesis allows us to explore how people relate to these meanings.

One participant discussed how important women's rights were to them and noted their disappointment that others were not as impassioned. This had a silencing effect with the participant expressing *'no one wants to hear me talk about it'* (participant 7). Here, the concept of habitus helps us to appreciate that previous experiences of dismissal had informed how the participant discusses their political opinions. The participant anticipates others' negative responses and so keeps their views to themselves. Another participant (participant 28) highlighted that the use of racist messaging by some political parties ran counter to their conceptualisation of politics as pursuing social progress. To use racist campaigning methods was not true 'politics'. The participant's deliberations were anchored to their observation of the political system and their own meaning of politics. Consequently, the actions of particular political parties were found to be highly questionable and not in line with what politics should 'be'. Additionally, other participants noted the effects of economic inequality and class relations meaning that political decisions will be experienced differently according to an individual's situation. Participant 36 took a particularly international perspective when discussing their concerns about inequitable trade relations and spoke at length about their experience of guilt when they choose a cheaper product over a Fairtrade product. The participant's reflections described a sense of culpability and almost a

sense of acting against their own meaning of politics. The internal political conversation provides an instrument in which to explore how participants make sense of the incongruence between what politics should be and how politics is practised. The findings chapters (chapters 5 and 6) discussed how the assessment of an interest in politics was conditional on recognising salience within an individual's meaning of politics. There are both cognitive and emotional dimensions within participants' reflections on the importance of politics. While participants reasoned that politics was important due to its effects, some participants' responses had clear indications that the consequences of politics inspired an emotional response.

We can see that participants' acknowledgement of the salience of politics was not just a product of their experiences of politics or, more narrowly, their own interactions with the political system. The internal political conversation helps us to appreciate that participants reflect on the implications of politics. Through the internal political conversation, we can appreciate the potential for a wide variety of responses to politics. The internal political conversation opens up the potential for us to consider what people think and feel in response to politics while avoiding simple cause and effect assertions. The deliberations that are a part of the internal political conversation allow for a more nuanced account of how people identify salience within their meaning of politics.

b. A sense of place in politics

Participants discussed a sense of place via whether they felt that they had a right to claim an interest in politics. For several participants this was discussed in terms of the

accessibility of politics and how some people may not feel represented within the political system. It is notable that participants often referenced the perceptions of other people rather than reflecting on their own sense of a lack of representation. A small number of participants also discussed their self-doubt as to whether they were able to engage with the political system, with two participants discussing directly their sense that they fell short of the perceived 'requirements' to be interested in politics.

Holding a sense of place in politics does share some similar elements to the concept of internal political self-efficacy. However, place is broader and there is a greater emphasis on participants perceiving that they 'belong' within politics rather than focusing solely on the ability to generate change within politics, or understand politics. Definitions of political self-efficacy focus on the extent to which an individual perceives that they can influence the political system or, as noted by Morrell (2003, p. 589), 'citizens' perceptions of powerfulness (or powerlessness) in the political realm'. The concept has been argued to have both an external form, seen to be the perceived receptiveness of the political system to individuals' influence, as well as an internal form, referring to individuals' perceptions of their ability to interact with the political system 'to achieve desired results' (Balch, 1974; Caprara et al., 2009, p. 1002). Internal political self-efficacy has been identified to have a number of elements that are related to, but distinct from, perceptions of the ability to influence the political system (Caprara et al., 2009). These include perceptions of being able to understand politics and being well-informed, to self-belief in the ability to voice an opinion. Arguably, self-perceptions of being able to understand politics and a belief in being able to influence the political system are two very different viewpoints. An individual perceiving that they can influence the political system will be intrinsically bound to

perceptions of the openness of the political system, or perceived external political self-efficacy (Morrell, 2003, p. 593). This openness is a different proposition to whether someone perceives that they understand politics. Furthermore, and by way of contrast to political self-efficacy, holding a sense of place in politics is rooted in an individual's thoughts as to whether politics is 'for them' and whether they feel that they are accepted and belong within politics (Bourdieu, 1992, 2010). Chapter two referenced Yuval-Davis' (2006; 2007) discussion of 'belonging' as a sense of being at home or fitting in with the social environment. When thinking about a sense of place associated with political interest, it is not so much that someone feels that they can generate change or understand politics. Rather, it is whether individuals perceive they have the right, or are entitled, to be interested in politics.

Akram's (2013, 2019) call for a greater acknowledgement of the role of the unconscious, as mediated via Bourdieu's concept of habitus, begins to expand our understanding of how someone identifies a sense of place within politics. The participant who expressed that they were uninterested in politics outlined their unease at the thought of discussing politics. The participant notes variously that they have *'got a bit of a barrier with politics'*, finds it *'really easy to get lost in like the wording of it [politics]'* and avoids political discussions, even though they have opinions, as they *'wouldn't have the confidence to back my answer up'* [participant 37]. The participant attributed their lack of interest to politics having '*not really been a major thing in my household*' when growing up and often made references to the complexity of politics, in particular, discussing the challenges of studying a module on public affairs while at university. The participant also noted that if someone tried to engage them in a political discussion they would '*feel like they were trying to catch me out*'. There are indications

that politics inspires a sense of not belonging, or sense of inadequacy, within the participant. The participant appears to have internalised the self-perception that they do not understand politics and this perception, mediated via habitus, appears to prevent them from expressing an interest in politics. In other words, they cannot be interested because they sense that politics is not for them as they question their political knowledge. The participant seems to lack a sense of entitlement that they can be interested in politics and perceives that politics is a domain to which they do not have a place. Politics is seen to be unwelcoming.

The participant's self-assessment was made in relation to others. The participant clearly identified that they felt that others had more knowledge and that they would be 'found out' as someone with limited knowledge – that they were trying to access a world to which they did not belong. Politics is undoubtedly a complex entity. It is a constant and incomplete process in which there will always be shifts in political proceedings. Considering this character of politics, it is difficult to comprehend how anyone can ever truly understand politics. Nevertheless, the participant's self-questioning reflects how their self-perception had been cast with reference to their beliefs about others. The participant did hold political opinions but did not acknowledge the inconsistency between the existence of these opinions and their lack of interest. Instead, the participant perceived that they do not match the requirements to be interested in politics and so 'removed' themself from the running of entering into a political discussion.

Participants who recognised and expressed their strong interest in politics also demonstrated an element of the unconscious in their discussions about politics. Often these participants could not identify a specific time when they became interested in politics, as reflected in participant 18's response when asked if they had always been interested in politics:

> *I think that it's always been constant. I can't think of a watershed moment where I thought right that's it, this is something that I want to take an interest in, it's just been a constant stream within my life, you know.* Participant 18

Participants with a clear interest in politics often discussed this as an almost innate quality, that they just *were* interested in politics and did not seem to have considered not being interested. Some participants referenced their parents being interested in politics but often did not make clear links as to how their parents' interest influenced their own. Often these participants spoke about having always been interested in current affairs. For these participants, there is almost a sense of their political interest being 'natural' and not something that is questioned. Habitus helps us appreciate that participants' expression of interest may be influenced by a sense of being 'at ease with politics' (Shani, 2009, p. 197) to the point that participants are unaware of what has influenced their interest. There is an impression from these participants that they have the prerogative to claim an interest in politics. As framed by this thesis, participants had a sense of their own place in politics. There is an agential dimension to this sense of place which is informed by the structural context, as revealed when participants who self-assessed being politically interested are compared with those who do not, or who were uncertain about their interest. Those who assessed that they are interested in politics did not seem to subject themselves to the same level of questioning or self-scrutiny as those who were uninterested, or uncertain about their interest in politics.

There was a greater sense of possibility that they could be interested whereas those who self-assessed as uninterested seemed to exclude themselves from perceiving their interest. Just as there was a sense from one participant that they were not entitled to be interested, others did not demonstrate any questioning of their own position or interest in politics. It was almost something that was unquestioned, they had never had to consider what had informed their interest in politics – they just *were* interested.

While some participants did not make explicit links between their family's engagement with politics and their own interest, participant 10 was an exception who discussed how they saw participating in political discussions as a *'gateway'* to maturity and how observing their family's discussions emphasised the importance of politics and that they could *'see themselves being interested in it* [politics]'.

> *Yeah, I guess, I think within my, within my family in terms of my household as I was the youngest child, I feel like I was often searching for something that would make me grown up and make me more part of the team, I guess. And amongst my wider family as well it felt like there was a lot of importance put on grown-up chats and a lot of that I associated, looking back on it, I associated with politics. Maybe at the time I didn't actually realise it was so much politics. A lot of the discussions that my family would have would involve what I would have thought at the time as around grown up, so around politics, around society stuff like that. I saw that as my gateway to, what's the word? Maturity basically. I think having a say, it's maybe the importance that I felt my family put on it. It felt like I kind of had a bit of a look within their world.* Participant 10

The effects of habitus could also be identified within participant 27's reflection on their internal political conversation which was focused on their growing realisation that they were interested in politics. The participant attributed their previous uninterest in politics to a lack of confidence and a belief that they could not meet the perceived requirements of, in the participant's words, '*my interpretation and vision of politics*…

[based on] *that Westminster sort of public school educated, not really in touch with people*' [participant 27]. This lack of confidence was despite their acknowledgement of a keen awareness of politics as a young child. Such awareness was attributed to their family background which was suggested to have helped them understand the difference a Labour government could make to people's lives. However, the participant identified that their involvement in community organisations, in particular a local campaign, and friends' and colleagues' suggestions that they would make a positive contribution to local politics had, in their words, '*made me reflect on politics internally*' and started to influence how they saw themselves in connection to politics. It would appear that the participant had started to challenge the conditioning of their habitus as they were actively deliberating their relationship with politics and, with it, their interest in politics via their internal political conversation.

The example detailed above demonstrates how Akram's developed account of agency sensitises us to the processes which can lead to shifts in how someone associates with their meaning of politics. The 'generative principle' (Maton, 2008, pp. 51–55) of Bourdieu's concept of habitus helps us to appreciate how people may feel included, or excluded, when relating to their meaning of politics based on their prior experiences and perceptions. However, Akram (2019, p. 127) identifies that a changing situation or scenario may lead to an individual demonstrating greater reflexivity within their internal political conversation. Such reflexivity has the potential to influence how individuals relate to politics. The reflexivity can still be influenced, or directed, by habitus but the situation – in the example above, involvement in a local campaign which was of great importance to the participant, and the encouragement from friends

and colleagues to get involved in politics – may encourage greater deliberation from the individual.

Building block 5: How a developed account of political interest furthers our understanding of political socialisation

The final building block of the framework highlights how the study contributes to our understanding of political socialisation. Applying Akram's developed account of agency to the study's findings has progressed our understanding of the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics and also adds to our understanding of political socialisation. Political socialisation refers to the processes which inform the transmission of a political culture to citizens (Owen, 2008, p. 2). Sapiro (2004, p. 2) defined macro political socialisation as the ways in which 'polities and other political societies and systems inculcate appropriate norms and practices in citizens, residents, or members'. Of greater interest to this study is political socialisation at the micro, or personal, level which considers:

> *the patterns and processes by which individuals engage in political development and learning, constructing their particular relationships to the political contexts in which they live* (Sapiro, 2004, p. 3).

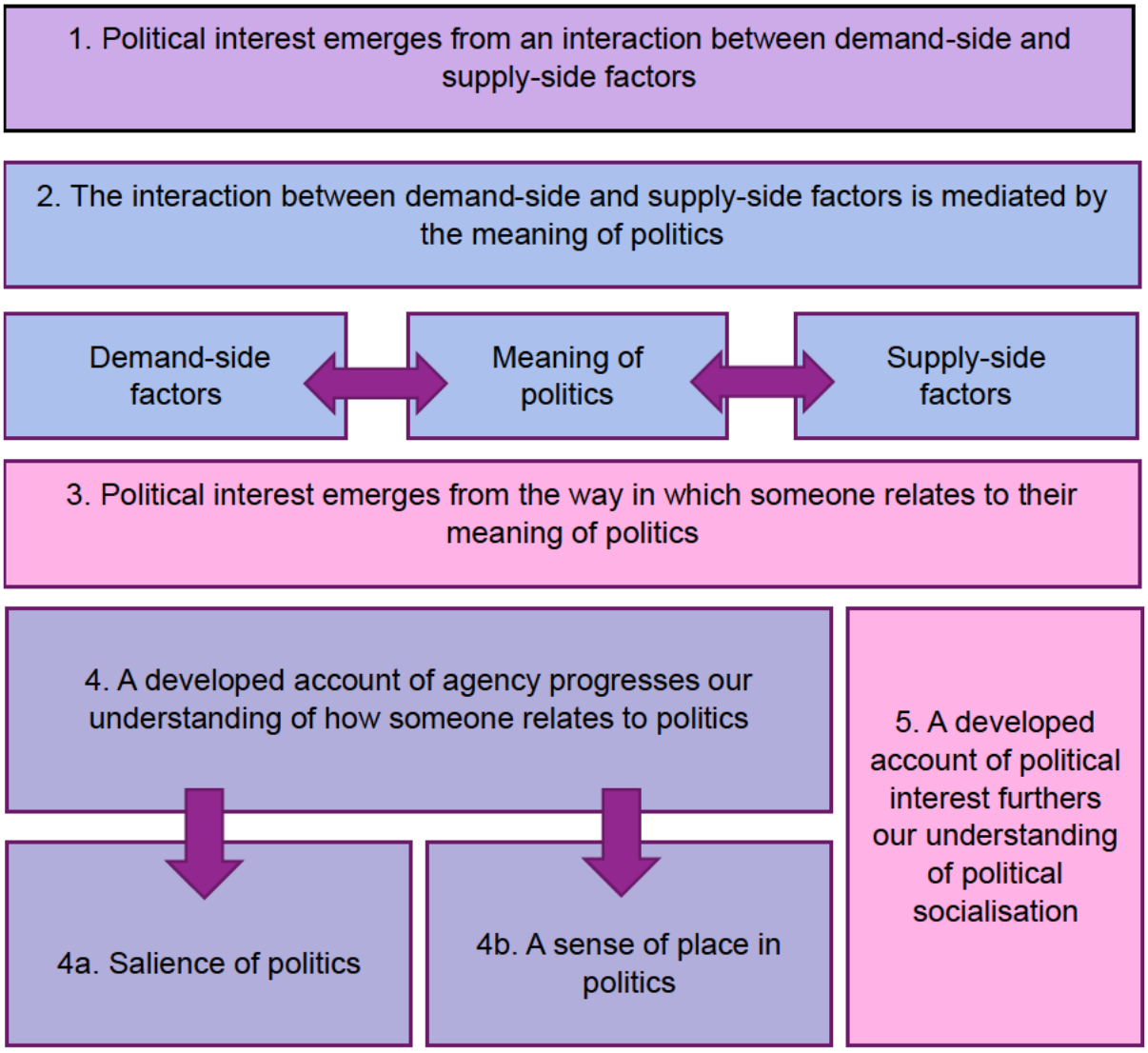
Previous exploration of political socialisation has been criticised for being overly focused on childhood experiences rather than acknowledging that processes of political socialisation occur throughout the life course (Marsh, 1971; Akram, 2019, pp. 67–68). While Sapiro (2004, p. 18) contends that there is increasing agreement that political socialisation occurs throughout the life course, this is used as justification for the value of exploring political socialisation in childhood. Despite these discussions

regarding the timing of the process, studies exploring political socialisation have been criticised for assuming that recipients of socialisation are passive and unquestionably accept inculcation on politics (Connell, 1987; Sigel, 1995). The study's application of Akram's developed concept of agency begins to unveil the processes that have been suggested to be missing from discussions about political socialisation. Within this thesis, the individual is placed at the centre through emphasising how they relate to politics. Exploring what influences an individual to acknowledge the salience and a sense of place within their meaning of politics provides a starting base on which to develop our understanding of the processes of political socialisation. The emphasis on agency within this analysis addresses the criticism levied to the concept of political socialisation that it assumes passivity. Instead, the individual is centred within the processes by which someone comes to relate to their meaning of politics.

