

**“Living this written life”: An examination of narrative as a means of
conceptualising and strengthening parliamentary engagement in the UK**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of citizens' engagement with the UK Parliament, at a critical time for this institution and for representative democracy in general. Long-term trends in political participation (in a UK and global context) have contributed to a widely-perceived crisis of representative democracy, characterised by popular dissatisfaction, disinterest, and disengagement. This thesis examines perceptions toward the UK Parliament and parliamentary engagement through institutional and citizen perspectives. In doing so we provide a definition of parliamentary engagement as an *ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)*. Utilising an innovative theoretical framework, we investigate specific parliamentary engagement initiatives, narratives and discourses, and discuss what these indicate about the nature (or existence) of Parliament's 'culture' of engagement.

The way(s) in which Parliament is defined, conceptualised and represented – by citizens, and within Parliament – is a means by which this institution's practical and symbolic role can be better understood. These definitions, conceptualisations and representations are examined as narratives, a framework that also allows us to examine several engagement initiatives (which make conscious reference to narrative and storytelling) in terms of objectives, intended audience(s), and influence. In addition, Parliament's wider engagement efforts (and those of outside organisations) will be investigated first-hand, analysing the initial and retrospective perceptions of the citizens who experience them. These aims also inform our discussions with parliamentary staff and officials, helping to construct an 'institutional perspective' on engagement. In doing so, we find Parliament to be an enduringly 'abstract' institution (according to citizens *and* staff); a narrative that problematises relatability and identification (as well as broader, deeper engagement). This narrative is reinforced by several factors, including the ad-hoc nature of parliamentary engagement – understood variously across departments, teams and individuals – and an institutional dichotomy of 'stories' and 'information' when addressing public input, as well as a continued absence of corporate identity.

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Introduction

Our story takes place, we are made certainly to feel, in enduring settings that long predate and will long outlast those momentary actors.

John Updike

The contemporary significance of parliamentary engagement

This thesis addresses the topic of parliamentary engagement in the UK; the ways in which citizens engage with the UK Parliament (if at all), and how they conceptualise it as an institution. More broadly, this allows us to investigate Parliament's perceived role within 'politics' as it is understood by citizens. In defining a 'parliament' (or, more accurately, describing how difficult parliaments are to define), we should note that, in the UK and across the Commonwealth, a 'parliament' is simply the preferred term for "a legislature – a body created to approve measures that will form the law of the land" (Norton 2013b, p.1). The function, power, and significance of a parliament is particular and peculiar to its respective country. This thesis is focused upon the UK Parliament, an ancient institution described historically as the 'mother of parliaments'. In describing the UK Parliament, Petit and Yong – borrowing Shepsle's (1992) phrasing – state that "Parliament is a 'they, not an it'", a "shorthand for a bundle of sometimes overlapping institutions and functions" (2018, p.24). In accounting for these overlaps, Petit and Yong describe five key features that render Parliament's role – with respect to UK governance – complex and problematic. They are as follows: (1) difficulties in resolving disputes between nominal equals in a highly politicised environment, (2) government influence, (3) ambiguous constitutional functions, (4) bicameral status (i.e. two Houses: the Commons and the Lords), and (5) a lack of formal external scrutiny (Petit and Yong 2018, p.24). The UK Parliament's internal complexities – its overlapping responsibilities, functions, and expectations – constitute an important contextual point. As we will show, even within a single parliamentary function – engagement – there exist myriad institutional definitions, responsibilities and priorities.

Parliamentary engagement in the UK – though, in perspective, a recently-established practice – is now a key element of parliamentary activity, and an essential area of study in the contemporary landscape of global democratic politics. A report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons (2004, p.9) emphasises the importance of engagement to the UK Parliament's democratic legitimacy:

The legitimacy of the House of Commons, as the principal representative body in British democracy, rests upon the support and engagement of the electorate. The decline in political participation and engagement in recent years, as well as in levels of trust in politicians, political parties and the institutions of State should be of concern to every citizen. But it should be of particular concern to the House of Commons.

A perceived 'decline' in democratic legitimacy, and its repercussions for legislatures, is a source of concern within the UK and outside it. Democracy, on a global scale, is widely described as being in a state of decline, malaise, or even 'crisis' (Flinders 2016, p.182). It is important, especially in this context, to define what form of democracy these perceptions refer to; for instance, a recent academic study identified and catalogued 2,234 different expressions, or 'versions', of democracy (Gagnon 2018), showcasing the need for specificity. This thesis focuses on representative democracy (and perceptions toward it), adopting the following definition from Sonia Alonso, John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel:

...a cluster of territorially bound governing institutions that include written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws. These institutions guarantee such procedures as periodic election of candidates to legislatures, limited-term holding of political offices, voting by secret ballot, competitive political parties, the right to assemble in public and liberty of the press. (2011, p.1)

Parliament, within this thesis, is understood as a 'territorially bound governing institution'; an institution of representative democracy, an understanding upon which the aforementioned Modernisation Committee report's definition of Parliament (a 'representative body in British democracy') is also premised.

The report's projected concerns relate to Parliament's capacity to represent, which is described as being incumbent on its *legitimacy* (and dependent, in turn, on engagement). Diagnoses of democratic decline, malaise, and/or crisis frequently draw upon (and often, ultimately, reinforce) the "widespread concern about a legitimacy crisis" that, though open to empirical problematisation, is impossible to ignore or dismiss (Norris 2011, p.4). "More than a generalised crisis in legitimacy", argue Severs and Mattelaer, "our democracies face a crisis of legitimation: political choices are in dire need of an explanatory narrative that binds citizens together" (2014, p.2). This observation indicates an atomisation, or individualisation, of politics as citizens understand and practise it. This reflects the fact that political engagement – especially among younger generations – is increasingly characterised (in academic studies) by a cumulative lack of interest (and/or knowledge) or, alternatively, by more 'personalised' forms of issue-politics (Manning 2017, p.468). Both interpretations imply a shift (deliberate or otherwise) away from formal politics and, by extension, formal political institutions. This would appear to jeopardise Parliament's "key role as mediator between society and governance" (Leston-Bandeira 2016,

p.502), since it indicates a landscape of political engagement in which formal representation is either irrelevant or undesired. This creates a problematic context for parliaments and for representative democracy more broadly.

Ulrich Beck *et al.* describe this political context as one “in which the individuals must produce, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves” (1994, p.13). It is a description that will be examined literally – perhaps more literally than the authors envisaged – within this thesis, which investigates ways in which ‘individual biographies’ are evident (as stories) and communicated to others (as *storytelling*). This provides an effective means of studying an increasingly informal, personalised form of political engagement, one which necessitates a greater understanding of the role(s), significance, and meaning of legislatures *to citizens*. The political atmosphere surrounding Brexit reinforces the timeliness of this thesis, since Parliament’s relationship with the Government *and* the citizenry is now being discussed in unprecedented breadth and depth. In addition, the ongoing plans, debates and discussions relating to the Restoration and Renewal project – i.e. the renovation and modernisation of the Palace of Westminster – have also generated close attention, from a variety of perspectives, on Parliament’s symbolic, geographical and political importance. The political fallout of the 2009 expenses scandal, meanwhile, is still prevalent within popular discussions of Parliament and parliamentarians, especially when concepts of trust and accountability are involved. This socio-political context collectively influences what (and who) politicians – and the institution of Parliament – are understood to represent.

Research aims

This thesis addresses the ways in which the UK Parliament and modern politics are conceptualised, inside and outside of Parliament. It discusses how politics and Parliament are engaged with at present, which entails examining several of Parliament’s existing means of engagement and discussing their influence. Within this study we draw on a wide range of academic theories, including symbolic representation, narrative theory and interpretivism; our research methods (questionnaires, focus groups, and elite interviews) and analytical techniques (including narrative analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis) are similarly wide-ranging. In addressing the existing literature on political and parliamentary engagement, we provide a coherent definition of parliamentary engagement (*an ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)*), which will provide a consistent point of reference throughout the thesis. This, in turn, informs subsequent discussions on how citizens’ engagement with

Parliament could be improved and strengthened. In this thesis we address Parliament's use of narrative devices and storytelling in order to engage citizens, a topic that constitutes an academic lacuna. In part this lacuna is attributable to how relatively recent these techniques are, and the fact that *parliamentary engagement* – meaning a recognisable (but by no means holistic) institutional effort to engage citizens with Parliament and its functions – is itself a relatively recent development. Another reason is that narratives are typically discussed by political scientists as contexts, rather than devices. Thus, the effectiveness of certain narratives, relative to others, is overlooked as an avenue of study. In addition, existing studies of political storytelling have focused on partisan – rather than parliamentary – engagement. Examining *parliamentary storytelling* can provide an invaluable contribution to the study of storytelling and of political and parliamentary engagement.