Previous studies have identified that there is a general stability to individuals' expressed political interest (Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010). This study's findings do not contradict this analysis but do suggest that, at an individual level, the intensity of assessed political interest can increase or decrease according to how people relate to their meaning of politics. Participants' discussions revealed processes of political socialisation that influenced the identification of salience or a sense of place within their meaning of politics. Two forms of learning about politics were identified from the interview data, one that was independent with the individual directing their own learning, and another that was led by others, such as family members or teachers.

Discussions of political socialisation within the childhood home can be associated with the participant developing a sense of place, or belonging, in relation to politics. The structuring quality of habitus offers us an analytical instrument to appreciate how this early learning can provide a foundation which can inform how someone interacts with politics in future. Similarly, participant 3 discussed the role of a teacher in supporting them to develop their political opinions by signposting relevant material to read, and noted the role of the education system to support people to feel that their voice is valued. Political socialisation, via the participant's formal education, informed their habitus, as seen when the participant discussed how they developed their view that there is value in engaging with politics. The ongoing influence of this interpretation within the participant's internal political conversation can be seen when they discuss their active attempts to reframe their meaning of politics so that it emphasises positive elements and avoids *'a rabbit hole of negativity'*. The participant also discussed how it can be difficult for some people to develop political knowledge as '*it's hard to get into politics if you don't have an avenue into it*'. Here, the participant perceives that access to political learning is not equitable, describing politics as a '*circle*' and '*if you're part of the circle, you're part of the circle*', noting that those outside of the circle will likely ignore politics and potentially disenfranchise themselves. Perceptions of the inaccessibility of politics have arguably informed their internal political conversation and their deliberations on the importance of maintaining a positive account of politics. Within this study, the emphasis on how the individual relates to their meaning of politics begins to open up the potential to explore the processes that inform political socialisation.

Figure 8 An analytical framework informing the study of political interest



Contribution

This thesis has considered the concept of political interest and the processes that can influence an individual to self-assess an interest in politics. In doing so, the thesis has made several further contributions to the field. These contributions have been divided into conceptual, methodological, and analytical contributions.

Conceptual contribution: A developed conceptualisation of political interest

The framework is built on a conceptualisation of political interest in which it is viewed to be an expression of a self-assessment. This study developed previous work which has similarly discussed the measurement of political interest as a self-assessment (van Deth, 1989; Prior, 2019) or self-evaluation (Boulianne, 2011), by exploring the implications of conceptualising political interest in this way. If political interest is dependent on the individual recognising their interest, our focus is recast to consider what influences someone to recognise, and express, their interest in politics.

The framework emphasises that political interest should not be analysed as a product of only supply-side or demand-side factors alone and encourages the researcher to consider the interaction of supply-side and demand-side accounts as mediated via an individual's meaning of politics. Interest is viewed to emerge from the relationships that the individual has with politics. Namely, that people are more likely to recognise and express an interest in politics if they identify the salience of, and place within, their meaning of politics. The analytical focus therefore shifts away from exploring the variables that are associated with higher or lower levels of political interest, towards a more relational account of interest which emphasises the multifaceted relationships and associations people have with politics.

This conceptual contribution also has implications for future quantitative research. Previous work has recommended that measures of political interest should be directed to different conceptualisations of politics (Campbell and Winters, 2008; Coffé, 2013; Robinson Preece, 2016) and the acknowledgement within this work that politics can

be interpreted in different ways is helpful. However, this thesis' findings direct us to consider not only how politics is interpreted, but also how people relate to their meaning of politics. Political interest emerges from participants' perception of the salience of their meaning of politics (interpreted as a collective account of salience) and their sense of place within politics (described as a broader sense of entitlement rather than a measure of internal political self-efficacy). It would be of great value to explore how these perceptions can be operationalised within survey research. For instance, an index of place in politics could be developed which would include a measure of the extent someone feels connected with politics and the sense that they feel that they can be interested in politics. Similarly, an index measuring collective salience could be developed. The index could consider whether a respondent identifies politics as being important to society as a whole, as well as the extent to which individuals' life outcomes are informed by politics. Future research should explore the association between these variables and respondents' expressed political interest. Specifically, analysis should focus on those groups identified to be less likely to express an interest in politics.

Methodological contribution: Application of Q-methodology to explore perceptions of politics

Q-methodology is a bottom-up approach which provides an open forum for participants to construct their own meaning of politics. The study of political engagement has been argued to be constrained by the analyst's conceptualisation of politics which can result in an underestimation of political engagement – particularly for younger people (O'Toole, 2003; O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Quintelier, 2007). This thesis is the

first time that Q-methodology has been used to study the range of shared subjectivities associated with the meaning of politics. Q-methodology offers an approach to study subjectivity in a systematic manner (Brown, 1993, p. 93) which allows the participant to be fully embedded within the research process. As discussed in chapter three, a participant's Q-sort reflects the process by which a participant constructs their preferences as they both project and draw meaning from the statements (Wolf, 2009, p. 21). The moderate social constructionist approach of this project proposes that the subjectivities identified via Q-methodology reflect shared accounts and interpretations that are in circulation within society (Stenner, 2009). In revealing five distinct accounts of politics, the thesis sensitises us to the idea that people have different conceptualisations of politics. Hitherto, these holistic accounts of the meaning of politics have been hidden. Q-methodology has allowed the thesis to respond to the second research question and explore the areas of similarity and difference within people's meaning of politics. The findings offer a starting point to explore the differences and similarities in what people think and feel about politics and how this may influence the agential process of self-assessing political interest.

Analytical contribution: A developed description of distinct meanings of politics

In addition to the development of a conceptualisation of interest, the Q-study identified five distinct meanings of politics. Previously, accounts have tended to focus on whether politics (often limited to the political system) is viewed positively or negatively. Instead, the five shared subjectivities presented within this thesis offer holistic accounts which are built on both an individual's orientation to politics, along with their definition of politics – the two domains identified to comprise a meaning of politics. The

literature on political (dis)engagement has progressed towards acknowledging a broader conceptualisation of politics rather than a narrow focus on participation with the political system, see, for example, Stolle et al.'s (2005) work on political consumerism, Bang's (2009) Everyday Makers, and Akram's (2014, 2019) discussion of the political character of riots. As chapter four outlined, an individual's meaning of politics is comprised of several elements. Employing Q-methodology within this thesis has developed a rounded description of what politics means to people. In other words, the descriptions of the meanings of politics have not just focused on where politics can be found, but has also explored with participants what it is that makes a phenomenon distinctly political.

Implications of the study for policy and practice

In addition to this study's contribution to the field, it is proposed that the findings also have implications for policy and practice and can contribute to a wider understanding of political engagement. Throughout this thesis, political interest has been positioned as antecedent to political engagement. There will be a feedback loop in which engagement with politics will likely increase political interest. However, those who recognise or express their interest in politics have been found to be more likely to politically engage (Prior, 2019). Therefore, understanding what influences someone to express an interest in politics will concomitantly develop our understanding of political engagement.

The study's findings may have implications for attempts to increase voter registration and subsequent participation in elections. A previous advertisement from the Electoral

Commission (2013) in 2004 which aimed to promote voter registration featured someone telling their friend that they *'don't do politics'*. When the characters come up against different scenarios that are a cause for complaint, such as roadworks, graffiti, or rising prices in a shop, the friend tells the original character that they cannot complain because *'you don't do politics, remember?'.* The advertisement's final strapline, '*If you don't do politics, there's not much you do do'*, clearly highlights attempts to raise the salience of politics by demonstrating how political decisions affect everyday life.

However, along with the emphasis on salience, attempts to increase political engagement should also consider how people's sense of place, or belonging, in politics can be developed. Recalling participant 37's interview shows us that, although the participant did vote, recognising the salience of politics was not enough to assess an interest in politics as this participant did not feel that they belonged, or had a sense of place, within politics. The approach of the Electoral Commission is in contrast to *When We All Vote*, an organisation which aims to increase voter registration in the United States. The organisation tested which campaign messages sent to people of colour were the most successful in prompting voter registration. These messages were 'aimed at honestly addressing feelings of alienation and frustration' (When We All Vote, 2020) and therefore could be said to reflect attempts to increase the sense of place, or belonging in politics. The current study has demonstrated that self-assessed political interest can be encouraged by increasing the perceived salience of, and place within, politics. Given the association between expressed political interest and political engagement, policy and practice to increase political participation should also take a similar, dual, approach. Turning back to the interviews with community organisations,

one participant discussed their experience of how inclusive campaigns encourage involvement and a greater sense of commitment from the individual to the work of the campaign. Attempts to promote an inclusive account of politics which highlights that it operates at an international, national, and local, level may help to encourage interest. Furthermore, there is an affective dimension to the way in which individuals' perceive salience and place. When reflecting on the importance of politics, it may be fruitful to frame this around a collective account of salience which promotes the effects of politics on society as a whole, rather than just at an individual level.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to develop an analytical framework to inform the study of political interest, as well as to situate the findings within the wider literature on political interest. Participants' accounts of their interest in politics reflected the complexity of the concept. We have much to gain by accepting this complexity and exploring what can influence someone to self-assess that they are interested in politics. Akram's enhanced account of agency opens up the potential to explore the relationship someone has with their meaning of politics. Furthermore, the application of the theoretical framework provides a starting point in which to develop our understanding of political socialisation. From this basis, an analytical framework has been developed which summarises a developed account of political interest and has the potential to inform our understanding of the concept and political engagement more widely. The contributions of the study have also been outlined. The next chapter offers a conclusion to the study. Along with providing an overview of the thesis, the implications of the study will also be outlined and future areas of research proposed.

CONCLUSION

The thesis was built on a starting principle, that being interested in politics is important and valuable. This thesis has explored the factors which influence whether someone assesses themselves to be interested in politics. Positioning political interest as an individual's self-assessment leads us to turn our attention to considering the conditions which can encourage someone to recognise their interest in politics. Being interested in politics has been viewed to promote and develop political engagement, although it is likely that there is a more fluid interaction where increased engagement leads to increased interest and vice versa (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Quintelier and van Deth, 2014; Prior, 2019). Frequently, studies of political (dis)engagement acknowledge the importance of political interest but do not devote much time to consider just what someone means when they say they are interested in politics. Often, political interest is inputted as a variable in quantitative research but the relationship between this and other measures of political (dis)engagement are under theorised.

The thesis has focused on developing our understanding of political interest. This has been progressed through drawing on literature exploring political (dis)engagement, as well as work within the field of educational psychology exploring what interest means. As a concept, political interest is ambiguous and indeterminate and there is no clear definition as to what measures of political interest conceptualise. The review of the literature on political interest contended that this confusion can be sidestepped if a distinction is made between an individual experiencing a state of interest and assessing, or claiming, their interest in politics. When conducting an empirical study

of political interest, we are limited to analysing people's own assessment of their interest. Therefore, considering the conditions which can prompt someone to recognise their interest will progress our understanding of political interest.

To view political interest as a self-assessment requires an individual to reflect and ask the question *'am I interested in politics?'.* This self-assessment is not necessarily the same as the 'experience' of interest and there is the potential that someone may experience the state of interest but may not acknowledge, or recognise, that they are interested. While others have discussed the measurement of political interest as a self-assessment or evaluation (van Deth, 1989; Boulianne, 2011; Prior, 2019), this thesis has considered the implications of this conceptualisation. Measures of political interest are not quantifying an 'amount' of interest as a discrete entity but rather these measures are a reflection of how an individual perceives themselves. Therefore, for someone to express that they are interested requires them to self-assess that they are interested or, in other words, to recognise their interest. This is a shift of analytical focus towards exploring the factors which may inform someone to recognise that they are interested in politics.

Previous studies often explore the strength of association between a range of variables and political interest. As identified in the literature review, people's interest in politics is often explored via supply-side, or demand-side accounts. The literature review contended that the theoretical underpinnings for these accounts are often underdeveloped which limits our understanding of the association between the independent variables and the dependent variable of political interest. Building on this

point, it was argued that these studies, often implicitly, suggest that people hold different interpretations of politics and that an individual's interest in politics can be attributed to these interpretations, or meanings, of politics. Highlighting these implicit accounts sensitises us to the idea that people can think and feel different things in connection to the word politics. Interest will always have a target and will be based on the interpretation that someone has of that object (Ainley, 2017). In relation, this thesis makes the implicit explicit and suggests that the recognition of interest is influenced by individuals' meaning of politics (a point also made by Robison (2014)). Placing an emphasis on the potential for people to hold different meanings of politics offers a more developed account of interest than one which claims that interest emerges from the way people 'rate' politics. For example, we can expect that people may have different levels of trust in politics. However, it is not immediately clear whether, or indeed why, someone with low levels of political trust may be interested in politics or not. Instead, the focus on the meanings of politics allows us to consider a broader and more holistic account of what politics 'is'. We should focus on what an individual identifies politics to be and also the implications of this account of politics.

The theoretical framework informing this thesis provides us with a navigational tool to assist us to appreciate the way in which someone may come to recognise that they are interested in politics. Within this study, the assessment of political interest has been positioned as an act of agency; the individual has the capacity to express an interest in politics. Calling on the work of Akram (2019), this act of agency is not just influenced by reflexivity, or the individual's unencumbered reflection on their interest. Previous studies of political interest frequently skirt around the issue of what 'is' political interest. Consequently, a somewhat simplistic account is presented whereby

people know their interest with limited exploration of the processes which have informed someone to assess themselves to be interested.

Akram's (2019) developed account of agency identifies that there is also a role for the unconscious and the affective, as positioned within Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Here, habitus provides an analytical mechanism whereby past experiences have a bearing on individuals' interactions with the social world. The internal political conversation is also highlighted by Akram as a way in which to explore people's political behaviour and refers to the deliberations people have when thinking about politics 'in their head'. The reflexivity within the internal political conversation may be influenced by habitus. In other words, the way in which someone thinks about an object or concept may be influenced by their prior experiences. From Akram's argument, our account of reflexivity needs to acknowledge the influence of the social world on what people think and feel about an object. Consequently, people's assessment of their political interest emerges from the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics.

Employing the work of Akram within this thesis provided the tools in which to unpack the claim that individuals' recognition of their interest in politics is influenced by their meaning of politics. If interest is directed to an object, then Akram's developed account of agency highlights the processes by which what we think and feel about an object can influence our self-assessment. In other words, the internal political conversation and the unconscious provides us with a sense of how the individual relates to their meaning of politics when considering whether or not they are interested in politics.

Identifying the meanings of politics

A cornerstone of this thesis is that people call to mind different things when thinking about politics and that there is not a single unified idea of politics. To explore this claim, it was necessary to first examine the extent to which people hold different accounts of politics. The second research question: '*What types of meanings do people hold about politics?'* was assessed through conducting a Q-study. Previous work has identified that people think and feel different things when encountering the word politics. However, the use of Q-methodology generated a holistic account of the meanings of politics. These accounts captured the different elements which comprise how someone may interpret politics. Before now, Q-methodology has not been used to study people's conceptualisations of politics.

The theoretical and empirical literature, along with interviews with community organisations, and analysis of the Qualitative Election Study of Britain, were used to identify what can constitute a 'meaning' of politics. Completing this exercise revealed that there were two dimensions to the meaning of politics – the definition of politics and the orientation to politics. The definition of politics is described as the what, where, and why of politics, and the orientation to politics refers to an individual's preferences and beliefs about politics. The Q-study identified five distinct meanings of politics based on how participants sorted a set of statements structured using the definition and orientation dimensions, with four sub-themes falling under each of these domains. The four sub-themes that fall under definition include: 1. the where of politics, 2. the what of politics, 3. the why of politics, and 4. identifying political activity. Sub-themes under the orientation dimension include: 1. self in relation to politics, 2. views on politics, 3. perceptions of citizenship duties, and 4. facilitators and barriers to

engagement. Each of the identified meanings of politics were distinctive and reflect different perceptions with regards to the function of politics and the accessibility of the political system. While there were areas of shared understanding across the five accounts of politics, there were also areas of subtle distinction. The thesis has demonstrated that people can hold different meanings of politics and the development of a balanced Q-set reveals the nuance within these accounts.