This approach to parliamentary storytelling can also help to address a pre-identified gap in the study of parliamentary engagement. The focus of scholars has hitherto been on the *means* of interaction between citizens and Parliament (or parliamentarians) rather than the *nature* of the interaction (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018, p.155). The latter is crucial to an understanding of what Parliament does and does not represent to citizens, and how citizens conceptualise, define, and engage with Parliament. Our study interprets storytelling as a device by which citizens communicate and substantiate their political understandings, and by which Parliament can communicate to citizens, represent itself to citizens, and represent citizens to themselves. It therefore entails gathering the viewpoints of citizens and their definitions of terms such as 'politics' and 'parliament'. As van Wessel argues, citizens' conceptualisations and understandings of politics are, all too often, examined according to "large-scale developments political scientists have identified (chosen?) as important" (2016, p.4). Citizens' attempts to make sense of politics themselves – and the myriad manifestations of these attempts – are thus omitted. Investigating these attempts to 'make sense' inductively – being led by citizens' own definitions of the concepts in question – is a means of "resistance against the dictate that the political thinker must withdraw to a vantage point beyond the social world in order to understand its relations of power and adjudicate its conflicts of interest" (Disch 1993, p.668). Engagement is accordingly understood (and examined) within this thesis as a dynamic; as a mutual relationship, underpinned by dialogic communication and forms of meaning that are co-constituted (i.e. established mutually by both 'sides'). Employing an innovative theoretical framework, we will demonstrate the centrality of narrative to this dynamic, at a conceptual and practical level.

Research questions

This thesis will examine numerous applications (and, by extension, underlying conceptualisations) of parliamentary engagement, utilising a mixed-methods approach. The fieldwork for this approach encompasses questionnaires, focus groups, elite interviews, and discourse analysis. Subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis will then establish how Parliament is represented through specific engagement initiatives (including those that utilise – or appear to utilise – narrative devices), what type of audience they conceptualise and presuppose, and their effects on an intended audience (or audiences). A similar, smaller-scale investigation of non-parliamentary engagement sessions (i.e. events focused on engagement but not organised by Parliament) will provide an additional basis for comparison. The fieldwork and analysis will be undertaken in accordance with the following research questions:

1. How is the UK Parliament conceptualised and represented by citizens, and by the institution itself?
2. In what ways do citizens tell stories to describe and substantiate their political and/or parliamentary engagement?
3. What is the significance of storytelling as a means of parliamentary engagement?
4. What do Parliament's existing engagement initiatives demonstrate in terms of:
 - a. Their effect(s) on the citizens experiencing them?
 - b. A broader parliamentary 'culture' of engagement?

In addressing these research questions, the thesis aims to make a valuable contribution to the field of parliamentary engagement, specifically in terms of its current applications and functions, and the ways in which citizens (and even individuals *within* Parliament) conceptualise and relate to this institution.

Chapter structure

This thesis proceeds in two main parts; the first consists of a literature review, theoretical framework, and methodology. The literature review (Chapter 1) contextualises this thesis within existing theories and studies, in order to provide a new definition of parliamentary engagement. It seeks to problematise what are often taken to be self-evident markers of (dis)engagement, and instead demonstrates a context of continued political change, of which the causes and effects are interpreted in various ways in accordance with broader academic narratives. The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) builds on this theme of narratives, employing them as a

means of conceptualising parliamentary engagement. It also demonstrates how narratives are communicated through the telling of stories. As the chapter shows, storytelling is an appeal to context and relatability; in other words, the capacity to see oneself reflected within a story. This is an essential discussion in the context of parliamentary engagement initiatives, which show an increased propensity to use and/or tell stories as a means of representing Parliament to citizens. The methodology (Chapter 3) presents the mixed-methods approach by which external and internal perceptions of Parliament (and the political sphere more broadly) are captured and subsequently analysed. It shows the particular sequence in which the fieldwork methods were deployed, in order to encourage increasingly self-reflective responses which draw upon participants' life stories. It also presents the methods by which parliamentary discourse(s) can be analysed, with reference to citizen input. All of these factors contribute to a clearer understanding of Parliament's 'culture' of engagement, and establishing whether such a culture even exists.

The second part of the thesis presents the empirical findings and the outcome of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Chapter 4 discusses citizens' perspectives of Parliament, and the perspectives of parliamentary staff toward their own institution, with reference to dominant socio-cultural narratives. It serves to problematise a concept of Parliament as possessing, and pursuing, a coherent and consistent culture of engagement. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the stories told by the research participants; the devices through which storytelling was evident, and what these techniques indicated about citizen and staff attitudes (in consideration of the broader narratives discussed in Chapter 4). Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of select committee reports, we also examine the existence of a parliamentary discourse that dichotomises 'stories' and 'information' (in terms of 'legitimate' citizen input). Parliamentary engagement sessions are the focus of Chapter 6, which presents an analysis of their effects. It also addresses the question of 'typical attendees' and 'usual suspects'; whether these events attract a certain segment of the UK population (according to their demographics, political interest, or other factors), and thus can claim only a limited degree of effectiveness in 'taking Parliament to the people'. Chapter 7 further discusses the significance of Parliament as an influential element *within* parliamentary engagement initiatives. It also contextualises our broader discussions alongside the Restoration and Renewal project – the multi-billion-pound renovation of the Palace of Westminster – to further reinforce the importance of discussing parliamentary symbolism, corporate identity, and the subjective meaning(s) of Parliament among the citizenry.

Chapter 1 – Literature review: assessing, contextualising and (re)defining engagement

Politicians are not natural crooks, they are actors...one aspect of it is the political game, but that kind of acting is not lying so long as it refers to, and reflects, and exalts, the essential common ideals of a culture. Those performances are part of our culture.

Orson Welles

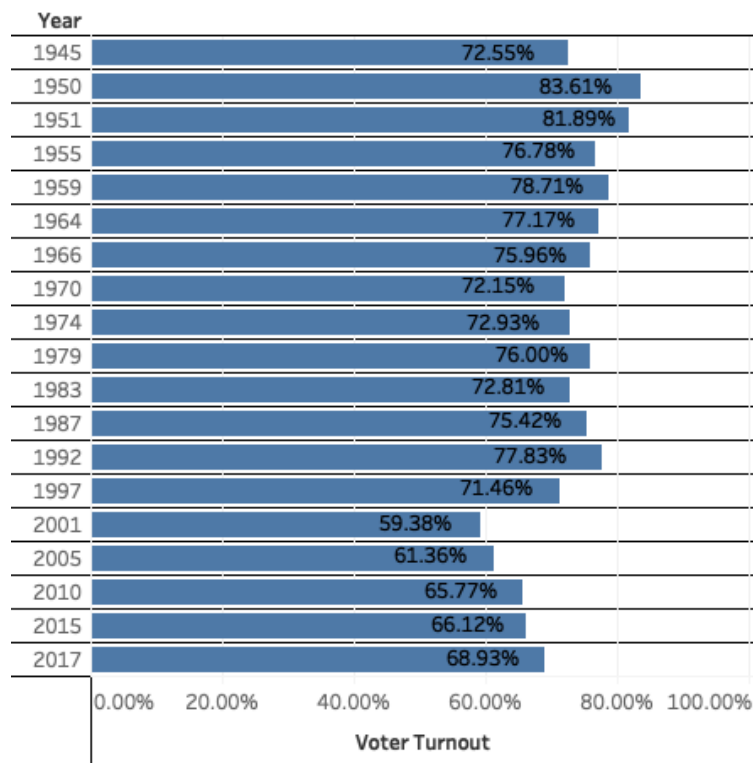
Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of key academic definitions of engagement, and how the existence (or absence) of engagement within contemporary society is substantiated and understood. In order to do so we will refer to Loader's (2007) description of political engagement literature; as being largely defined by one of two distinct narratives, *citizen disaffection* and *cultural displacement*. This chapter emphasises the importance of a clear, coherent understanding of key terminology; especially in the case of 'engagement' which remains a highly contentious term. Taking into account the increasingly informalised landscape of self-actualising political expression in the UK (and across Western Europe) – in the sense of being self-motivated, subjective and unmediated – it is also important to recognise the ways in which citizens themselves conceptualise 'politics'. In affirming the relevance of this discussion to parliamentary engagement specifically, this chapter proposes a new definition of the term: as an ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s). Such a conceptualisation approaches engagement as a co-constitutive dynamic, necessitating a re-examination of what Parliament represents (symbolically and politically) to citizens. Drawing on the 'constructivist turn' in representation literature (Disch 2015; Saward 2006), we show parliamentary engagement as a means by which Parliament is communicated to citizens, and by which citizens are represented to themselves.

1.1 – Academic interpretations and substantiations of political (dis)engagement

Engagement with political institutions is widely described as being in a diminished (or diminishing) state. One of the most widely-employed indicators of disengagement is voter turnout which, according to Putnam’s social capital theory, is characteristic of a decline in civic enthusiasm; towards traditional institutions, and towards the wider practice of politics (1995). Fluctuating turnout is widely cited as evidencing the diminished importance of political parties (Mair 2013), and popular dissatisfaction with politics (Stoker 2006). However, it is important not to take this ‘decline’ (or what it demonstrates) as self-evident. Upon examining international voter turnout figures, two observations can be made. Firstly, engagement is not in decline across all countries, or even all European countries (Norris 2011, p.221; Dalton 2008, p.37; Franklin 2004, p.11). Secondly, even in countries frequently characterised as experiencing a long-term decline in turnout – such as the UK – the decline itself is not consistent (Franklin 2004, p.69). The UK’s recent voting figures are shown below, in order to illustrate this point:

Table 1 – Voter turnout (%) at UK parliamentary elections from 1945 to 2017



Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (2018)

Based on the figures above, we can see that, since its historic low-point in 2001, UK turnout has increased consistently. Declining turnout (as ‘self-evident’ disengagement) therefore escapes broad characterisation as either chronic or continuous, since – despite not reaching the levels recorded in the 1950s – this phenomenon is subject to considerable nuance.

There are additional ways of analysing and describing electoral activity, besides measuring turnout. Electoral volatility – the likelihood of voters switching their party preference from one party to the next, in an unpredictable fashion – suggests a major shift in the way that citizens perceive elections *and* political parties (Mair 2013, pp.29-34). Mair, taking into account turnout figures and electoral volatility indicators, concludes that “citizens, when they are not abstaining from the ballot altogether, are voting with significantly reduced partisan commitment” (2013, p.34). This reduction in partisan commitment – a trend “as close to a universal generalization as one can find in political science” (Pharr, Putnam and Dalton 2000, p.17) – has often been used to underline diminished political participation more generally (Mair 2013; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). Mair, for example, describes a context of mutual withdrawal from traditional engagement, on the part of citizens *and* parties (2013, pp.89-98). Forgoing their traditional community networks as sources of interaction, parties are now increasingly professionalised and technocratic, and more dependent on the state for resources and legitimacy (Mair 2013, pp.97-98). Disengagement, at least in terms of party membership, can be seen as co-constitutive and cumulative; “[t]here is [now] a world of the citizens...and a world of the politicians and parties, and the interaction between them steadily diminishes” (Mair 2013, p.98).

Inconsistencies and instabilities in citizens’ perspectives of (and engagement with) political institutions – of which parties can be counted as a key example – indicates a negative shift in the ability (or desire) to relate to the political sphere (Norris and Newton 2000). However, more recently there have been developments in party membership that would appear to problematise the ‘universal generalisation’ mentioned above:

As of April 2018, Labour had 540,000 members, compared to just under 125,500 SNP members as of August 2018, and 124,000 Conservative members reported in March 2018. As of August 2018, The Liberal Democrats had 99,200, Green Party 39,400, UKIP 23,600 and Plaid Cymru 8,000 members. Party membership has risen notably since 2013, both in total and as a percentage of the electorate. (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen 2018)¹

¹ The report by Audickas, Dempsey and Keen is clear in maintaining the caveat that “parties are under no official obligation to publish membership data. There is no agreed definition of “party membership” nor any official body to monitor it” (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen 2018, p. 6). This renders a ‘conclusive’ study of party membership extremely difficult.

Political parties would, on the basis of the figures above, appear not to represent the ‘site of mutual withdrawal’ that Mair diagnoses. Nevertheless these recent increases in (certain) party memberships – as well as the political figures encouraging them – have also been problematised, and brought into discussions of populism. Populism has a wide variety of definitions, but generally relates to a dichotomisation of the (corrupt) elite and the (pure) people, and a conception of politics “*as an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012, p.8, emphasis in original). Claiming that populism is gaining momentum in the UK is contentious, given continued disagreement as to whether populism relates to an ideology or simply a style of politics (Chwalisz 2015, p.6). Populism is also a contentious term inasmuch as it can be ‘weaponised’ as a means of de-legitimising non-centrist politics (and politicians), notably Labour under Jeremy Corbyn (Dean and Maiguashca 2017). However, its trope of “forcing voters to make a choice about what they think when they do not think” (Chwalisz 2015, p.18) is highly significant in this context. If indeed these party membership figures are attributable to populist sentiment, it may suggest that continued (or increased) political engagement is achieved *at the expense of* parliamentary engagement, due to Parliament’s association with the elite establishment.

Colin Hay’s diagnosis of politics having “become a dirty word” (2007, p.1) speaks to precisely this distaste for established institutions. Flinders, moreover, laments that “the civic culture seems to have become almost ‘anti-political’” (2016, p.185); indeed, *anti-politics* now constitutes a distinct literature within political science. Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker (2016, p.4) provide the following description of its theoretical and empirical premise:

Anti-politics...describes negative feeling towards politicians, parties, Parliament, councils, and governments in general (as opposed to particular politicians, parties etc. – which is to be expected in a partisan system).

As demonstrated above, definitions of anti-politics are often framed by a mainstream, institution-based conception of ‘politics’ (Jennings and Stoker 2016; Jennings, Stoker and Twyman 2016). Anti-politics literature postulates that this form of politics, while traditionally attracting a degree of healthy scepticism from the citizenry, now attracts open hostility. However, the very notion of *anti-politics* brings us into a discussion of what scholars and citizens actually mean by engagement and, more fundamentally, politics. Political science has, over the course of the preceding century, diversified in terms of what is legitimately studied as *political* activity: from voting-centric studies in the 1940s and 1950s, to the incorporation of fundraising activities and contacting officials by the 1960s, and political protest by the 1970s (Steiner and Kaiser 2016). Crucially, we are discussing a legitimacy imparted not by citizens (regarding

appropriate practice) but by *scholars* (regarding appropriate nomenclature). Margit van Wessel offers the following critique of mainstream studies of political engagement, many of which still 'compartmentalise' citizens' understandings of politics:

...they propose explanations for citizens' understandings of democratic politics looking not to what citizens actually think or say, but elsewhere: to a range of large-scale societal developments...Authors thus do not fully seek to actually establish what citizens' understandings are. Understandings are largely derived. Citizens' understandings are taken to be predictable, on the basis of analysis of large-scale developments political scientists have identified (chosen?) as important. (2016, p.130)

Building on this point, Manning argues that diagnoses of political apathy and disengagement often employ an interpretation of democratic politics that has remained unchanged since the Scottish Enlightenment (2013, p.21). Manning instead advocates – like van Wessel – a theoretical approach that relies upon *citizens' interpretations* (rather than 'the large-scale') for contextualisation. The rationale for this approach is provided by "the development of other identity politics, especially around new social movements from the 1960s" (Manning 2015, p.113), necessitating academic understanding of what these identities are and how they are expressed politically. This plurality of political identities also impacts upon the traditional remit of political parties as mass-organisations. As Webb notes, "environmental quality, social norms, lifestyle choices, multiculturalism, and other social and cultural issues have led to the triumph of interest articulation over interest aggregation", an observation that encapsulates the difficulties of parties (and governments) in capturing even a substantial proportion of voices in an unprecedentedly fluid political landscape (2013, p.748). Political identities (especially among younger generations) are often defined by race, gender and sexuality, rather than relying on political parties or social class as 'cues' (Manning *et al.* 2017; Manning 2015; Loader 2007; Dalton 2000). This acknowledgement that "people rely less on habitual behaviour or social structure to guide action" (Manning 2015, p.107) means that factors such as party membership and electoral volatility could be framed in terms of change rather than decline; of unprecedentedly assertive decision-making rather than civic decay.