The meaning of politics and the self-assessment of political interest

The third research question directing this thesis built on the second to ask: *'To what extent do individuals' meaning of politics influence the self-assessment of their interest?'.* This question explored how the different identified meanings of politics influenced the recognition of political interest. In response to the question, the meaning of politics does influence the self-assessment of political interest. However, while people do hold different meanings of politics, the study has demonstrated that an individual's political interest cannot be attributed to their meaning of politics alone. In other words, it is not the case that variation in expressed political interest can be explained by politically interested people holding one account of politics and uninterested people holding another account. Participants loading onto the different viewpoints (or different meanings of politics) expressed a range of interest in politics. Participants who expressed a lack of interest in politics did load onto viewpoint 2 *(We need politics but it's off-putting)*. However, participants who were interested in politics also shared this account. Indeed, participants interested in politics loaded across all five identified meanings. Consequently, conceptualising politics in a particular way does not necessarily result in the recognition of political interest. It is too simplistic to say that there is a linear association between the meaning of politics and the self-

assessment of an interest in politics. As demonstrated by the different meanings of politics identified within this thesis, it is not the case that people who interpret politics negatively are uninterested in politics and those with positive perceptions are interested in politics. While Prior (2019) confirms that there is no clear direction of association between system support and political interest, I take this one step further by exploring how the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics may mean that they are more likely to self-assess as being interested in politics.

Conducting semi-structured interviews aimed to complement the findings of the Q-study by exploring participants' interest in politics, along with their own relationship with politics. Analysis of interview data revealed that self-assessed interest emerged from the way in which someone relates to their meaning of politics, in other words, how they connect with their meaning of politics. Specifically, the recognition of political interest was conditional on whether participants identified salience within their account of politics, as well as a sense of place – viewed as belonging or a sense of acceptance, within their meaning of politics. Interview data from the one participant who was not interested in politics demonstrated the potential for someone to identify the salience of politics but not perceive a sense of place, or feel that they were permitted to be interested, in politics. This finding would suggest that an interest in politics is unlikely to be recognised unless there is the acknowledgement of both the salience and a sense of place in relation to an individual's meaning of politics.

Implications of the findings

Applying the theoretical framework to the analysis of interview data develops our understanding of the factors that can influence whether people recognise their interest in politics. When acknowledging the salience of politics, participants reflected on the function of politics and what it achieves for society as a whole. The emphasis on the collective stands in distinction to an individualised account of salience. The concept of the internal political conversation alerts us to the idea that people have ongoing silent discussions with themselves about politics. These discussions open up the potential for people to reassess their interest in politics. While it is acknowledged that there is broad stability to people's assessment of their political interest (Shani, 2009; Prior, 2010, 2019), the internal political conversation highlights how people's perceptions of their political interest may shift as new information or perceptions are encountered and reflected upon. Furthermore, the role of the unconscious, as mediated by habitus, assists us in appreciating how individuals' self-perceptions formed previously may be projected and influence how they come to recognise that they are interested in politics.

A further implication relates to the association between a sense of place and political interest. A sense of place in politics is broader than internal political self-efficacy. It is not so much the case that participants felt that they could generate change within the political system. Nor is a sense of place limited to an individual's account of whether they feel they have the skills required to understand politics. Rather, place relates more to participants' self-perception that they could be interested in politics, that they were entitled to be interested. The concept of habitus refines our understanding of how individuals come to recognise that they are interested in politics. Along with recognising the salience of their meaning of politics, participants must also identify that

they belong within this account. There may not have been an active discussion of this sense of place within interviews, however, perceptions of belonging were identified within participants' responses and the contrast between some participants' expressions of self-doubt and others' lack of questioning.

In addition to developing our understanding of political interest, the study begins to shed some light on the processes which inform political socialisation. Studies of political socialisation have been criticised for assuming that people passively accept and absorb such inculcation (Sigel, 1995). By way of contrast, the deliberations within the internal political conversation demonstrate that individuals construct their own account and relationship to politics and opens up the potential to identify the processes which inform political socialisation (Akram, 2019). Furthermore, the actions of habitus alert us to the way in which messages promoting political engagement may be more or less likely to be accepted. These messages could be both formal, as portrayed within education or communications campaigns, or more informal, conveyed via everyday conversations. Consequently, the findings of this thesis suggest that attempts to increase political engagement should acknowledge that people do not share a single conceptualisation of politics. There should be a greater exploration of how people relate to their meaning of politics. In particular, ways to increase the salience of, and sense of place within, politics should be considered.

Interview data were also used to develop tentative proposals of how people identify the salience and sense of place in connection with each of the five meanings of politics. While these assessments are cautious due to limited data, the proposals may provide

a starting point in which to build different strategies intended to boost political interest. Such strategies may entail foregrounding the functions that politics provides for society, for example through highlighting the contribution politics can make to progressing social justice and generating compromise, to considering how to ensure that people feel that their opinions are valued. Identifying that people will relate to their meanings of politics in different ways may assist us in developing our understanding as to why some strategies to increase engagement may be more successful for some people than others.

Limitations and future studies

As discussed in chapter three, which detailed the research design, there are several limitations within this study. The timing of the fieldwork coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and led to a shift in the research design from face-to-face methods to conducting the Q-study online, with interviews being conducted via telephone or video call, whichever the participant preferred. This shift had unavoidable ramifications for the study. Primarily, it introduced a time lag between the completion of the Q-sort and the interview. While data were collected from participants as to what informed the ranking of their 'most agree' and 'most disagree' statements, undoubtedly, a greater depth of data could have been collected had the Q-sort been completed face-to-face. With the benefit of hindsight, it may have been better to attempt to conduct the Q-sort via a video call which could have facilitated the participant completing the Q-sort before then being interviewed. Furthermore, the Q-study would have been strengthened if the interpretations of the viewpoints had been sent to participants to further validate the findings. However, given the great disruption of the initial months of the lockdown within the United Kingdom, attempts were made to reduce the burden

on participants wherever possible. Suggestions of future areas of study to respond to these weaknesses are proposed later in the chapter. The thesis provides a foundation on which additional studies could be completed which would further validate this study's findings.

Despite its limitations, this study still makes clear contributions to our understanding of political interest. The emphasis on self-assessment, and the resulting shift towards exploring the factors that can influence whether someone identifies an interest in politics, deepens our understanding of political interest. The thesis presents an analytical framework which intends to encourage questioning and challenge directed to the concept of political interest. In doing so, the framework aims to prompt the researcher to consider political interest as an act of agency and unveils the processes by which someone recognises their interest in politics.

Along with developing our understanding of political interest, the study also elicits a number of areas for future research. These areas include additional research which could address some of the limitations of this study, as well as topics that will build on the study's findings to enhance our understanding of political interest and engagement more widely.

Can the study's findings be applied to other areas of political engagement?

The key argument of this thesis is that the assessment of political interest is dependent on the way in which individuals relate to their meaning of politics. The study was

inspired by previous analysis which identified the tendency for certain groups to demonstrate higher levels of political interest than others. There is the potential for the premise of the thesis to be applied to other measures of political engagement which rely on respondents' self-assessment. Political knowledge is one such area. While some civic engagement surveys develop measures of political knowledge based on questions of fact, for example, the British Election Study (Fieldhouse et al., 2018) and American National Election Studies (2021), other surveys ask individuals to self-assess their own level of knowledge about politics, see the Hansard Society's (2019) Audit of Political Engagement as an example. Consequently, there is the opportunity to explore whether the way in which people relate to their meaning of politics influences how they self-assess their political knowledge. Additionally, further research could consider whether the application of this study's theoretical framework assists us to understand what influences someone to identify that they are knowledgeable about politics.

Do individuals' meanings of politics change over time?

While this study has demonstrated the association between interest and the object of interest – politics, we have little understanding of what influences people to hold different meanings of politics. In other words, the current study has identified and described the meanings of politics but we do not yet understand what has contributed to people holding these different meanings of politics. This remaining knowledge gap surfaces three areas of further study:

- The first is the scope for future research to explore the genesis of the multiple meanings of politics. In other words, what processes, practices, and events at

a macro, or collective, level have occurred to generate the five meanings of politics identified within this study.

- Building on the study of the meanings of politics, a second area of suggested research is to consider the experiences and factors which can influence individuals to hold different interpretations of politics. This would explore what informs people to interpret the word ‘politics’ in different ways.
- The third suggested area of research is to explore the extent to which individuals’ interpretation, or meaning of politics, is stable or subject to change. This suggested area of research is less about assessing the reliability of the meanings identified within this study via Q-methodology but is instead focused on exploring whether people’s interpretation of politics changes across time and what may influence this shift.

The study has demonstrated that political socialisation has the potential to occur throughout the life course as participants noted that politics became more or less salient to them. Furthermore, there was also some discussion from participants as to a changing sense of place in connection to their meaning of politics. Participants who reported increasing or decreasing political interest experienced a shift in how they relate to politics. However, it may well be that changing political interest can be attributed to their meaning of politics shifting. In other words, it may have been that the perception of the very object to which interest is directed had changed, rather than the way in which the participant related to their meaning of politics. Reliance on retrospective interview data within this study meant that there is no way of dissecting this nuance. A longitudinal study exploring whether the meaning of politics varies

across time may develop our understanding of a changing interest in politics. Undertaking a comparative analysis exploring the meaning of politics in different countries may also add to our understanding of political interest.

Future research to address the study's limitations

Further research could also respond to the limitations of this study. As outlined in the research design, only one participant interviewed explicitly stated that they were uninterested in politics when asked via the post-sort questionnaire. Repeating the study with people who are uninterested in politics would offer a way in which to test the validity of the findings for this group. Replicating the study would address some of the limitations of conducting Q-sorts online. Furthermore, administering the Q-sorts face-to-face would allow greater interrogation of participants' responses which may add further depth to analysis. Figure 7 in chapter six summarises how people who align with the various meanings of politics may identify salience and a sense of place within their meaning of politics. Due to data limitations, this summary is tentative and there would be greater confidence in the findings if a future study conducted post-sort interviews for all participants. In addition, the study was conducted with participants located in Great Britain, consequently data and analysis were very much rooted within this political context. For example, the timing of the interviews also coincided with ongoing Brexit negotiations which were raised frequently by participants. Undertaking comparative analysis and administering the study in other countries would offer an opportunity to establish the generalisability of the findings.

Conclusion

The thesis makes a contribution to our understanding of political interest but also has the potential to inform discussions on political (dis)engagement. However, this is exploratory research which has sought to develop our conceptualisation of political interest, as well as consider what can influence someone to claim that they are interested in politics. This study has contended that political interest should be viewed as an act of agency. The self-assessment of political interest has been demonstrated to be informed by an individual acknowledging the salience of politics and perceiving a sense of placed within politics.

There are limitations to the study and so caution should be exercised when considering its findings. Nevertheless, several suggestions of areas for further research have been proposed which, if completed, would lend further support to the study's conclusions. What is clear from the thesis is that our understanding of political interest would be furthered if we accept the ambiguity of the concept and centre analysis on what influences someone to recognise, or assess, their interest in politics.

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APPENDICES

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Appendix 1: Q-methodology Glossary

Concourse	The range of ideas and opinions on a particular topic that is generated using a variety of sources.
Conditions of instruction	The instructions given to participants prior to ranking the statements (the Q-set).
Correlation	The process by which participants' statement rankings (Q-sorts) are compared.
Extraction of factors	The process by which areas of commonality across Q-sorts are identified.
Eigenvalue	A measure that indicates the statistical strength and explanatory power of a factor (Watts and Stenner, 2012).
Factors	Groupings of common viewpoints participants express via their Q-sorts.
Factor array	An 'ideal' Q-sort (a ranking of statements) that approximates the shared viewpoint captured within a factor.
Forced-choice distribution grid	A grid that participants use to rank the Q-set (the statements).
Humphrey's rule	A criterion to support the decision as to how many factors should be extracted.
Loading	When a Q-sort meets the defined threshold to be grouped as part of a factor.
P-Set	The participants in the study.
Q-Set	The group of statements that participants rank.
Q-Sorts	Participants' ranking of the statements (the Q-set).
R-methodology	A general term for quantitative methods based on measures of variables. This is in contrast to Q-methodology.
Rotation	The process which increases the variance captured by factors. Rotation means that Q-sorts are more likely to load onto one factor.
Variance	The extent of variability across Q-sorts. Explained variance refers to the proportion of variance across Q-sorts that is captured by the multiple factors (shared viewpoints).

Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Community Organisation Interviews

You have been invited to take part in a PhD research project about people's involvement in politics. This will ask people questions about what they think and feel about politics. As part of this, I'm looking to talk to people who are involved in a range of community organisations that are working on a wide variety of social issues. In particular, I am interested in hearing more about your organisation and your experiences of how people get involved in its work. It doesn't matter if you are, or are not, involved in politics.

This information sheet gives a bit more information about what taking part in an interview will mean for you.

Information about the interview

We would like no more than 50 minutes of your time to be interviewed by a PhD research student from the University of Birmingham at a location convenient to you, or via telephone if it is more convenient. Your responses will be kept confidential at all stages of the research and so your name will not be attached to anything you say. Your organisation and job role will not be reported within any output. However, it may be the case that you could be identified through the answers you provide.

With your consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The audio files and transcripts will be stored on University of Birmingham computer systems. After the project has been completed the data will be anonymised, so that all information that might potentially identify participants is removed, and the data will then be saved in the University of Birmingham's data archive so it is available to members of the public if they wish to access it. Again, no information that could be used to identify you will be included in these files.

What if I decide during the interview that I don't want to take part anymore?

If you decide you don't want to take part in the project you can stop your involvement at any time. Participation is completely voluntary and you do not need to give me a reason for your withdrawal. If you decide after the interview that you no longer want to participate you can let me know one month after the date that you signed the consent form that you do not want to be part of the study and I will withdraw your data. If you do decide to withdraw from the interview your data will not be analysed. After one month, I would have started to analyse the data and so I cannot guarantee that I will be able to withdraw your data.

I also want to interview members of the public on political engagement and their thoughts and feelings towards politics. After the interview, I will also ask whether you would be willing to distribute an invitation to your contact list and wider network (who have previously given your organisation permission to contact them) to ask if they would be willing to participate in an interview. It is completely your choice whether you would like to distribute this invitation and you are under no obligation to send it to your network.

What will happen to your answers?

The findings from my fieldwork will be written up as part of a thesis. It may also be the case that the findings are written up as part of journal articles and other reports and presentations. Again, no information that could identify you will be included in these outputs.

After the project has finished, a brief summary of the project findings will be made available to all participants via email if they would like to learn more about the topic.

More information

If you have questions about the project please contact me.

Emily Burn, Research Student, The University of Birmingham, Department of Political Science and International Studies Email: [redacted]
Muirhead Tower, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

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Appendix 3: Community Organisation Interview Participant Consent Form

Views on Political Engagement

This project is about political engagement, specifically what people think and feel about politics. You have been invited to take part in an interview to ask you about your experiences of working in a community organisation.

The things you say during the interview might be used when reporting the findings of the study and this is why you have been asked to sign a consent form. You are free to withdraw and stop your involvement in the interview at any point and all data that has been gathered to that point will be destroyed. Once data has been analysed, it is unlikely that you will be able to withdraw your data. Therefore, if you would like to withdraw your data, you are asked to confirm this within one month of signing the consent form.

Your interview data will be confidential. This means that when analysing your data, you will be allocated a reference number and only the student researcher will know which individual has been allocated which reference number. All interview data will be stored securely on University of Birmingham password-protected computer systems. Following University policy, collected, anonymised data will be made available on public databases. As the data will be anonymised, your personal details will not be identifiable to anyone else.

Please read the following statements and tick the boxes if you agree.

1. I have read and understood the information sheet for the study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask the student researcher questions and have these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. This project is about political engagement, specifically what people think and feel about politics. ☐
3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw within a month of the date that I have signed this form. I understand that I do not have to give any reason for my withdrawal. ☐
4. I understand that data collected during the study will be analysed by the student researcher. I understand that data will be stored on password-locked computer files and locked cabinets within the University of Birmingham. ☐

5. I understand that my data will be kept anonymous by using false names. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be deleted after transcription. ☐

6. I understand that my name will not be included in any document developed as part of this study. It may still be possible for me to be identified by the answers I have given. ☐

7. I agree that the interview can be audio-recorded. ☐

8. I give my consent to take part in the study. ☐

9. I understand that I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the University of Birmingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	*Date*	*Signature*

_____	_____	_____
Student researcher	*Date*	*Signature*

Was consent given over the telephone or face-to-face? _____

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Appendix 4: Information Sheet for Individual Interview Participants

You have been invited to take part in a PhD research project about people's involvement in politics. This will involve asking people questions about what they think and feel about politics. I am interested in hearing from all types of people, whether you care about politics or not. The project is looking at people's experience of politics, whether they have lots of experience, or none at all.