At this point we can see that the same topics (and even the same data) can be utilised by scholars to formulate markedly different theories of political engagement. Loader (2007) describes two academic narratives regarding this topic, thereby providing an invaluable intersection between two (often opposing) interpretations of the same evidence. The first academic narrative is *citizen disaffection*, which describes a political landscape characterised by disinterested citizens, (at best) ad-hoc engagement, distaste for politics and (simultaneously) unrealistic expectations as to what politicians can achieve and deliver. The second narrative, *cultural displacement*,

generally provides a more positive view on citizens' level of interest in politics, their critical capacity, as well as the impact of digital technology in facilitating additional opportunities for communication and network formation (Loader 2007). That is to say, a lack of political consensus (or ineffective 'interest aggregation', to borrow Webb's aforementioned terminology) is a sign of self-actualisation rather than apathy; or, more generally, *change* rather than *decline*. We will be examining the *citizen disaffection/cultural displacement* narratives on a more empirical basis later in the thesis (see Section 4.1). However, at this point it is useful to draw attention to these two academic narratives in demonstrating that factors such as voter turnout and party membership often carry distinct (and highly varied) meanings to citizens and scholars.

This point encourages a degree of nuance when addressing what might ostensibly constitute negative indicators of disengagement. Both of the narratives described by Loader illustrate a broad scholarly consensus on the notion that change *has occurred* in the realm of political participation; the difference lies in how this change is interpreted. In the context of fluctuating turnout figures Norris' contention that "it is often deeply problematic, indeed foolhardy, to infer psychological orientations from behaviour" (2011, p.20) is extremely relevant. Indeed, it is relevant within political science as a whole, in terms of problematising the supposedly self-evident. Norris' argument addresses a panoply of motivations for electoral participation; these include duty, habit and fear. These motivations are not self-evident and thus in each case require examination in order to avoid potentially harmful generalisations (such as perceiving authoritarian regimes – which often capture enormous turnouts – to be exemplars of political engagement). Judge, moreover, describes a "basic incongruity" in the assumption that "it does not matter what reasons are adduced for non-voting" (2014, p.35). The danger of this assumption is echoed in what politicians Jack Straw and John Prescott have both previously referred to as the "politics of contentment" (Judge 2014, p.35), essentially the notion that low turnout could even be thought of as a mark of satisfaction (or at least an absence of *dissatisfaction*).

Within this contested scholarly context, Coleman advocates "thinking of voting as an exotic, unsettled and problematic act that is most effectively apprehended through repeated redescription rather than semantic certitude" (2013, p.9). Voting, in other words, can be conceptualised as expressive in a manner that must be (re)examined contextually. Moreover, Colin Hay, in response to Putnam's association of falling turnout with declining civic values, argues that this position entails "a normative judgement (in this case, a condemnation) of that conduct" (2007, p.45). This presents us with a critique of studies (such as Putnam's) in which voting is conceptualised unequivocally as a *virtue*, a position criticised even in its empirical

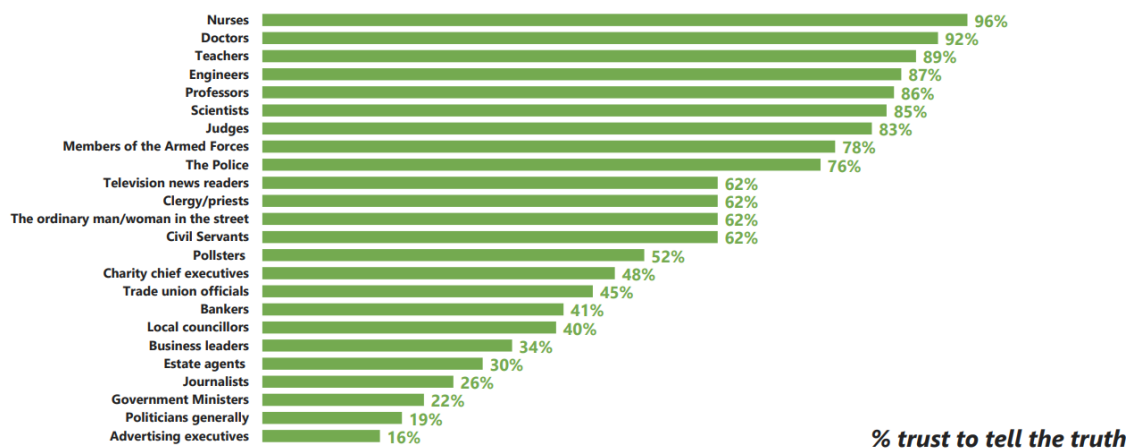
foundations as an over-simplification (Stoker 2006). Franklin, by contrast, discusses turnout vis-à-vis the changed character of *elections* rather than *electors*; problematising rational choice theory's assumption of the individual voter as "entirely divorced from any social context or peer group that might give her vote value" (2004, p.40). Rational choice theory's focus on self-interest as a primary motivator (Downs 1957) has already been substantially challenged on the basis of its accuracy and empirical claims (Hay 2007; Stoker 2006) and even the image of politics that it creates (Flinders 2012b). Specifically, it is criticised for suggesting "the absence of a public sector ethos", which "leads us to destroy the very contexts in which such an ethos might be exhibited" (Hay 2007, p.112).

Within this discussion of political (dis)engagement further nuance can be added through the following observation: that while political institutions may attract a certain degree of citizen dissatisfaction, democracy in general possesses an enduring aspirational value (Severs and Mattelaer 2014; Norris 2011; Stoker 2006). Norris illustrates a 'democratic deficit' between citizens' broader aspirations and how these are (perceptibly) realised by institutions (2011, p.4-5). Larry Diamond – while problematising levels of confidence in *applied* democracy – emphasises its continued desirability as a concept, remaining "globally ascendant in peoples' values and aspirations" (2015, p.154). Identifying and discussing a discrepancy between the widespread acknowledgement of the UK Parliament's role, and dissatisfaction with the *application* of that role, will be the focus of the following section. What will also be discussed is the 'tipping-off point' that Norris herself acknowledges when revisiting her earlier 'democratic deficit' thesis; that a continued gap between democratic aspirations and political satisfaction could "spread upward to corrode faith in democracy itself, like dry rot weakening the foundations from below" (2011, p.245). Citizens who are increasingly politically literate will (understandably) also be increasingly aware of the shortcomings of *applied* democracy as they perceive it, and demand more of their own political institutions. In this case, where can the line be drawn between aspirations and capacity? Flinders, in particular, emphasises the perils of an environment in which citizens' demands eclipse what politics can realistically deliver (2012a; 2012b). This issue of 'demands' and 'delivery' has already proved influential within citizens' perceptions of institutions, as well as the way in which public reactions to major events are framed and interpreted. The following sections will discuss this phenomenon in greater detail.

1.2 – Political engagement and the UK Parliament

Thus far we have discussed indicators and interpretations of political engagement, as well as means of problematising them. It is now important to consider these indicators with particular reference to *parliamentary engagement*, since engagement is a key determiner in the perceived (and self-perceived) legitimacy of this institution (Kelso 2007). The indicators of participation discussed in the previous section (and our means of interpreting them) are therefore highly pertinent in a parliamentary context, since they construct a basis of parliamentary legitimacy. Also of note is the concept of trust (as referenced in the Introduction), as a keystone requirement of representative democracy. Previous studies of trust – whether in relation to politicians or parliament(s) – would appear to justify concerns relating to legitimacy and public approval. Figure 1, for example, shows a broad spectrum of public trust toward several different professions:

Figure 1 – Levels of public trust in politicians alongside other professions



Source: Ipsos MORI (2018)

Politicians appear to attract a low degree of public trust, even in comparison to professions which approach cliché in this regard. The extent to which this represents a break from historical precedent is a moot point; Flinders (2012b, p.6) and Riddell (2010, p.545), for example, both observe that “[p]oliticians have never been popular”. In any case it is important to note the wording utilised within Figure 1: ‘politicians generally’. It has often been observed that there is a substantial discrepancy between trust of politicians in general and citizens’ trust of their local MPs (Norton 2013a, pp.149-150; Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons

2004, p.9). This distinction – between the *general* and the *local* – is also illustrated by the data below:

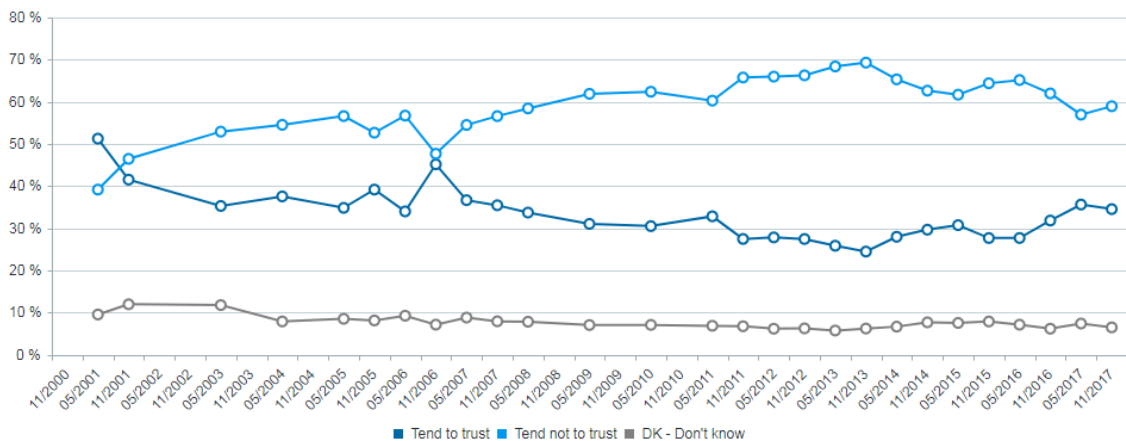
Table 2 – Comparison between trust in MPs in general, and trust in local MPs

	2004	2006	2009	Feb 2013	Jun 2013
	%	%	%	%	%
MPs in general					
Trust to tell the truth	27	30	20	23	21
Do not trust to tell the truth	67	60	76	70	72
Don't know	6	11	3	8	7
Your local MP					
Trust to tell the truth	47	48	40	n/a	51
Do not trust to tell the truth	45	39	44	n/a	35
Don't know	7	13	6	n/a	14

Source: Ipsos MORI (2013)

Citizens appear to judge politicians in a more inherently cynical (rather than critical) manner when thinking of them in an abstract sense. When citizens refer to a specific politician, however – and a local one, at that – the picture is very different. Norton argues that this discrepancy in perceptions (between general and local) could be attributable to citizens’ perspectives of “the local MP as a service provider, working on behalf of local people, whereas the perception of the House of Commons is one of empty green benches and adversarial conflict” (2013a, p.150). The importance of this term – *local* – can be understood variously, and is addressed specifically in Section 4.2. At this point we discern an argument that the relatability of an MP is incumbent upon their capacity to be (or appear) local; in other words (and somewhat paradoxically), *their distance from the institution of which they are a member*. Survey data on trust, relating to the UK Parliament specifically, gives some indication as to why ‘distancing’ oneself from the institution (as opposed to the locality) might be seen as politically advantageous:

Figure 2 – Trust in the UK Parliament



Source: Eurobarometer (2018b)

Uniformly low levels of trust in political institutions contributes to an overall impression that approval of Parliament – revisiting the discrepancies discussed in the previous section – is primarily theoretical. This notion is reinforced through a recent Audit of Political Engagement by the Hansard Society, which noted “a substantial majority (73%) believing [Parliament] is essential to democracy. However, overall satisfaction with the way Parliament works (30%) is now six points lower than when the first Audit was published in 2004” (2017, p.7). Ipsos MORI data (2011c) indicates that dissatisfaction with Parliament is a long-established phenomenon, having been consistently evident between 1995 and 2010. In discussing trust specifically, Easton points out that the concept of diffuse support – which encapsulates trust – “refers to evaluations of what an object is or represents - to the general meaning it has for a person – not of what it does” (1975, p.444). Easton’s study sought to differentiate between two types of support; firstly, ‘specific support’, relating to satisfaction with a particular incumbent even if the regime in general is treated with disdain (1975, p.438). This mindset is typically associated with a designated output; in other words, whether a citizen’s pre-determined demands are perceived to have been met (Easton 1975, p.438). The second form of support is that of ‘diffuse support’, which indicates a more fundamental (and durable) positivity towards the object (Easton 1975, pp.444-445). Easton points out that “diffuse support for the political authorities or regime will typically express itself in the form of trust or confidence in them” (1975, p.447).

Van der Meer’s concept of trust is particularly useful within this study, particularly its positing “that people do not simply trust or distrust solely because of their personality or their social standing; there is no ‘syndrome of trust’ in different objects” (2010, p.519). From this viewpoint

it is difficult (and inaccurate) to reduce ‘trust’, in an objective sense, to the individual’s ‘capacity’ for trust, or the institution’s ‘trustworthiness’. Van der Meer instead conceptualises trust as “a subjective evaluation of a relationship” (2010, p.519). This allows for an interpretation of trust as co-constitutive, which – also drawing on Easton’s aforementioned theory of ‘diffuse support’ – necessitates an examination of what Parliament *represents* as part of its encouragement of *trust* and *engagement*. Both terms, as mentioned in the Select Committee on Modernisation report (see Introduction), provide an impetus for greater parliamentary engagement efforts. It is important to point out that these efforts are very recent. Parliament has only possessed an official public engagement strategy since 2006; this five-year strategy (2006-2011) constituted the first concerted, institutional effort “to *inform* the public about the work and role of Parliament; to *promote* Parliament as an institution and explain why it should be valued; and to *listen* to the public by seeking and responding to feedback” (Walker 2011, emphasis in original). *Trust* was afforded especial focus in the second five-year strategy; a focus that, as Walker attests, was made particularly relevant by the 2009 expenses scandal (2011, p.278). Moreover, studies of *parliamentary* engagement have thus far focused upon its modes and applications, with “relatively little attention...upon what is being communicated to citizens about parliaments and upon the nature of the parliamentary institutions that citizens are expected to engage with” (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018, p.155).

The need for scholarly attention on precisely this topic – the *nature* of the Parliament that citizens are invited to engage with – is compounded by the fact that, as the practice of politics has changed, the institution of Parliament has likewise evolved. Leston-Bandeira’s outlining of the changing role of Parliament shows that engagement, now a key *modus operandi*, is more salient a topic than ever. Leston-Bandeira tracks Parliament’s evolution from the elite (and distant) “Gentlemen’s Club Parliament” in the 19th century through to today’s “Mediator Parliament”, characterised by a policy of openness and broad links with increasingly informed citizens (2016, p.5). Connecting citizens to governance, in this context, is a vital area of study because it constitutes an unprecedentedly large component of parliamentary policy. Educational efforts and resources have meanwhile been afforded greater institutional attention, along with visitor services and outreach campaigns. Public engagement has been incorporated into the core tasks of select committees (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015), while the example of the Petitions Committee implies citizen input as being, in some cases, a *raison d’être*. However, this new-found parliamentary engagement remit is difficult to negotiate smoothly, given the inherent instability of politics (Griffith and Leston-Bandeira 2012, p.498; Leston-Bandeira 2014, p.7). Indeed, within research conducted by Leston-Bandeira, Parliament is

described by one official as “a way of managing disagreement and that makes it very difficult to articulate exactly what its role and objective should be” (2016, p.12). These points reflect the difficulty of managing the simultaneity of political demands (defined by division and transience) and historical demands (defined by coherence and continuity) within one institution.