Information about the interview

The interview will take place either by phone or online, whichever you would prefer. The interview will take around 50 minutes of your time. Your responses will be confidential at all stages of the research and so your name will not be attached to anything that you say. If you decide to take part, you will be offered a £10 voucher in recognition of your time. If you do take part in an interview, you will be asked whether you would be happy for the conversation to be recorded and transcribed.

The audio files and transcripts will be stored on University of Birmingham computer systems. After the project has been completed, the data will be anonymised and saved in the University of Birmingham's data archive so it is available to members of the public if they wish to access it. Again, no information that could be used to identify you will be included in these files.

What if I decide during the interview that I don't want to take part anymore?

You can stop your participation at any point, participation is completely voluntary. If you don't want to continue the interview at any point, just let me know – you won't have to explain why you don't want to continue. If you decide after the interview that you don't want to participate, you can let me know within one month of participating and I will withdraw your data so it will not be analysed. After one month, I would have started to analyse the data and so I cannot guarantee that I would be able to withdraw your data.

What will you do with my answers?

The findings will be written up as part of a thesis. It may also be the case that the findings are written up as part of journal articles and other reports and presentations. Again, no information that could identify you will be included in these outputs. After the project has finished, a brief summary of the project findings will be made available to all participants via email if they would like to learn more about the topic.

More information

If you have questions about the project, please contact the researcher.

Emily Burn, Research Student, The University of Birmingham, Department of Political Science and International Studies Email: [redacted]
Muirhead Tower, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

Appendix 5: Telephone Interview Consent Script
Political Engagement Project

Hello, my name is Emily Burn, a postgraduate researcher from the University of Birmingham. Thank you for agreeing to take part in an interview for this study.

This study is about people's involvement in politics. This will ask people questions about what they think and feel about politics. I am interested in hearing from all types of people, whether you care about politics or not. The project is looking at people's experience of politics, whether they have lots of experience, or none at all.

If you're happy for me to do so, I would like to record this conversation. (Researcher to record conversation from this point if participant agrees). (If participant does not agree to recording) I will take some notes during the interview as a record of the conversation.

The interview will take approximately 50 minutes of your time.

Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, and you can stop the interview at any stage if you wish. If at any point after the interview you decide that you don't want your data to be included in the study, please let me know within a month and I will delete your data and it will not be analysed.

What you tell me will remain confidential, you won't be named in any outputs that are produced.

After the interview, I will transcribe our conversation. If you agree, I will send this to you via email. You can then let me know if there are any changes you would like to see made to the document.

All of your data will be password protected and stored securely on University of Birmingham computer servers. Only the research team will have access to your data.

Do you have any questions about the study or what taking part will involve?

If you have any questions about the study after the interview, please contact Emily Burn who is leading the study. Contact details can be found on the information sheet.

Are you happy for me to start the interview now?

Participant name:.....
Date of interview: .....

Researcher signature:.....

(Sign to confirm that consent script has been followed)

Appendix 6: Interview Schedule: Community Organisations

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.

I'm a PhD student at the University of Birmingham. My research project is about political engagement, how people feel about politics, and whether they are interested in politics.

You've already been provided with an information sheet. I'm happy to answer any further questions you might have about my project.

- Before we start, have you got any more questions about the study?
- Are you comfortable that you understand what the study is about and what we are asking you to do?

I will keep what you say in the interview confidential, however, it may be the case that your participation in the study might be identified due to what you say about your organisation. However, you, or your organisation, will not be named in anything that I write about the study and I will anonymise any transcript made of this interview.

If you decide that you no longer want to participate, you can withdraw your interview data at any point up to a month from the day you were interviewed. This will be an informal interview and I hope you feel comfortable to raise and discuss any topics you feel are relevant.

Are you happy for the interview to be recorded? ***(If yes, then researcher will switch on the tape).*** **I'll now go through the consent form, please could you confirm whether you agree or not.**

---

1. Can you tell me a bit about your organisation and your role in it please?

2. How do people come to hear about your organisation? How do people come to get involved in your organisation?

3. What sort of actions / activities do they participate in?

4. What sort of things do you think encourages people to get involved in your organisation?

5. Would you describe your organisation as being ‘political’ in nature? How would you define what being ‘political’ means? Do you think your members share this view? Why? / Why not?

6. I’d be interested to know how you define ‘politics’? What sort of things comes to mind when you think of the word politics?

7. (Reflecting definition back) How interested in politics would you say the people who are involved in your organisation are? What sort of things do they do that makes you think they are / are not interested?

8. Have you noticed any trends in the types of people who get involved with your organisation?

9. Do you have any thoughts of how people reflect on their experience with the organisation? What do they get out of being involved?

10. What about the current political situation (Brexit / General Election 2017 - Conservative minority government / austerity)? Has this had any effect on people’s involvement with your organisation? Do you think this has made people more / less likely to get involved with your organisation?

Thank you very much for your participation in the interview, we’ve come to the end of all of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I will now transcribe this interview into text. If you agree, I will send the transcript to you so you can check your answers. Please feel free to add or remove any comments from the transcript. If I do not hear from you within a month of sending the transcript, I will assume you are happy for it to be included in the study.

Please can you confirm an email address to which I can send you the transcript?

Appendix 7: Individual Interview Schedule

Follow consent script.

1. Tell me about a time in your life when you first became aware of politics?

Prompts: Can you tell me more about that? / What in particular stood out for you about this? / How did you feel about that? / How do you feel about this now?

2. What do you feel when you think about politics?

3. In your life, do you have internal thoughts about politics? What sort of things do you think about?
    - Reflecting on your experience, are there any triggers that make you think about politics? Have these changed over time?

    - Can you tell me about the issues / concerns that are important to you? Has there been any change to these issues over time?

4. What sort of things do you think about when you hear the word politics?

5. Are there any boundaries to politics? Is there anything in your life that you think isn't political?

6. Throughout your life, how interested in politics have you been?
    - Has anything affected / influenced this?

7. What does it mean to you to be interested in politics?
    - How does it feel to be interested in politics?

8. In your life, how have you learnt about politics?

9. Have you participated in politics? What sort of things have you done?

10. What does participation mean to you?

11. Have you encountered any barriers to being engaged or interested in politics?

12. Has anything helped you to be interested in politics throughout your life?

Close the interview. Thank the participant and highlight that the transcript will be emailed to them if the participant is happy to receive it. If the participant would like to amend the transcript, please contact the researcher within a month Ask for email address. Confirm that a voucher will be sent to the participant.

Appendix 8: Community Organisation Coding Frame

Challenges when trying to engage people
Definition of politics
Description of organisation - Description of issues the organisation looks at - Difficulties / challenges for organisation - Examples of where the work of organisation has been successful - Profile of people getting involved in the organisation - Relational approach – aim is to bring people together - Relationship between national and local groups - Way organisation engages with others - What has informed the issue that the organisation seeks to address - Why should these issues be addressed / moral dimensions
Relationship between the media and politics - Thoughts of media - Thoughts on social media
Is the organisation political - Addressing gaps in service - Campaigning / lobbying - Political neutrality / apolitical - Sense of efficacy of approaches - Way that limits can be placed on the organisation
Personal reflections on why involved with the organisation
Local political situation / context
Reflections on policies / political system / politicians
Reflections of working with organisation / role within organisation
Reflections on own interest in politics
Reflections on other people's political engagement
Reflections on own political engagement

Appendix 9: Qualitative Election Study of Britain Coding Frame

2010 Reflections on campaign and results
2015 Reflections on campaign and results
2017 Reflections on campaign and results
Brexit negotiations. Aftermath and political change
Devolution: Relationship between levels of government
EU referendum - Decision to have a referendum - EU referendum campaign reflections (Negative) - EU referendum campaign reflections (Positive) - EU referendum, reflections on results
Initial awareness of politics - Controversial topics or international events - Election campaigns - Emotional accounts - Family or school socialisation - Learning about history - News and media consumption - Party politics (not elections) - Politics as creating change - Politics as symbolism - Social action
Integrity of elections or the wider political system
Party cohesion and position of the leader
Party competition or changes in parties in power
Perceptions of politics and engagement with politics - Apathy or never voted - Emotional response - General point about the need for change in the political system - Importance of politics - Not registered to vote - Perceptions of politicians - Political bickering - Political engagement / interest shifting - Political parties are similar - Politics as confusing - Politics should be decentralised - Presentation of politics often focuses on unimportant issues - Role of people in decision-making - Situation making politics interesting or engaging
Policy issues
Political socialisation
Reflections on electoral system and fixed term parliaments - Electoral reform - Fixed term parliaments - Reflections on electoral politics - Reflections on voting process

Reflections on EU - Bureaucratic - EU undemocratic - Immigration - Sharing of resources
Reflections on leaders
Role of media in politics and campaigns
Role of social media
Scottish referendum: Reflections on results, influence, impact
Scottish referendum: Campaign and involvement - Involvement in campaign – negative experience - Involvement in campaign – positive experience - Reflections on identity
TV debates
Uncertainty of electoral politics
Voting decision

Appendix 10: Individual Interviews Coding Frame

Barriers to political engagement
Changing levels of political interest
Enablers of political engagement
First awareness of politics
Interaction between meaning of politics as related to self-perceived interest
Internal conversation (Akram, 2019, pp. 99-100) - Shape of the internal political conversation - Temporality of the internal political conversation - Tone of the internal political conversation
Meaning of political interest
Meaning of politics (meaning of politics: definition and orientation) - Aim of politics - Facilitators and barriers to political interest/ engagement - Perceptions of citizenship - Political system - Self-conception - What is political engagement - What is politics - Where is politics
Media accessed
Own interest in politics
Political knowledge
Political learning
Political participation
Political system (thoughts on)

Appendix 11: Longlist of Statements

Participants were asked to sort a series of statements (known as the Q-set). The Q-set was generated from a longlist of statements and the table below maps the sources used to create the longlist. It should be noted that citations to the literature may refer to the different meanings of politics discussed in the text, rather than implying that the source argues in support of the sentiment included in the statement. The statements are grouped by the eight sub-themes identified in chapter four.

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
Definition: The 'where' of politics	1. Politics is what the Government does.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Hay, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2013) Community organisation interviews
	2. Politics is the decisions that governments make.	(Hay, 2007)
	3. 'Politics is government and how much or how little it is involved in personal life'.	(Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 467)
	4. Politics is 'governing a specific group or entity'.	(Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 467)
	5. Politics is 'legislation'.	(Harrits, 2011, p. 247)
	6. Politics is what the Government and parliament does.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008)
	7. There is a public emphasis in politics. Politics does not include the private sphere.	(Honig, 1993; Leftwich, 2004b; Squires, 2004; Crick, 2005)
	8. There are different levels of politics – there is an international dimension to politics.	QESB data Community organisation interviews
	9. There are different levels of politics – there is a local dimension to politics. This can include local government or devolved issues.	QESB Community organisation interviews (Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006; Coffé, 2013; Robinson Preece, 2016)
	10. Politics can be found on the national level.	QESB Community organisation interviews (Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006)
	11. Politics is the 'public exercise of force' so the state can get what it wants.	(Nicholson, 2004, p. 45)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	12. Politics is 'voting, government, democracy, political parties, politicians and legislation'.	(Halupka, 2016, p. 1490)
	13. It is difficult to define what politics is.	Community organisation interviews
	14. Politics is about political parties and campaigning in the electoral system.	QESB (Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006)
	15. 'Politics is about political party tactics and strategies'.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008, p. 55)
	16. Politics refers to the tensions between the national political parties and grassroots activism.	QESB
	17. Politics is about elections and voting.	QESB (Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006; Harrits, 2011)
	18. You can see politics in every day, social interactions / Everyday life is political.	Community organisations (Leftwich, 2004a)
	19. Politics as 'all social interaction occurring within the sphere of government'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 61)
	20. Politics includes people's lived experience.	Community organisation interviews (Leftwich, 2004a; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Vromen, Loader and Xenos, 2015)
	21. The way we treat each other in everyday life relates to politics.	Community organisation interviews
	22. Politics is not just embedded in an institution. Politics can be found in the effects of policy issues on society.	(Leftwich, 2004a; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Sloam, 2016)
	23. Politics can be found in private or lifestyle decisions.	(Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005; Manning, 2010, 2014; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015)
	24. Politics is about the local community.	Community organisations interviews

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	25. Politics should not be allowed to infiltrate all areas of life. For example, politics does not have a place in sport.	Community organisations interviews (Manning, 2014)
	26. Politics affects my daily life.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Riddle, 2016)
	27. Politics includes social movements.	Community organisation interviews QESB (Bang, 2009; Saunders, 2014; Marsh and Akram, 2015; Rowe, 2015; Rowe and Marsh, 2018)
Definition: The 'what' of politics	28. Politics refers to formal and informal rules. Politics refers to the 'decisions that affect us directly'.	Community organisation interviews (Sloam, 2007, p. 558; Harrits, 2011)
	29. Politics refers to 'the arguments between parties and / or politicians'.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006, p. 24)
	30. Politics refers to disagreement or arguments.	(Eliasoph, 1998; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017)
	31. Politics involves conflict.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008; Jenkins, 2011)
	32. Politics is about dealing with 'controversy'.	(Walsh, 2010, p. 38)
	33. 'Openness to other people's views and willingness to compromise are important for politics in a country like ours'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11).
	34. Debate and deliberation are important in politics.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	35. Politics is discussion and debate.	(Mathé, 2018, p. 13)
	36. Politics is 'changing things through policies and laws'.	(Sloam, 2007, p. 558)
	37. Politics involves adversarial campaigning.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008)
	38. Politics is 'conflict, within a consensus, with compromise as the necessary outcome'.	(Stoker, 2006; Halupka, 2016, p. 1488)
	39. It is important for elected politicians to discuss and debate things thoroughly before making major policy changes.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	40. Politics creates order – but there is necessary conflict in politics.	(Mouffe, 2005)
	41. The electoral system creates divisions in politics.	QESB
	42. 'Politics means a slow, powerful drilling through hard boards'	(Weber, 2004, p. 93)
	43. Politics is about working together to create positive change for society.	Community organisation interviews
	44. Politics is about amplifying people's voices.	Community organisation interviews
	45. Politics is about caring for other people.	Community organisation interviews
	46. In politics, it's impossible for everyone to be happy with the resolution of conflict.	(Crick, 2005; Stoker, 2006)
	47. We need institutions in politics in order to resolve conflict.	(Crick, 2005; Stoker, 2006)
	48. Politics involves discussing issues and reaching agreements.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006, p. 24)
	49. Politics is 'ways of making decisions'.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006, p. 24)
	50. Politics is the 'choices for society / how the country should be governed'.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006, p. 24)
	51. Politics is talking / 'people discussing issues / reaching agreement'.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006, p. 24)
	52. Politics are the choices available to a community.	(Weale, 2004; Hay, 2007; Jenkins, 2011)
	53. Politics involves public deliberation.	(Hay, 2007; Jenkins, 2011)
	54. Politics is collective action.	(Weale, 2004; Hay, 2007; Jenkins, 2011)
	55. Politics is 'regulated decision-making procedures and processes of deliberation'.	(Harrits, 2011, p. 244)
	56. Politics forms messy compromises.	Community organisation interviews (Stoker, 2006)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	57. Politics is about the Government getting its way and forcing policies through. Often, it's difficult to have influence as a decision's already been made.	Community organisation interviews
	58. Politics heavily influences what people can achieve in their life.	Community organisation interviews
	59. Politics is shaping a country.	(Mathé, 2018, p. 13)
	60. Politics is ruling a country.	(Mathé, 2018, p. 13)
	61. People understand politics with reference to 'their own lifeworld'.	(van Wessel, 2010, p. 507)
	62. Politics is public service.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	63. When I think of politics, I think of democracy.	QESB (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 111; Stoker and Evans, 2014)
	64. Politics refers to procedures, for example, 'the ability to engage in strategic relations, struggles of power and rational discussions'.	(Harrits, 2011, p. 244)
	65. Politics is 'capacities for autonomy and collective life'.	(Jenkins, 2011, p. 159)
	66. Politics is the 'capacity for agency'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 65)
	67. Politics is a generative (and) indeterminate process.	(Jenkins, 2011, p. 159)
	68. Politics is 'flows of power'.	(Jenkins, 2011, p. 159)
	69. Politics is power.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	70. Politics is 'the formal or informal exercise of power'	(Foster, Kerr and Byrne, 2015, p. 122)
	71. Politics is people with power or the people who run things.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006)
	72. Politics is connected to 'authority relationships'.	(O'Toole, 2003, p. 87; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	73. Politics affects people's lives. It affects my life too.	QESB