Increasingly informed citizens, alongside a Parliament that has been unprecedentedly active in engaging them, represents a valuable area of inquiry for parliamentary scholars. The methods by which parliamentary engagement is facilitated represent a key case of modernisation, in the case of e-petitions for example. Historically, signing a petition is second only to voting in terms of its popularity as a political expression (Fox 2012, p.878). Nevertheless, Hough notes “the huge numbers of petitions that were submitted to parliament during the nineteenth century and...the sharp fall in the number of petitions raised during the twentieth century” (2013, p.216). Until recent years, petitions were typically viewed by politicians as an ineffectual means of participation (Miller 2009, pp.162-163). With this in mind, it is notable that an e-petition calling for a second EU Membership Referendum has amassed more than 4,000,000 signatures (Healey 2016). As Leston-Bandeira notes, “[i]f a petition achieves 100,000 signatures, the Committee considers whether it should hold a debate about it. As of 6 February 2017, the Petitions Committee had held 30 such debates (2017)”. Thus e-petitions “have quickly become part of the online repertoire of citizen groups in the United Kingdom”; not by virtue of numbers alone, but also for their ‘rippling effect’ on encouraging subsequent discussions (Chadwick 2012, p.61-62).²

Parliamentary engagement has therefore achieved some measure of success in harnessing new technologies, even to the extent of re-invigorating traditional participatory methods. This is all the more notable considering the history of Parliament’s application of technology for the purposes of engagement (or even transparency); “although the technical ability to broadcast parliamentary proceedings existed as early as the 1920s, sound broadcasting did not begin until 1978, and television cameras were not permitted into the Commons until 1989” (Kelso 2009, p.337). Norton also points out MPs’ initially slow utilisation (or, indeed, comprehension) of web communication, noting a memorable instance in which an MP’s researcher was asked whether “today’s e-mails have come in yet?” (2007, p.356). In examining even more recent communication methods, politicians’ use of social media has (justifiably or otherwise) attracted a great deal of debate, from citizens and scholars alike. “The advent of social media”, as Manning *et al.* note, “has made the cultivation of an authentic image easier for politicians but it can also

² See Section 5.3 for a discussion of specific cases in which parliamentary e-petitions have effected political change, with particular reference to petitions on high heels and workplace dress codes, and brain tumour research.

undermine their claims of eminence, professionalism and authority” (2017, p.14). On an institutional level, Leston-Bandeira and Bender observe that parliamentary “social media accounts are mainly about providing information about parliamentary business, embodying therefore a passive type of engagement” (2013, p.294). The following section will discuss the (relative) importance of ‘informing’ within the process of engagement more broadly, as well as the paradox exemplified by politicians’ use of social media: specifically, reconciling claims of authenticity *and* eminence.

1.3 – Interpretations of effective (and strengthened) engagement

While this chapter has, thus far, discussed academics’ theoretical discussions of engagement, the next two sections of the chapter deal with more ‘procedural’ discussions; first and foremost, how engagement is facilitated (and potentially improved). Alongside these discussions it is also important to acknowledge boundaries (i.e. limits) as to how much engagement citizens may actually desire. The concept of ‘stealth democracy’ addresses precisely this topic; the theory was first put forward by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) and – as another example of how variously low turnout can be interpreted (see Section 1.1) – specifically examines what citizens actually want from politics, and what they are realistically prepared to commit to it. Contemporary participation among the *polis*, from a ‘stealth democracy’ standpoint, is characterised by a desire for influence rather than involvement, and for clearly-defined points of entry and exit (Fox 2009; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2001). In the specific context of the UK Parliament, Fox references the ‘stealth democracy’ model while noting that true participation is often visible only when citizens perceive their own self-interest to be in jeopardy (2009, p.675-676). Citizen involvement is therefore hindered by the basic observation that “[f]or many, at least as far as conventional politics is concerned, it is enough to be simply spectators” (Mair 2013, p.37). We can see a resulting point of consistent emphasis amongst scholarly recommendations for new avenues of engagement; that they not overlook the likely extent of what citizens (outside an especially engaged minority) might commit to them.

The ‘stealth democracy’ model hints at the numerous complexities, paradoxes, and outright contradictions that scholars have often identified when examining citizens’ demands on political institutions. These demands have frequently been seen to outstrip what can realistically be delivered; at least, without any greater degree of public sacrifice. For example, Flinders observes an inherent contradiction when “[t]he public demand better services but are not willing to pay higher taxes” (2012a, p.15). Several studies have attributed these unrealistic expectations to

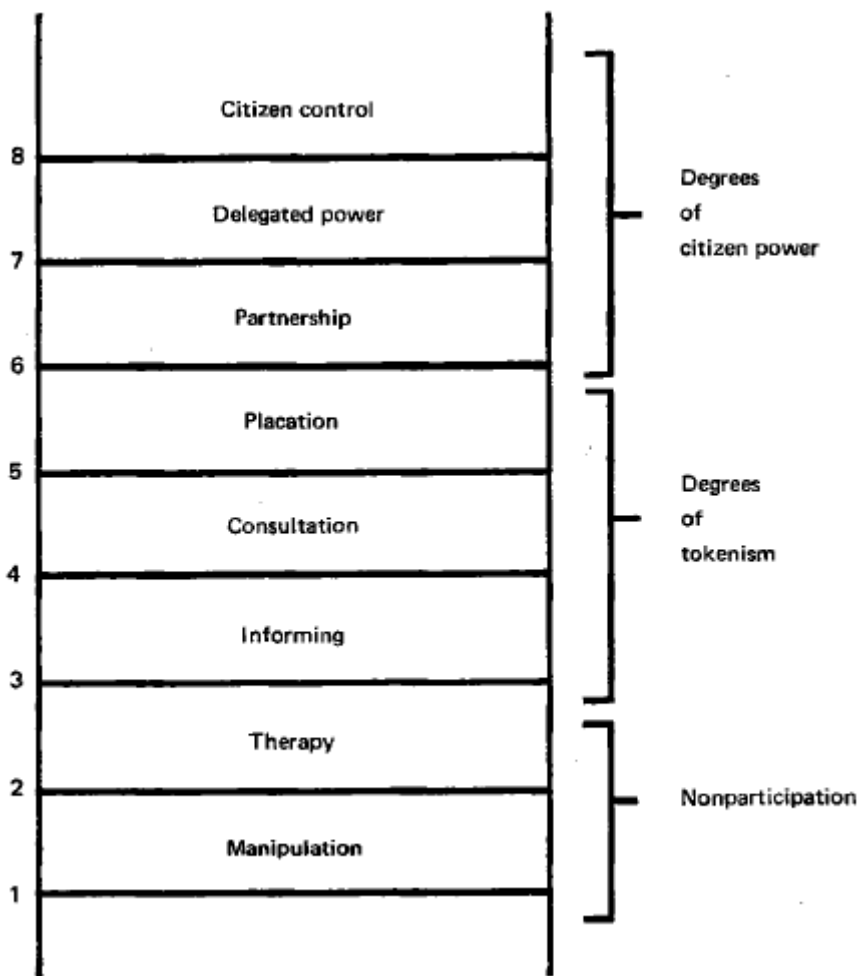
modern consumer society, and the citizenry's resulting distaste for compromise (Flinders 2012a; Hay 2007; Bale, Taggart and Webb 2006). These expectations are also levelled at politicians, who according to this framework must be "ordinary enough to be representative, while extraordinary enough to be representatives" (Coleman 2005, p.15). This is highly relevant to the topic of social media communication discussed previously, and would appear to lend a certain inevitability to disappointment. Norton reinforces the notion of increasingly contradictory demands put on politicians as public figures; specifically the constituency work that "offers certain benefits to parliamentarians" yet is ultimately "not cost-free" (2002, p.12). Constituency work inevitably results in a large number of empty spaces in the Commons chamber; these scenes, often broadcasted by the media with no context, mean that "electors fail to link the empty green benches with the fact that MPs increasingly have to spend time in their offices dealing with constituency casework" (Norton 2013a, p.150).

These paradoxical expectations and perceptions are particularly apparent in the event of public outrages. The 2009 expenses scandal is a prominent case in point here, given its specific relevance to Parliament as well as perceptions of politicians (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016; Manning 2015; Manning and Holmes 2013; Norton 2013a; Webb 2013; Flinders 2012b; Duffy and Foley 2011; Fielding 2011; Riddell 2010). As Fielding points out, the scandal's significance lay not only in its revelations, but also its "slott[ing] very easily into an already-established narrative in which politics and corruption were close bedfellows" (2011, p.227). This narrative was also seen to encourage the departure of MPs who *had not been involved* in the scandal, but had instead "come to the conclusion that the prejudices affixed to the behaviour of politicians had eviscerated their capacity to make a positive difference" (Flinders 2012b, p.15). It is also important to note that "a desire to politically tar and feather the sinners" did not subsequently manifest into more positive engagement and interest (Fox 2009, p.676); engagement, in this instance, was characterised by *reaction* rather than proactive involvement. This is highly reminiscent of the 'stealth democracy' model, as well as Mair's aforementioned characterisation of the citizenry as 'spectators'. Both viewpoints emphasise contemporary engagement as (at best) ad-hoc, and often underpinned by narratives that 'pre-frame' perceptions of Parliament, politicians, and their actions.

In many cases these narratives are described as a by-product of mediatisation and 'soundbite' politics – itself driven by a media-based barrage of isolated information – which promotes a short-term, negative and reactive view of politics (Flinders 2016; Jennings, Stoker and Twyman 2016; Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016; van Biezen 2014; Ampofo, Anstead and O'Loughlin 2011; Loader 2007). When discussing political scandals, political literacy and (objective) information

are often described as the most precious (i.e. absent) currencies. In the case of the aforementioned expenses scandal, Fielding notes that – outside of having their suspicions of corrupt politicians ‘confirmed’ – citizens remained largely ignorant of the actual details (2011, p.227). A self-fulfilling prophecy is visible here: congruence between a political scandal and an accepted narrative serves to *reinforce that same narrative*. From Fielding’s point of view, what entrenches the narrative is a lack of information and/or understanding, which provides a useful entry point into discussing the relationship between information and engagement. Parliament’s contemporary social media activity, and its broader engagement strategy, have – as already discussed – shown an awareness of the need to inform *in order to* engage. This notion is illustrated in Sherry Arnstein’s widely-cited ‘ladder of participation’ which, within its descriptions of “gradations of citizen participation”, implies the necessity of achieving one ‘level’ of participation before the next (1969, p.217):

Figure 3 – Sherry Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’



The process of ‘informing’ is described by Arnstein as the first step in ‘tokenism’, in which citizens are at least enabled “to hear and to have a voice” (1969, p.217); this is put forward as the first step in meaningful engagement, a position echoed by Leston-Bandeira (2014, pp.4-5). Walker also supports the claim that knowledge, openness, and relevance are key steps in attaining political engagement, all of which are underpinned by *informing* (2011, pp.272-276). The gradations of engagement described by Arnstein, Leston-Bandeira and Walker all emphasise the importance of information, education and literacy. These qualities – or lack thereof – also constitute the basis of Fielding and Fox’s aforementioned lamentations on political scandals, and the narratives underpinning them. Also feeding into these narratives (which, as described in Chapter 2, are both enduring and appealing) is a desire for simplicity that is devoid of reflection (and even reality), which – as discussed in Section 1.1 – can facilitate the onset of populism.

Another important conceptual contribution of Arnstein’s model (in the context of this chapter) is the observation that certain techniques, while labelled as participatory mechanisms, do not actually constitute participation. Arnstein warns us against ‘manipulation’ and ‘therapy’, “contrived by some to substitute for genuine participation” (1969, p.217). Distinguishing different grades of engagement is also used in Curtin and Meijer’s work on political transparency, which is broadly divided into ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ forms. Curtin and Meijer (2006, p.115) draw a sharp line between these two processes:

1. ‘Thin’ transparency: the opening up of institutions to facilitate the *possibility* for interaction
2. ‘Thick’ transparency: the pursuit of a more active form of transparency that *encourages* an institution-citizen dynamic

Curtin and Meijer point out that “policymakers may stick to strict procedures and avoid innovative solutions” (2006, p.120) as a response to opening up their own institutions, since “[t]ransparency does not guarantee a favourable press” (2006, p.118). John Parkinson echoes this argument from a more architectural standpoint when discussing the physical accessibility and openness of legislative buildings; in many cases, the symbolic ‘opening up’ of these buildings is accompanied by a reduction in the amount of administrative work that takes place inside them (2013, p.444). Administrative responsibilities are subsequently transferred to other buildings, which remain inaccessible to the public (Parkinson 2013, p.444). Curtin and Meijer, as well as Parkinson, thereby observe that what may initially be presented (by legislatures) as greater transparency may, in reality, be a more conscious form of institutional opacity. Instead, it can be seen as a process of safeguarding. ‘Thin’ transparency is therefore problematic in terms of meaningful engagement, since it represents a highly reductive form of citizen interaction.

Relating back to Arnstein's model, we can see – in all of these cases – a clear and crucial distinction between engagement as a premise and engagement as a meaningful practice.

This point is especially relevant to Parliament's increased engagement efforts, and its utilisation of new technologies in order to do so. For example, taking into account our previous discussions of e-petitions and social media, it is important to note that they do not necessarily constitute *an addition to* the volume of discernible parliamentary engagement. Previous studies have argued that active users of these social media channels are typically those who are already politically engaged (Smith 2009). Nor should we ignore the obvious caveat that, even in advanced industrial democracies, access to the internet is by no means universal (Smith 2009; Norris 2001). As a result, there is a risk of drawing conclusions based on engagement channels that are not accessed by (or not accessible to) a large and skewed proportion of the UK population (Stoker 2006, pp.192-193). This speaks to a broader academic tendency – particularly prevalent in the late 1990s and early 2000s – of examining digital technologies in an abstract manner, without contextualising them as being subject to broader societal norms (Chadwick 2012; Loader and Mercea 2011; Loader 2007; Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003). Similarly, social media discussions have often been described as creating and entrenching an 'echo chamber' effect, in which communicators seek out sources of agreement rather than challenge (Williamson 2016; Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015; Wiersma 2015; Duffy and Foley 2011; Loader and Mercea 2011; Smith 2009; Williamson 2009).

Nevertheless, the increasing volume and plurality of digital communication holds significant potential not only for political engagement, but for undermining phenomena such as the 'echo chamber' as well. Research conducted by Dubois and Blank found that those who are "not politically interested *and* who do not use diverse media are more likely to be in an echo chamber...This is an argument that an echo chamber exists, *but for a subset of the population*" (2018, p.741, emphasis added). Similarly, though the population of internet users in the UK is skewed in terms of factors such as age and disability, these gaps have appeared to be narrowing in recent years (Office for National Statistics 2018b). As the UK's digital accessibility increases (Office for National Statistics 2016), digital modes of parliamentary engagement are likely to become more numerous and, crucially, more demographically inclusive. In this context, the potential for increased dialogue – as an effective form of political and parliamentary engagement – is considerable. Considering this point – alongside the importance of *informing*, and of active engagement – the following section will provide a coherent definition of engagement. This definition will also take account of our previous discussions and observations

on the current landscape of political engagement, Parliament's existing efforts, and citizens' perceptions and interpretations.