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
		Community organisation interviews (Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Horner, 2007)
	74. Politics is 'a public and formal set of processes and rituals through which the citizens of a state may participate, often at arm's length, in the process of government'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 62)
Definition: The 'why' of politics	75. Politics allows the 'construction, pursuit and defence of the common or public interest'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 62)
	76. Without politics we'd live in chaos. Politics creates order in society.	(Crick, 2005; Stoker, 2006)
	77. Politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in a society.	(Crick, 2005; Stoker, 2006)
	78. Politics is about addressing social injustice.	QESB Community organisation interviews (Riddle, 2016)
	79. Politics is necessary. Society needs politics.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	80. 'Following politics helps me safeguard my interests'.	(Horner, 2007, p. 79; Riddle, 2016)
	81. Social inequality is related to politics.	Community organisation interviews (Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	82. Personal identity is related to politics.	Community organisation interviews (Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	83. 'Politics can help me with my personal or family problems'.	(Horner, 2007, p. 79),
	84. Politics is about social problems.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008)
	85. When I think of politics, I think of the important issues of the day.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006)
	86. Politics has the ability to 'change everybody's lives'.	(Sloam, 2007, p. 561)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	87. As many people as possible should be involved in politics, that's the point of democracy.	QESB
	88. Politics is how we decide how to share scarce / limited resources.	(Leftwich, 2004a; Weale, 2004)
	89. Local involvement in politics is important. Keeping up to date with local politics safeguards the community.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 54)
	90. Politics allows us to 'organise our communities and common lives.'	(Harrits, 2011, p. 244)
	91. Politics ensures people have opportunities.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	92. Politics 'is a way for the powerless to acquire equal footing'.	(Zukin et al., 2006, p. 110)
	93. 'Politics is more than the voting booth'.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 59)
	94. Politics involves the hope that things can be better.	Community organisation interviews (Jenkins, 2018)
	95. Politics affects the future.	(Riddle, 2016)
	96. Politics allows you to connect with decision-makers.	Community organisation interviews
Definition: Identifying political activity	97. 'Every day, mundane actions can have political meaning'.	(Flinders and Wood, 2018, p. 62)
	98. Politics includes 'collective and public, yet informal and extra governmental or parliamentary, activities designed to draw attention to issues of contention'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 62)
	99. To be engaged with politics you have to be doing something, to be taking action.	(Manning, 2010; van Deth, 2014)
	100. Signing petitions is a way of having a say in politics.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 93)
	101. Political engagement doesn't necessarily have to target parliament, or local, or national	(Bang, 2009; Rowe, 2015)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	government. You can be engaged in politics in your everyday life.	
	102. You can engage with politics online as well as face-to-face.	(Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2016, 2018; Theocharis and van Deth, 2018; Theocharis, de Moor and van Deth, 2019)
	103. Decisions you make as an individual about your lifestyle can be political, for example, boycotting companies, or reducing how much meat you eat.	(Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005; Vromen, Loader and Xenos, 2015)
	104. Political engagement isn't just about creating change. Knowing about social issues or expressing your identity are also examples of engagement.	(Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2018)
	105. Everyday decisions you make can be political.	Community organisation interviews
	106. Learning about politics and watching the news is a way of engaging with it.	QESB
	107. Sharing opinions on social media is engaging with politics.	(Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2018)
	108. If you change what you would buy / not buy, you are engaging with politics.	(Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti, 2005; Manning, 2014)
	109. Taking part in a rally or demonstrating are examples of political engagement.	(Saunders, 2014)
	110. You don't have to wait to be asked to get involved in politics. You can create your own opportunities to be engaged with politics.	(Bang, 2009)
	111. Knowing people who are engaged in politics can encourage you to engage with politics.	Community organisation interviews (Rolfe, 2012; Manning, 2014; Laurison, 2016)
	112. Politics isn't something that is done by citizens.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	113. Politics is an activity for politicians.	(Mathé, 2018)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	114. I don't feel that I have duties as a citizen but I like to get involved with issues that are important to me.	(Dalton, 2008)
	115. Political engagement is an 'activity located in the sphere of government or the state'.	(van Deth, 2014, p. 356)
	116. Political engagement is about trying to solve 'collective or community problems'.	(van Deth, 2014, p. 358)
	117. Online discussions are a good way to talk about politics.	(Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2016; Rowe and Marsh, 2018; Bang and Halupka, 2019)
	118. You should make your own opportunities to get involved in politics. Getting involved in politics is like having a project where you try and improve things.	(Bang, 2009; Rowe, 2015)
	119. If you know about social issues you are engaging with politics.	(Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2018)
Orientation: Self in relation to politics	120. I feel excluded from politics.	Community organisation interviews (O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Manning, 2014)
	121. I am not involved in the decisions made via politics.	(O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	122. Politics is not welcoming to me.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	123. Politics does not represent me.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	124. I don't have the ability to engage with politics.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	125. My views are not taken seriously in politics.	(O'Toole, Marsh and Jones, 2003; Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	126. I feel a strong connection to political parties.	QESB
	127. You should avoid talking about politics / Sometimes I feel like I don't want to discuss	QESB (Eliasoph, 1998; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	politics in case I cause arguments or awkward situations.	
	128. 'It's worth the time to keep informed about political issues'.	(Horner, 2007, p. 79)
	129. Not being represented in politics can encourage you to get involved.	QESB
	130. When I think about politics, I can get angry and passionate.	QESB
	131. I'm not the kind of person to get involved with politics.	(Manning, 2010)
	132. I get envious of people who get involved in, or passionate about political issues.	(Manning, 2010)
	133. Being involved in politics defines who I am as a person.	(Manning, 2010)
	134. I like to get involved in politics but it depends on the issue in question.	(Manning, 2010)
	135. I don't want to be more involved in politics – but I'm glad that other people are.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	136. Online, I'm happy to share posts about politics, but I won't get into discussions about politics.	(Mascheroni and Murru, 2017)
	137. I pay more attention to politics when it affects me.	Community organisation interviews
	138. 'I care about who wins and loses in politics'.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 93)
	139. I like to share my views about politics.	(Riddle, 2016)
	140. It's important to have views about politics.	(Riddle, 2016)
	141. It's important to be involved in politics.	Community organisation interviews
	142. I am interested in hearing what others think about politics.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 94)
	143. I don't vote as I'm not happy with politics.	QESB
	144. I don't want to be more involved in politics.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	145. I am put off by the conflict in politics.	Community organisation interviews (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017; Mathé, 2018)
	146. Politics is something to be avoided.	Community organisation interviews
	147. I feel like my vote is wasted.	(Manning, 2018)
	148. I'm satisfied with the different ways I can engage with politics.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	149. I don't think I do enough to be considered 'active' in politics.	(Manning, 2010)
	150. My cynical feelings about politics inspires me to act.	(Bhavnani, 1991)
	151. I feel an affinity with politics and the people involved in politics.	(Manning and Holmes, 2014)
	152. I feel it is important that people in politics communicate well.	(Manning and Holmes, 2014)
	153. I can't make a difference to politics	(Sloam, 2007)
	154. I should be more involved in politics but I don't have the energy.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	155. I have respect for the processes of politics.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	156. I don't think politicians are all that bad.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	157. I want my interests to be protected but I don't want to be engage in politics.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	158. I get frustrated at the inability of politics to deliver what I want.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
	159. If I were allowed, I would get more involved in politics.	(Sloam, 2007, p. 560)
	160. Sometimes, I am more or less interested in politics.	QESB
	161. I'm more interested in politics when the results of politics are uncertain.	QESB

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	162. I find it difficult to relate to politics.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	163. I enjoy keeping up to date with politics.	QESB (Horner, 2007; Riddle, 2016)
	164. I enjoy the drama of politics.	(Riddle, 2016)
	165. I feel invested in the results of politics.	(Riddle, 2016)
	166. I enjoy discussing politics.	(Horner, 2007; Riddle, 2016)
	167. I think politics is responsive to the people.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	168. 'I like to engage with the ideas of politics'.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 94)
	169. I expect more of politics than it delivers.	(Flinders, 2012, 2014, 2020)
Orientation: Views on politics	170. Politics is confusing.	QESB (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 112; Harrits, 2011; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	171. Politics is interesting.	QESB (Zukin et al., 2006, p. 112)
	172. Participating in politics can be empowering.	QESB
	173. Politics doesn't focus on the big and important things in life.	QESB Community organisation interviews
	174. Politics is only for the rich.	(Zukin et al., 2006, p. 112)
	175. My awareness of politics has been increased due to political scandals.	QESB
	176. Your thoughts about politics are influenced by your family background and previous experiences.	QESB
	177. People need to stop moaning about politics.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	178. In politics, it's impossible to please everybody.	(Crick, 2005; Stoker, 2006; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	179. People should make more of an effort to understand politics.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	180. Politics doesn't listen to the people. It ignores public opinion.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	181. Politics affects people but there is little chance to have an effect in politics.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	182. The media scrutinises politics too much.	(Flinders, 2012; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	183. Politics is affected by cronyism and nepotism.	(Zukin et al., 2006, p. 111; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	184. Politics is about self-interest.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	185. Politics is becoming more difficult than it used to be.	(Flinders, 2009)
	186. People involved in politics make out they have simple answers to complex questions. They should be more realistic with people.	(Flinders, 2009)
	187. People need to be more empowered in politics. Often politics ignores the issues that are most relevant to people.	(Holmes and Manning, 2013; Manning and Holmes, 2013; Richards and Smith, 2015)
	188. Politics doesn't involve me and is something for other people.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006)
	189. Politics is boring.	(Zukin et al., 2006, p. 111; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	190. Politics involves lies and spin.	(Hansard Society and The Electoral Commission, 2006; Zukin et al., 2006; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	191. There are too many broken promises and inaction in politics.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	192. Politics is 'deception, duplicity and the promotion in the name of the collective good of singular or sectional interests'.	(Hay, 2007, p. 62)
	193. Politics is aggressive. It involves bickering.	QESB
	194. People in politics make too many promises which aren't fulfilled.	(Flinders, 2009, 2014)
	195. Politics is a dirty game.	QESB
	196. In politics, questions are never answered.	QESB
	197. Politicians don't know what they are doing. They are clueless.	QESB (Holmes and Manning, 2013)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	198. People who are involved in politics are other to me.	Community organisation interviews
	199. I don't have faith in our political leaders.	(Brown, 1980, p. 50)
	200. In politics, the people represented are betrayed.	(Brown, 1980)
	201. You can't tell the difference between political parties.	(Holmes and Manning, 2013)
	202. Politics doesn't respond to my concerns.	(Manning and Holmes, 2013)
	203. People in politics don't listen.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016, p. 14)
	204. You can't trust people in politics.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Sloam, 2007; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	205. I don't have trust in politics.	Community organisation interviews
	206. Accountability doesn't work in politics.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	207. Politics is corrupt.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	208. Politics is all about deception.	(Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	209. People in politics are only in it for themselves.	(Holmes and Manning, 2013; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	210. 'Elected politicians would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11)
	211. 'What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out one's principles'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11)
	212. 'Our government would run better if decisions were left to successful business people'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11)
	213. 'Our government would run better if decisions were left to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 11)
	214. Politics is something that's done to me.	(Marsh, O´Toole and Jones, 2006; Sloam, 2007)
	215. Politics is the 'withholding or unfair distribution of resources'.	(O'Toole, 2003, p. 78)
	216. Politics is divisive.	QESB

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	217. Politics is too negative.	QESB
	218. There should be more information about politics.	(Sloam, 2007)
	219. Political parties are too concerned with presentation rather than content.	(Sloam, 2007, p. 558)
	220. Political parties don't represent people. They only represent themselves.	QESB
	221. In politics, political parties are a machine that people have to comply with. It's no wonder people prefer to engage with politics via other methods.	Community organisation interviews
	222. Political parties make me feel isolated from politics.	Community organisation interviews
	223. Politics needs to be reformed or changed in some way.	QESB
	224. Some people are looked down upon when it comes to politics.	QESB
	225. I feel removed from politics.	(Campbell and Winters, 2008)
	226. Politics is too tribal.	Community organisation interviews
	227. People involved in politics are all the same. They have the same backgrounds.	QESB (Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	228. Politics should be more accessible.	QESB
	229. Politics doesn't make a difference to anything.	QESB
	230. 'The political system should deliver what the people want without them having to pay continual attention to it'.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 5)
	231. There is too much politicking in politics. 'Politicians talk rather than act, make too many compromises to special interests'	(Stoker and Hay, 2017, p. 5)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	232. Politicians / decision-makers don't have the expertise needed.	(Holmes and Manning, 2013; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	233. Politics allows powerful people to maintain their advantage.	(Zukin et al., 2006)
	234. Politics in Westminster feels geographically remote.	QESB (Holmes and Manning, 2013; Manning and Holmes, 2013)
	235. Politics is too focussed on the leader and character of politicians rather than policy.	QESB
	236. There isn't enough focus on policy in politics.	QESB
	237. The media is a powerful influence in politics.	QESB Community organisation interviews
	238. Politics isn't fair. People don't have the same level of influence in politics.	QESB
Orientation: Perceptions of citizenship duties	239. It's important that people vote.	QESB (Riddle, 2016; Manning, 2018)
	240. I feel a strong sense of responsibility and duty as a citizen.	(Dalton, 2008; Manning, 2018)
	241. It is important for people to keep up to date with what is going on in politics.	(Horner, 2007; Riddle, 2016)
	242. I don't want to be involved in politics all the time – only when I need to be to hold people involved in politics to account. I feel like I'm on 'stand-by'.	(Amnå and Ekman, 2014)
	243. I don't feel a sense of duty as a citizen. A sense of belonging is more important to me.	(Flinders, 2020)
	244. When it comes to politics, people should 'dig deeper than the headlines'.	(Riddle, 2016, p. 54)
	245. You need to educate yourself about politics.	(Riddle, 2016)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	246. Being active in politics is a way of changing things.	QESB (Riddle, 2016)
	247. I want to be involved in politics.	QESB
	248. People don't get a chance to learn about politics.	QESB
	249. You are disenfranchised if you don't get a chance to learn about politics from a young age.	QESB
	250. There are different ways you can learn about politics.	QESB
	251. People are more likely to take part in politics if their friends do too. Sometimes you have to be invited to take part.	Community organisation interview (Putnam, 2000; Rolfe, 2012; Laurison, 2016)
	252. Good citizens know what is going on in politics.	(Horner, 2007)
	253. It's worth the time it takes to pay attention to politics.	(Horner, 2007)
	254. Politics is important to everyone's lives. Now, more than ever.	Community organisation QESB
	255. People should leave politics to the professionals.	(Stoker and Hay, 2017)
Orientation: Facilitators and barriers to political engagement	256. You need to be invited to take part in politics.	Community organisation interviews (Laurison, 2016)
	257. You need to have expert knowledge to get involved in politics.	Community organisation interviews
	258. People's opinions are so polarised these days, I think this puts some people off from saying what they think.	(Eliasoph, 1998; Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2017)
	259. Social media increases the opportunities people have to discuss politics.	QESB (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Vromen, Xenos and Loader, 2015; Halupka, 2016)

Sub-theme	Statement	Source
	260. Being engaged with politics requires commitment. A lot of people simply don't have the time to engage with politics.	(Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995)
	261. Social media has made it easier to be involved in politics.	Community organisation interviews
	262. Watching satirical TV shows increases my awareness of politics.	QESB (Riddle, 2016, p. 93)
	263. Politics is about being able to express an opinion but I don't get a chance to do this.	(Sloam, 2016, p. 533)
	264. To be involved in politics you have to be motivated to try and make a change.	Community organisation interviews
	265. It's difficult to keep track of what's going on in politics. You have to have a lot of specialist knowledge to be engaged in politics.	(Zukin et al., 2006; Sloam, 2007, p. 564)
	266. Certain types of people get involved in politics. This means that people are more likely to engage with politics if they see other people like them involved.	Community organisations interviews (Manning and Holmes, 2013; Stoker, Hay and Barr, 2016)
	267. If I wanted to get involved in politics, I would know how to do it.	(Sloam, 2007; Manning, 2010)
	268. Politics can be very individualised. You need to put yourself forward.	Community organisation interviews
	269. You need to know about politics to engage with it.	(Sloam, 2007, p. 564; Manning, 2010)
	270. In politics, campaigns should be inclusive.	Community organisation interviews

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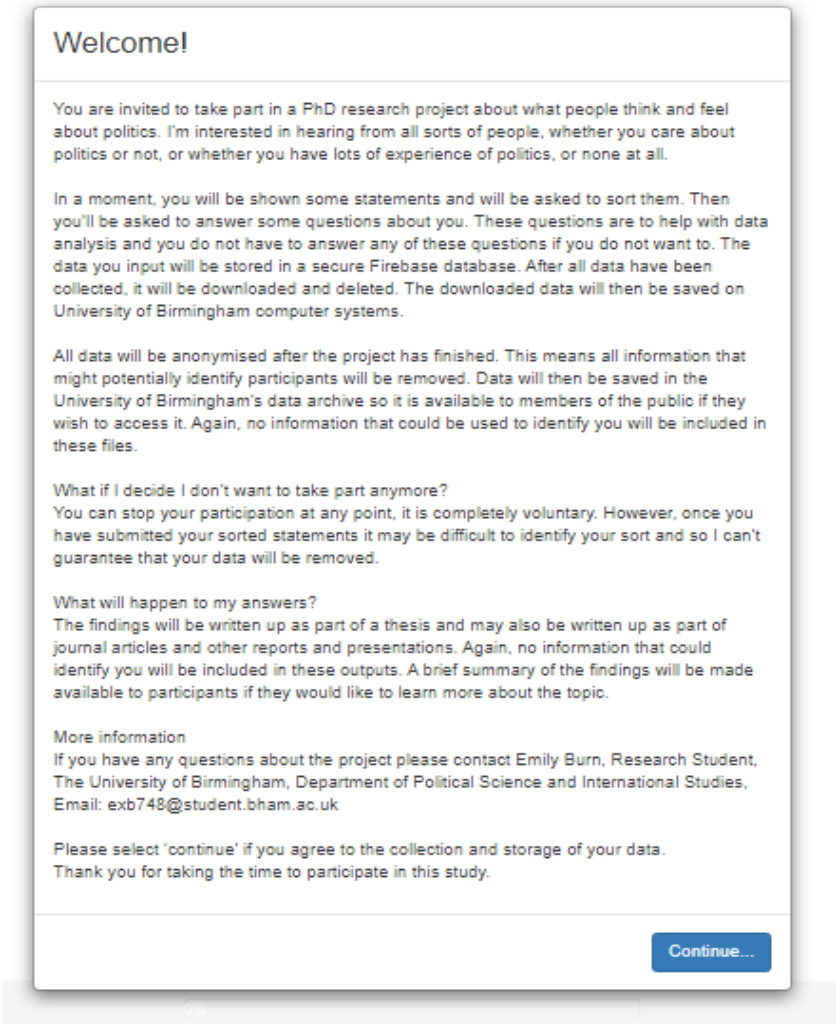
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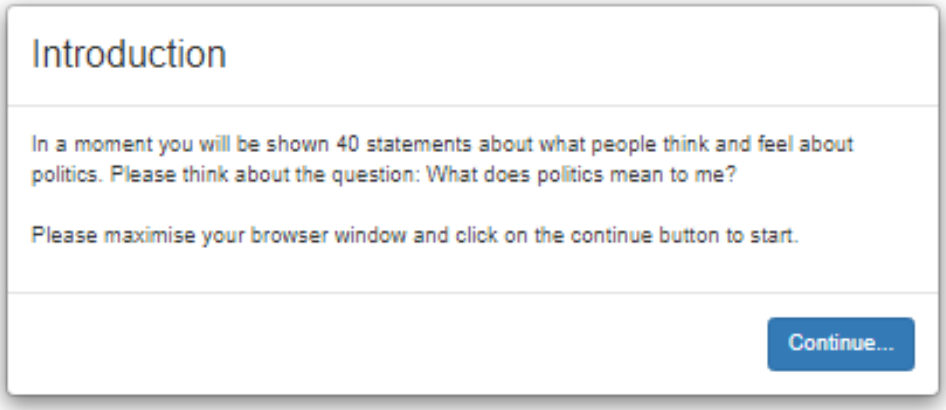
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Appendix 12: Screenshots of Online Q-sort

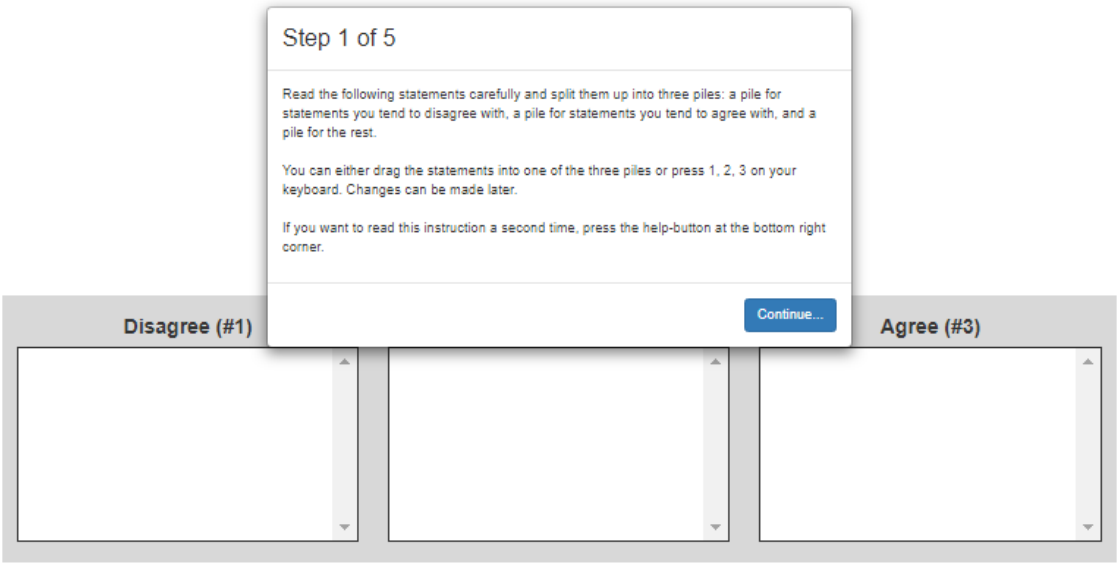
Screen 1



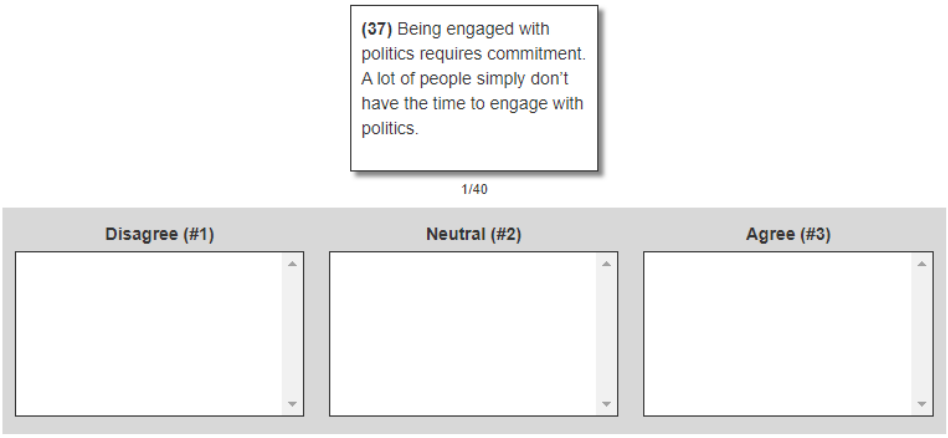
Screen 2



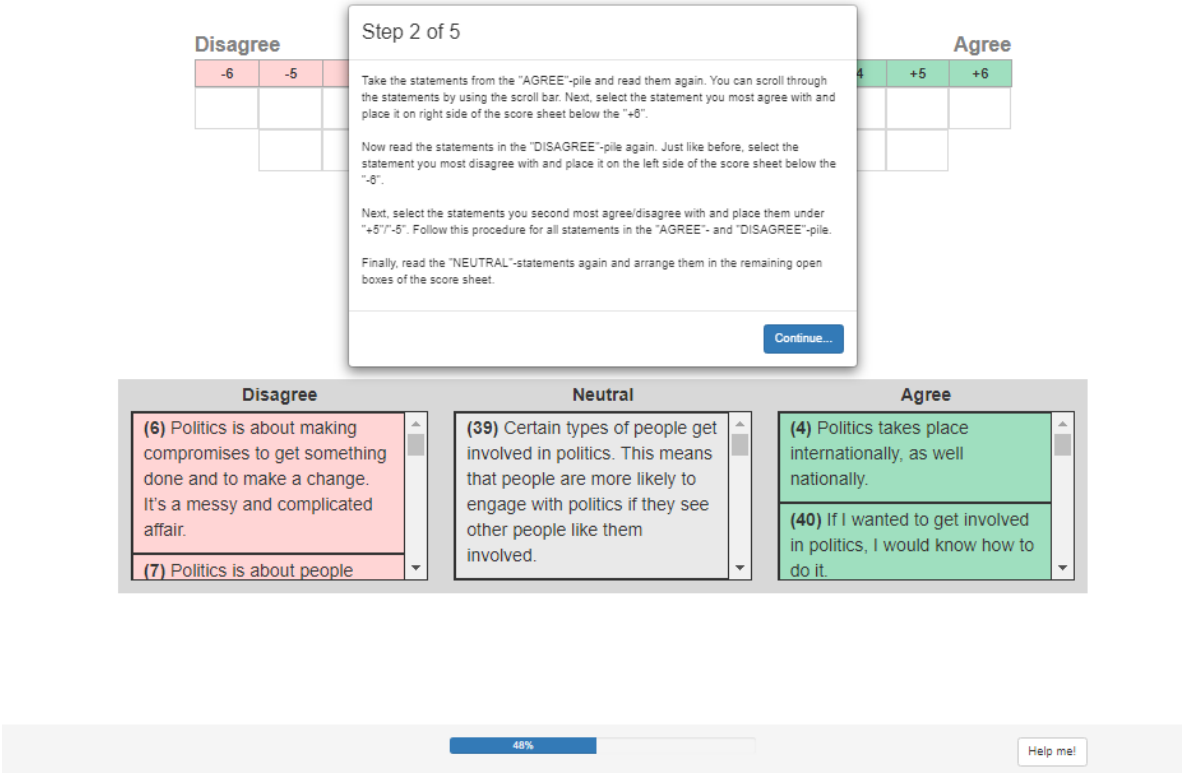
Screen 3



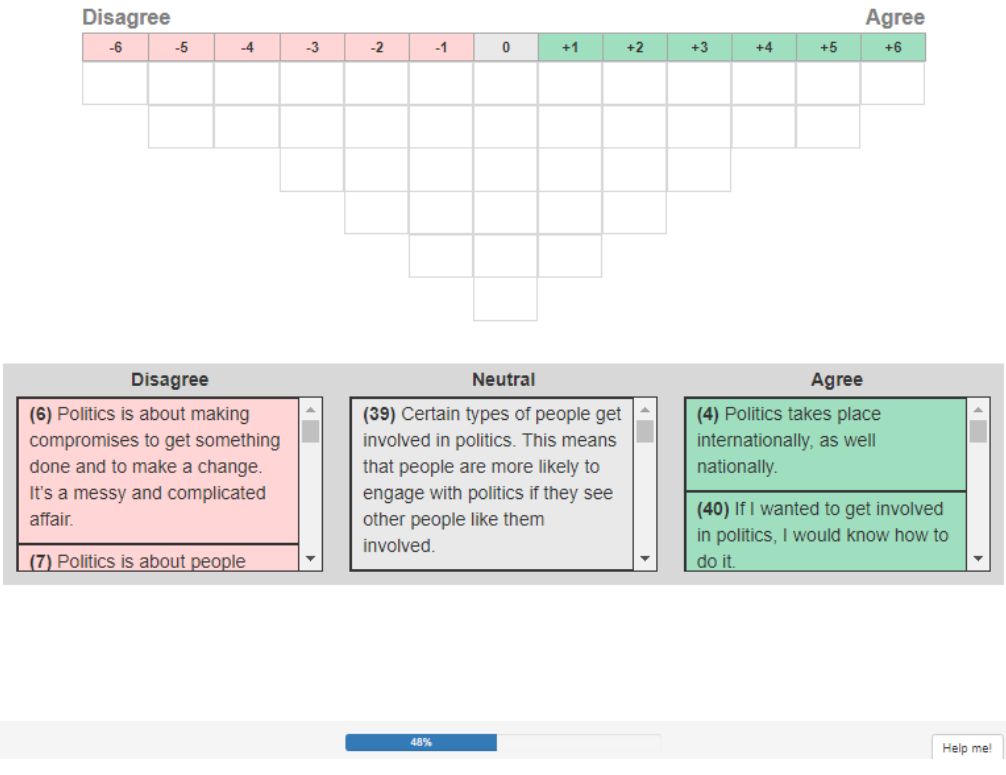
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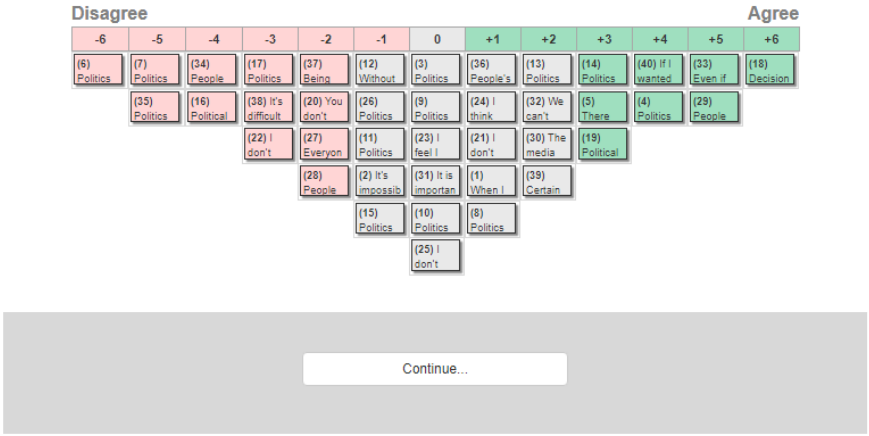
Screen 5



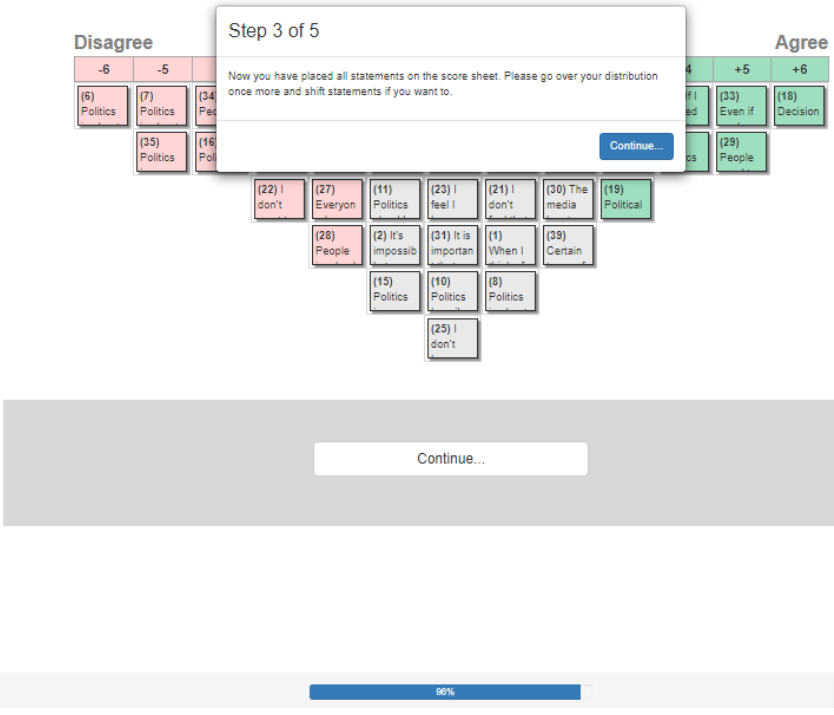
Screen 6



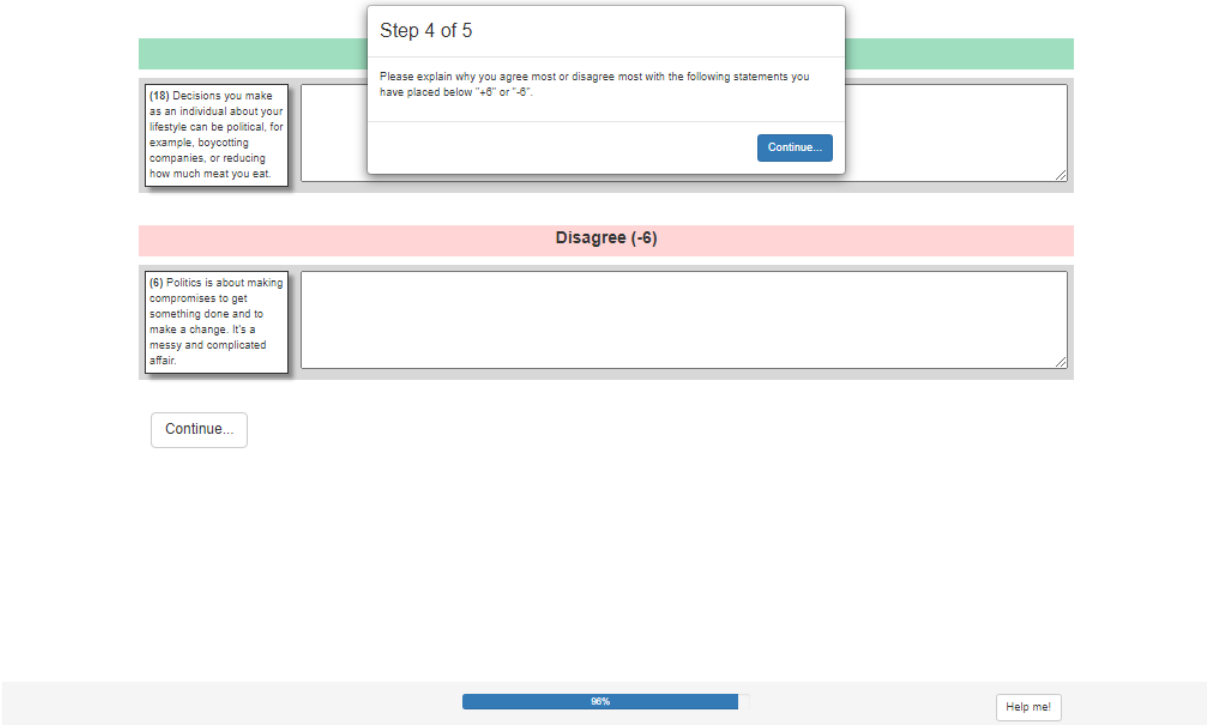
Screen 7



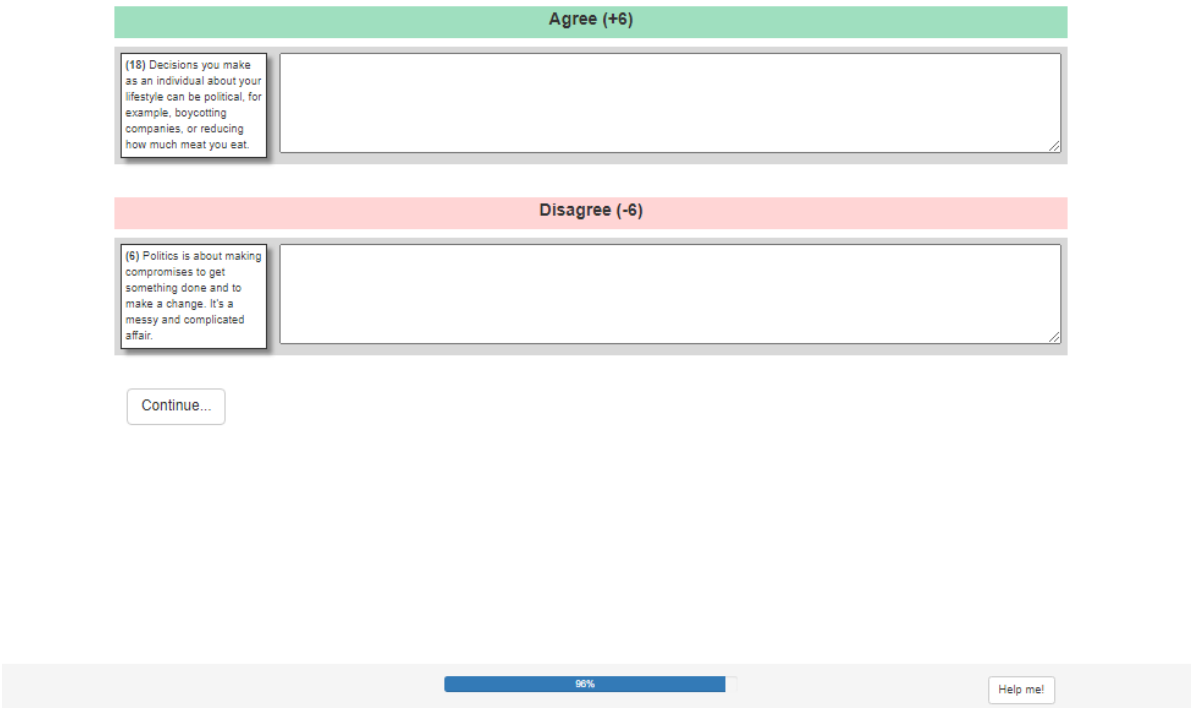
Screen 8



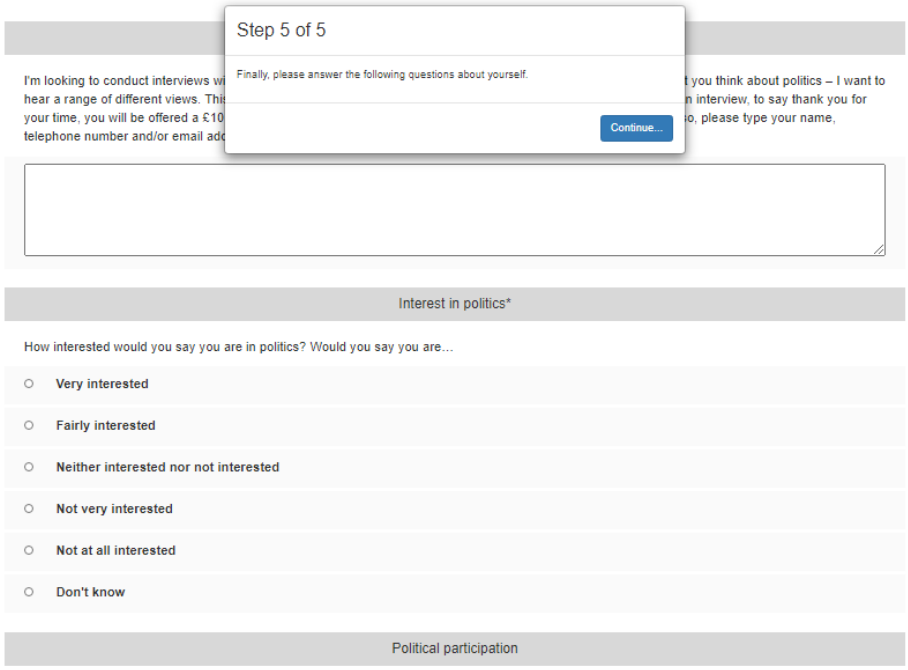
Screen 9



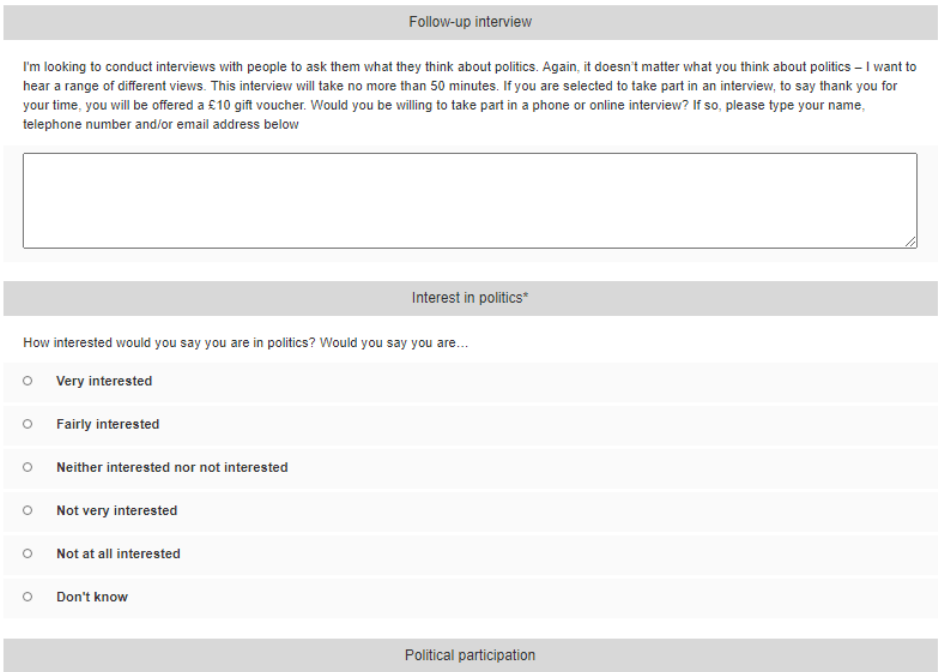
Screen 10



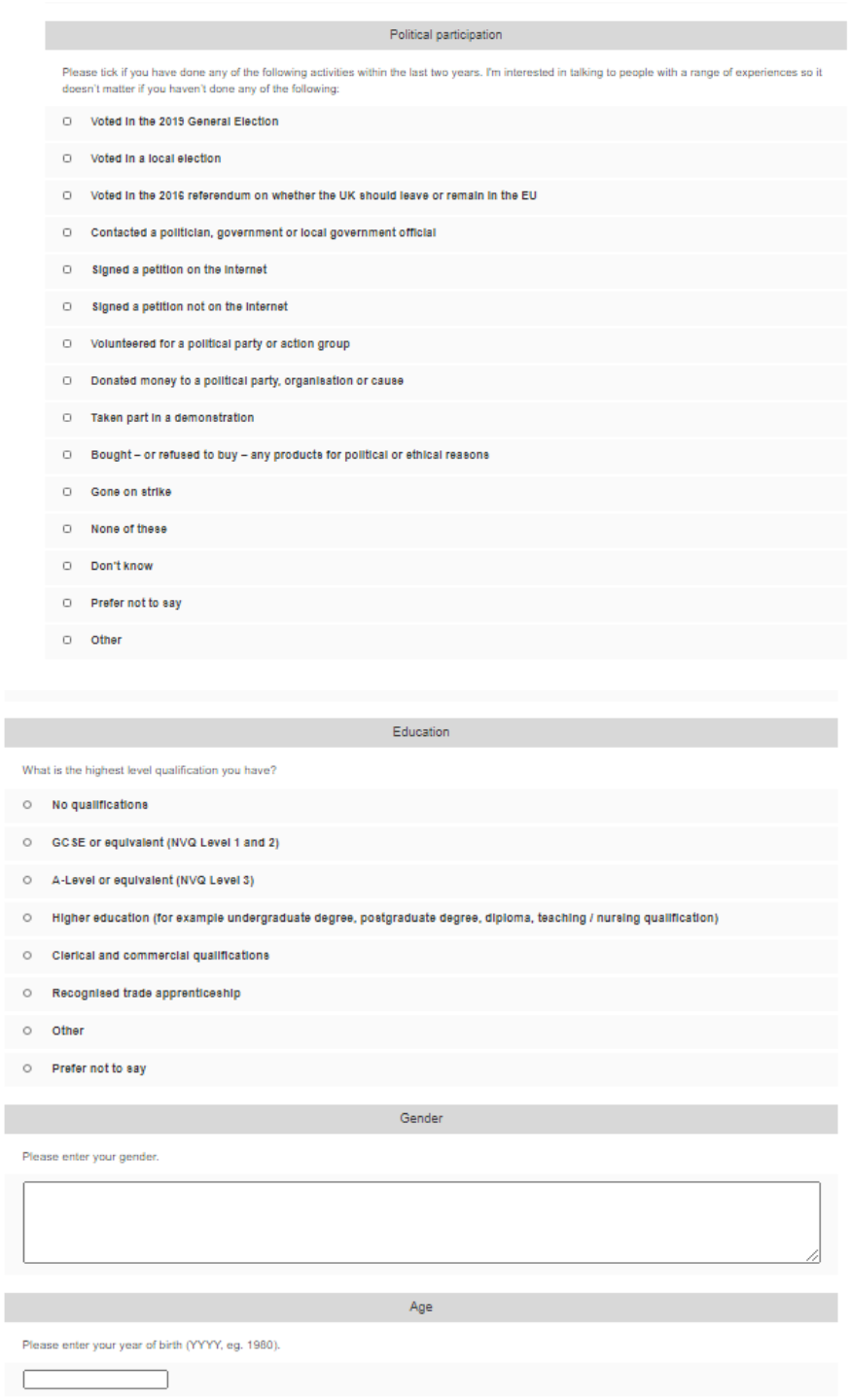
Screen 11



Screen 12



Screen 12 (continued)



Political participation

Please tick if you have done any of the following activities within the last two years. I'm interested in talking to people with a range of experiences so it doesn't matter if you haven't done any of the following:

- ☐ Voted in the 2015 General Election
- ☐ Voted in a local election
- ☐ Voted in the 2016 referendum on whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU
- ☐ Contacted a politician, government or local government official
- ☐ Signed a petition on the internet
- ☐ Signed a petition not on the internet
- ☐ Volunteered for a political party or action group
- ☐ Donated money to a political party, organisation or cause
- ☐ Taken part in a demonstration
- ☐ Bought – or refused to buy – any products for political or ethical reasons
- ☐ Gone on strike
- ☐ None of these
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other

Education

What is the highest level qualification you have?

- ○ No qualifications
- ○ GCSE or equivalent (NVQ Level 1 and 2)
- ○ A-Level or equivalent (NVQ Level 3)
- ○ Higher education (for example undergraduate degree, postgraduate degree, diploma, teaching / nursing qualification)
- ○ Clerical and commercial qualifications
- ○ Recognised trade apprenticeship
- ○ Other
- ○ Prefer not to say

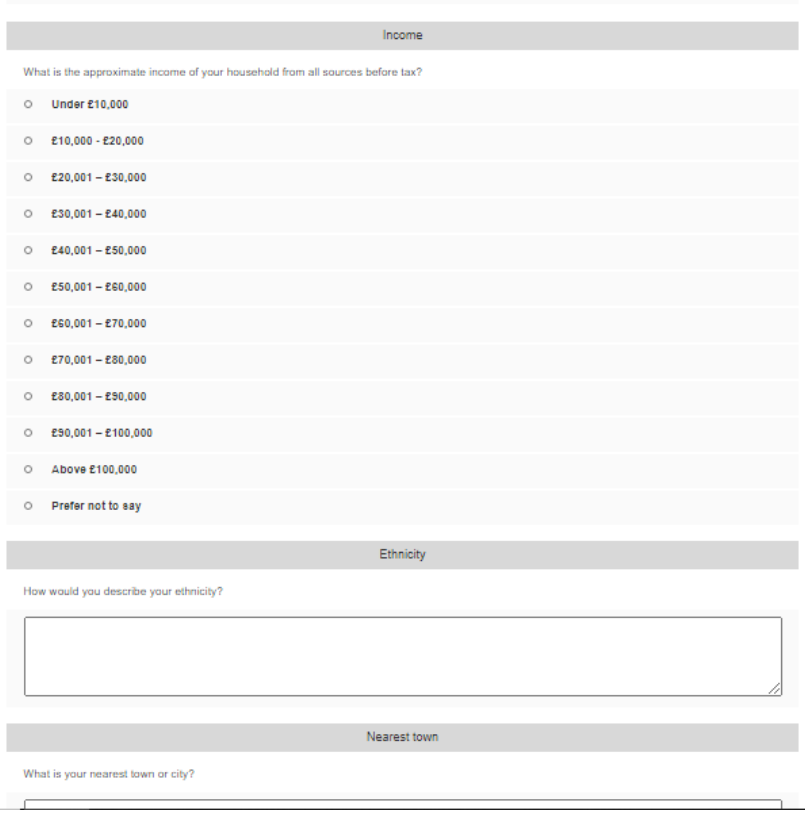
Gender

Please enter your gender.

Age

Please enter your year of birth (YYYY, eg. 1980).

Screen 12 (continued)



Appendix 13: Participants' Demographic Data

2019 General Election	Local election	EU referendum	Contacted politician	Internet petition	Hard copy petition	Volunteered for pol party/ action group	Donated money	Demonstration	Boycott/ buycott	Strike	None	Don't know	Prefer not to say	Other
a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	j	k	l	m	n	o

ID	Interviewed	Interest in politics	Political participation	Education	Gender (Open ended question)	Age range	Income	Ethnicity (Open ended question)	Region (Open ended question)
1		Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, h	Higher education	Female	25-34	Above £100,000	White British	West Midlands
2		Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, f, g, h, i, j, o	Higher education	Female	25-34	£40,001 – £50,000	White	West Midlands
3	Yes	Very interested	b, d, e, f	A-Level/ equivalent	Female	18-24	£10,000 - £20,000	Black / African	West Midlands
4		Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, j, k	Higher education	Female	25-34	£10,000 - £20,000	White British	West Midlands
5	Yes	Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, g, h, j	Higher education	Male	25-34	Prefer not to say	Chinese	West Midlands

ID	Interviewed	Interest in politics	Political participation	Education	Gender (Open ended question)	Age range	Income	Ethnicity (Open ended question)	Region (Open ended question)
6		Fairly interested	a, c, e, j	Higher education	Female	25-34	£30,001-40,000	White British	South
7	Yes	Fairly interested	a, e, i, j	Higher education	Female	18-24	Under £10,000	White British	West Midlands
8	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, f, j	Higher education	Female	25-34	£60,001-70,000	White British	North East
9	Yes	Very interested	a, b, c	Higher education	Female	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	Black Caribbean	West Midlands
10	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, g, i	Higher education	Female	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	White-British	West Midlands
11	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, d, e, j	GCSE / equivalent	Male	45-54	£10,000 - £20,000	White British	North East
12		Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, j	Higher education	BLANK	25-34	£30,001-£40,000	BLANK	South
13		Fairly interested	a, b, e, f, j	Higher education	Male	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	White British	South West
14		Not very interested	a, b, c, e	A-Level/ equivalent	Male	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	White British	West Midlands

ID	Interviewed	Interest in politics	Political participation	Education	Gender (Open ended question)	Age range	Income	Ethnicity (Open ended question)	Region (Open ended question)
15		Neither interested nor not interested	j	Higher education	Male	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	British-Caribbean	West Midlands
16		Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, f	Higher education	Male	25-34	£30,001 – £40,000	White	West Midlands
17	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, f, h, j	Higher education	Non-binary	25-34	Prefer not to say	White British	West Midlands
18	Yes	Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, h, i, j	Higher education	Male	45-54	£20,001 – £30,000	Irish	West Midlands
19		Fairly interested	a, c, e, h, j	Higher education	Female	75-84	£30,001 – £40,000	White British	North West
20		Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, j	Higher education	Male	45-54	£70,001 – £80,000	White British	South
21		Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, h, j	Higher education	Male	35-44	£60,001 – £70,000	British	BLANK
22		Fairly interested	a, b, d, i	Higher education	Male	35-44	£30,001 – £40,000	Scottish	Scotland
23	Yes	Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, j	Higher education	Male	BLANK	Prefer not to say	White British	South

ID	Interviewed	Interest in politics	Political participation	Education	Gender (Open ended question)	Age range	Income	Ethnicity (Open ended question)	Region (Open ended question)
24		Neither interested nor not interested	a, b, c, d, j	A-Level/ equivalent	Male	25-34	£80,001 – £90,000	White British	North West
25	Yes	Fairly interested	c, d, e	Higher education	Male	45-54	£30,001 – £40,000	White	Yorkshire
26	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, e, j	Higher education	Male	55-64	Under £10,000	White British	Scotland
27	Yes	Don't know	a, b, c, d, e, f, i, j	Higher education	Female	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	White British	Yorkshire
28	Yes	Very interested	a, b, c, e, f, h, i, j, o	Other	Male	35-44	£10,000 - £20,000	White Welsh	Yorkshire
29		Not very interested	a, c, e	Higher education	Male	18-24	£20,001 – £30,000	White British	South
30	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, j	Higher education	Female	55-64	£20,001 – £30,001	British	South
31		Fairly interested	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, j	Higher education	Male	65-74	£10,000 - £20,000	White British	South
32	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c, f, j	Higher education	Female	45-54	£30,001 – £40,000	British	South East

ID	Interviewed	Interest in politics	Political participation	Education	Gender (Open ended question)	Age range	Income	Ethnicity (Open ended question)	Region (Open ended question)
33		Fairly interested	a, b, c, d, e	Higher education	Male	45-54	£80,001 – £90,000	White British	South East
34		Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, f, i, j	Higher education	Male	35-44	£50,001 – £60,000	White British	West Midlands
35		Very interested	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j	Higher education	Male	25-34	£20,001 – £30,000	White British	West Midlands
36	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, e, f, i, j, k	Higher education	Female	18-24	Prefer not to say	White British	South East
37	Yes	Not at all interested	a, b, c, e	Higher education	Female	18-24	Under £10,000	White British	South East
38	Yes	Fairly interested	a, b, c	Higher education	Male	75-84	£80,001 – £90,000	West European	South

Appendix 14: Factors with Defining Sorts (**bold and underlined**) and Confounded Sorts *(italics)*

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
18 *Man, 45-54 years, £20,001-£30,000, Irish, HE, Very interested in politics*	**69**	-06	14	-08	16
31 *Man, 65-74 years, £10,000-£20,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	**56**	14	31	02	25
2 *Woman, 25-34 years, £40,001-£50,000, White, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	17	**56**	20	19	23
14 *Man, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, A-Level/ equivalent, Not very interested in politics*	-18	**44**	19	-27	10

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
20 *Man, 45-54 years, £70,001-£80,000, White British, HE, Very interested in politics*	00	**55**	11	20	-12
21 *Man, 35-44 years, £60,001-£70,000, British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	-06	**45**	-01	14	-28
27 *Woman, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, HE, Doesn't know level of interest in politics*	32	**42**	06	17	13
37 *Woman, 18-24 years, Under £10,000, White British, HE, Not at all interested in politics*	09	**62**	07	05	07

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
3 *Woman, 18-24 years, £10,000-£20,000, Black/ African, A-Level/ equivalent, Very interested in politics*	36	05	**66**	26	23
5 *Man, 25-34 years, Prefer not to say household income, Chinese, HE, Very interested in politics*	36	08	**59**	13	11
6 *Woman, 25-34 years, £30,001-£40,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	24	36	**58**	-27	01
8 *Woman, 25-34 years, £60,001-£70,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	18	12	**58**	24	-28

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
9 *Woman, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, Black Caribbean, HE, Very interested in politics*	02	21	**62**	09	-04
12 *Gender unknown, 25-34 years, £30,001-£40,000, Ethnicity unknown, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	01	22	**46**	16	03
16 *Man, 25-34 years, £30,001-£40,000, White, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	26	25	**41**	38	-35
19 *Woman, 75-84 years, £30,001-£40,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	-25	14	**51**	-04	12

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
22 *Man, 35-44 years, £30,001-£40,000, Scottish, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	12	09	**47**	00	22
36 *Woman, 18-24 years, Prefer not to say household income, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	25	10	**72**	09	17
10 *Woman, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	12	02	38	**54**	17
11 *Man, 45-54 years, £10,000-£20,000, White British, GCSE / equivalent, Fairly interested*	04	20	-09	**67**	-09

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
15 *Man, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, British Caribbean, HE, Neither interested nor not interested in politics*	15	-03	15	**47**	-02
23 *Man, Age unknown, Prefer not to say household income, White British, HE, Very interested in politics*	11	40	30	**47**	-06
25 *Man, 45-54 years, £30,001-£40,000, White, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	-07	19	07	**76**	-05
30 *Woman, 55-64 years, £20,001-£30,000, British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	07	-02	20	-18	**43**

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
32 *Woman, 45-54 years, £30,001-£40,000, British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	-05	19	-02	13	**<u>50</u>**
33 *Man, 45-54 years, £80,001-£90,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	37	02	10	-21	**<u>44</u>**
1 *Woman, 25-34 years, Above £100,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	09	39	20	-05	06
4 *Woman, 25-34 years, £10,000-£20,000, White British, HE, Very interested in politics*	*55*	04	*42*	21	-04

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
7 *Woman, 18-24 years, Under £10,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	28	36	09	28	22
13 *Man, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	37	20	00	03	-14
17 *Non-binary person, 25-34 years, Prefer not to say household income, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	06	-19	*43*	21	*49*

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
24 *Man, 25-34 years, £80,001-£90,000, White British, A-Level/ equivalent, Neither interested nor not interested*	-20	03	17	29	02
26 *Man, 55-64 years, Under £10,000, White British, HE, Fairly interested in politics*	10	-07	40	35	15
28 *Man, 35-44 years, £10,000-£20,000, White Welsh, Other education, Very interested in politics*	*45*	-04	*46*	25	-11
29 *Man, 18-24 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, HE, Not very interested in politics*	-07	*47*	11	*48*	*-45*

Participant number and description. *HE – higher education.* *Ethnicity was self-defined by the participant*	1 Politics impacts people's lives– being aware of what's going on allows you to challenge and hold people to account	2 We need politics but it's off-putting – it's too complex and centred on conflict	3. Politics is important – there is inequality of influence but this doesn't mean people shouldn't engage	4. The political system in its current form gives too much influence to vested interests	5. Politics should be left to the politicians. Few demands or expectations are made of politics
34 *Man, 35-44 years, £50,001-£60,000, White British, HE, Very interested in politics*	*52*	23	*61*	16	06
35 *Man, 25-34 years, £20,001-£30,000, White British, HE, Very interested in politics*	*42*	30	19	02	*41*
Percentage variance explained	8	8	13	9	5

Appendix 15: Example Crib Sheet: Viewpoint 1

Items ranked at +6

If I wanted to get involved in politics, I would know how to do it.

Items ranked at +5

Politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society.

Even if you're not directly involved in politics, you should still pay attention to what's going on.

Items ranked higher by viewpoint 1 than by any other viewpoint

Politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society. +5

Even if you're not directly involved in politics, you should still pay attention to what's going on. +5

Politics is a way for the powerless to improve their lives. +4

Politics is how we go about distributing resources in society. +3

Politics heavily influences what people can achieve in their life. +2

Politics is about making really difficult decisions and the choices we have in society. +2

People's opinions are so polarised these days, I think this puts some people off from saying what they think. +1

You don't have to wait to be asked to get involved in politics. You can create your own opportunities to be engaged with politics. +1

Items ranked lower by viewpoint 1 than by any other viewpoint

The media has too much influence over political outcomes. 0

It's impossible to escape politics. Politics can be found everywhere in society. 0

Politics takes place locally, as well as nationally. -1

When I think of politics, I think about what the government does to run the country. -1

I think there's too much conflict and arguing in politics. I find it off-putting -3

Being engaged with politics requires commitment. A lot of people simply don't have the time to engage with politics. -3

I don't have trust in politics. People who are involved in politics are only in it for themselves. -4

Politics is about the Government getting its way and forcing policies through. Often, it's difficult to have influence as a decision's already been made. -4

Politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in a society. -5

I don't want to be more involved in politics but I'm glad that other people are. -5

Distinguishing statements

If I wanted to get involved in politics, I would know how to do it. +6

Politics should resolve problems and create solutions for society. +5

Politics is a way for the powerless to improve their lives. +4

Items ranked at -5
I don’t want to be more involved in politics, but I’m glad that other people are.
Politics aims to achieve the best outcomes for everyone in a society.

Items ranked at -6
I don’t feel that I have a say in politics. Politics is something that is done to me and I don’t feel like anyone represents me.

Participants’ comments
Positive / Agree
Participant 18 "(s33) People should be aware of what is going on in our society".

Participant 31 "(s11) Politics, I feel, describes the means with which humankind can engage in positive discussion (with a strong accent on really LISTENING to widespread and even controversial viewpoints), weighing-up peaceful options, to hopefully agree a series of actions to achieve an equitable, safe society for all”.

Negative / disagree
Participant 18 "(s21) Everyone has a say at some level in the political sphere”.

Participant 31 "(s27) Those many many millions of souls trying to survive without an adequate supply of the basics (water, food, good health, safe shelter, hygiene and sanitation), the un-educated, those living in war/conflict zones, or under repressive regimes, surely have little opportunity to engage IN politics. However, their plight/situation will have an influence ON politics!".

Appendix 16: Example Pen Portrait

Participant 1

The participant came to the UK from a Caribbean island to study and has started their career in the UK after graduation. The participant did not think they *'ever had like a like one of those aha moments where, yes, politics is a thing and it exists'*. As the participant aged, they had a growing recognition that *'politicians can be bought'* and represented the interests of the *'rich'*. This questioning of politics and the motivations of those involved in politics were referenced frequently by the participant. Politics was viewed to be for the *'White and elite'*. Nevertheless, the participant still identified that it was important for people to engage with politics and that politics should be for everyone. Related to this point, it was noted that people should vote in elections. Voting was identified to be a way of influencing decision-making and the participant identified that these decisions affect everyone's life.

To the participant, people with fewer economic resources are more likely to disengage from politics, with a sense from some people that there is *'nothing that you can do'* to influence the political process. However, the participant noted that politics should be for everyone and acknowledged the potential for education to challenge these ideas. Nevertheless, the participant questioned why politics was not taught more at school and whether this was *'intentional'*, noting that school curricula were controlled by those who held power in society.

The participant noted that their experience of university was pivotal in developing their awareness of politics and that their interest in politics had increased. Their experience had exposed them to politics and this was attributed to campaigns on campus which offered the opportunity to learn more about issues which were not necessarily covered at high school. In addition to increased exposure to politics at university, the participant associated *'becoming an adult'* with a growing awareness of a world outside of school (with politics associated with this external world).

The participant discussed how they perceived themselves to be lucky to have not been brought up in the United Kingdom which *'stratifies everything'*. Opportunities were perceived to be limited and there is a lack of social mobility. The UK education system, particularly fee-paying schools, was identified to entrench social inequality within society. The participant identified that *'the system has to be learned'* and that some people do not have the resources to access this system. By not growing up in the UK, there was *'no pigeonholing'* and the participant did not feel that they had to *'define'* themselves or perceive that *'there was no space for me here or there is no way for me to excel beyond somewhere'*.

Overall, the participant discussed politics in terms of an arena account which foregrounded the actions of political parties and voting in elections. The participant noted that political participation *'gives definition'* and contributes to a sense of who someone is *'as a person'* and that some people can get *'branded with that brush'* if they support particular parties. The participant noted that they do read a lot about current events and discussed how the media can have an agenda which influences the way in which stories are reported. However, the participant felt they lacked the time to get more involved in politics and were focused on progressing in their career.