1.4 – Towards a definition of parliamentary engagement

Drawing upon the conceptualisations of engagement that have been discussed thus far, this section elaborates on a new definition of engagement. Impetus for this (re)definition is drawn from the fact that phenomena such as disengagement, and especially apathy, are all too often accepted (by citizens and scholars) as social truths, with little or no reflection on their empirical validity (Dean 2014). In this sense there is an argument that, if political engagement is indeed diminished, scholars must accept some degree of culpability. Much political science material is, as Riddell observes, “self-referential as well as self-reverential, and often unreadable for anyone but a specialist” (2010, p.552). Flinders, meanwhile, laments the notion that “academics appear unable to enter the fray and promote a more optimistic, or at the very least constructive, view of politics” (2012b, p.14). Flinders' perception of the need to ‘reimagine’ politics (2016) is, in its chosen terminology, knowingly indebted to the writings of C. Wright Mills, who once observed that the ‘ivory tower’ of academia serves only “to empty politics and keep it empty” (1959, p.183). This ‘emptiness’ does not seem to have improved a great deal in the last half-century, given Flinders' diagnosis (in 2016) of a contemporary problem that was identified by Mills almost six decades earlier. Engagement is shown to be an equally pertinent issue for academics, who – like the citizens they study – are also capable of disengagement. Political scientists must therefore be put forward as a vital component in ‘filling up’ (to borrow Mills' terminology) broader societal understandings of politics.

In order to propose a new definition of engagement we must clarify what does *not* constitute engagement. One of the consistent points of emphasis within this chapter is the distinction between engagement and voting. In other words, that an individual can be engaged without being a voter and, by extension, can vote without (necessarily) being engaged. The importance of this distinction can be illustrated by the following exchange:

Interviewer (IR): Why do you still vote Labour, sir?

Interviewee (IE): ...I just vote, is all...

IR: Just habit?

IE: Yeah!

(Harris and Domokos 2016)

The above conversation is taken from research conducted on behalf of *The Guardian* by documentarians John Harris and John Domokos. Despite being a regular voter, the interviewee displays no reflectiveness as to the process of voting; as he freely admits, voting is a habit rather than an expression of engagement. The political context that we have explored thus far is characterised by individualised, self-actualising politics, and a decline (or increased volatility) in many of the practices that are typically used as indicators of engagement. Though voting has been found to be a habitual practice (Coppock and Green 2016; Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Green and Shachar 2000) this conception is incongruous with a model of engagement that, as we will discuss, must be *maintained* as a dynamic.

The maintenance of an engagement dynamic through dialogue is an invaluable point of emphasis. Coleman, for example, envisages democracy (and its application through the political process) as an “ongoing conversation” (2005, p.8) and is careful to distinguish engagement and democratic dialogue from “‘monologue in disguise’, presented as if it were a conversation” (2004, p.115). The concept of a ‘monologue’ is antithetical to engagement, since it does not describe (or require) a two-way relationship. A ‘monologue’ is instead akin to ‘broadcasting’, a term that describes ‘one-to-many’ communication, and one that is utilised – especially within the context of digital engagement – as a marker of ineffectiveness (Marsh 2016; Wiersma 2015; Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013; Smith 2009; Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons 2004). Broadcasting is also referenced more generally – outside of a digital context – as an enduring ethos of political communication, and one that stands at odds with effective engagement. Coleman is highly critical of “the broadcast-megaphone model”, which lacks “the requisite depth and richness of interactive communication in the age of the internet” (2005, p.9). Broadcasting and unidirectionality thus constitute an antithesis to meaningful engagement as it is understood within this thesis, which – in analytical terms – will examine engagement initiatives with a view to establishing the extent of their mutuality.

In presenting our own distinctive definition of engagement we can instead refer back to the distinctions employed by van der Meer in his approach to ‘trust’ (Section 1.2); as “a subjective evaluation of a relationship” (2010, p.519). Approaching engagement in a similar manner avoids a conceptualisation of engagement as a *correspondence* – as a process that citizens and institutions enact or exchange – or as a form of habitual input. Engagement, instead, exists in the form of a dynamic *between* institutions and individuals, and as such is a co-constitutive, dialogic process. Van Wessel, in a similar fashion, addresses engagement as “a dynamic between a citizen and the democracy she/he is trying to understand”, and as “an embodied achievement, contextually embedded” (2016, p.1). This emphasis on contextualisation, and understanding

through the individual generation of meaning, is central to theories of semiotics, or the process of meaning-making. It is a discipline that is highly relevant to engagement, since it concerns the role of dynamics and contexts, and the importance of both in informing how individuals and entities can relate to each other. A great deal of contemporary mainstream literature on engagement focuses on relatability which is, in turn, underpinned by how people (can) understand, interpret, and connect themselves to politics (van Wessel 2016; Coleman 2013; Flinders 2012a; Hay 2007; Stoker 2006). Discussions of semiotics, of trust as encompassing what an institution *represents*, and the importance of citizens' interpretations of politics, and what it means (to them) leads us to draw heavily, throughout this thesis, on representation literature (and symbolic representation in particular) in defining and discussing engagement.

The theoretical framework for symbolic representation was provided by Hanna Pitkin's *Concept of Representation* (1967), which remains a foundational touchstone. Pitkin's theoretical groundwork (on representation in general) has been subject to extensive critique by academics such as Michael Saward, who stress a more performative and – even more pertinent to this thesis – *dynamic* element to representation. This performativity is encapsulated by the theory of a 'representative claim' and the necessity of an audience to validate it (Saward 2010). From the 'claim-making' viewpoint, representation is a performative construct rather than a universal truth. This represents a substantial departure from Pitkin's original conceptualisation; a "three-dimensional structure in the middle of a dark enclosure" which we may only glimpse through "flash-bulb photographs" (1967, p.10). Nevertheless Pitkin's discussion of *symbolic representation* – as representation ('speaking for') on the basis of inference and suggestion rather than resemblance (1967, p.92-111) – remains highly influential within an area of political science that emphasises the role of symbolism, ritual and ceremony within political practice and institutions (Leston-Bandeira 2016; Rai 2015; 2010; Waylen 2010; Parkinson 2009).³ Loewenberg points out that symbolic representation is distinctly (and continually) significant in terms of the inferences made by institutions:

Although it would appear to be the most abstract aspect of representation, symbolic representation finds a specific application in the contribution that legislatures make to nation building, to giving a set of separate communities the sense that they belong together as a nation (2011, pp.33-34).

What Parliament represents, infers and contributes to citizen perceptions is therefore a crucial consideration within discussions of engagement. The 'meaning' of Parliament exists in its

³ This acknowledgement of the 'symbolic' is by no means universal within political science; for example, the term remains frequently associated with 'artificiality' (Feola 2016; Papadopoulos 2012) rather than the co-construction of meaningfulness.

meaning *to citizens* (or even to its inhabitants) and as such is not 'set' or self-explanatory. Saward, in emphasising this point, critiques the traditional notion that "[p]olitical makers of representations tend to foreclose or fix the meanings of themselves and their actions" (2006, pp.303-304) and adopts a (re)conceptualisation of meaning as reflexive and co-constitutive. This argument can be traced back to Stuart Hall (1997), who stressed the co-constitutive nature of meaning based, in turn, on Saussure's pioneering work on semiotics. Building on this point, the notion that engagement must have an audience is embraced by academics who stress a performative element to the political process. Shirin Rai expresses this mindset below:

[P]erformances in political institutions are carried out for both the audience present – 'the empirically present listeners' – and the 'ghostly audiences' outside the spatial parameters of performance (2015, p.1188).

Thus, even in instances where a physical audience is not physically present, the 'act' of politics remains a relationship-based concept characterised by an actor and an audience. As a result, this concept of engagement as a semiotic relationship facilitates a much more individualised, contextual approach to assessing engagement. The essentiality of representation to this model of engagement is two-way, since (effective) representation actually *requires* participation in order to function (Urbinati 2006; Young 2000). As we will discuss in later chapters, the co-constitutive nature of representation *and* engagement can inform each other to a great extent; moreover, their conceptual overlaps help to construct our own theoretical framework.

Parliamentary engagement will therefore be defined throughout this thesis as *an ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)*. This definition encompasses and amalgamates two distinct interpretations of engagement, which have formed the focus of our literature review:

- Engagement as a process (e.g. an institution adopting a policy of engagement)
- Engagement as an outcome (e.g. quantifiable factors such as voting and party membership which indicate but do not encapsulate engagement)

Through this theoretical lens, engagement will be interpreted as a process, but always with a view to the relevant objective and the *meaning* of that objective. How engagement is perceived by citizens – and, indeed, what politics *means* to them – will be a key component of the fieldwork conducted for this thesis, and will lead to a re-examination of the concepts of engagement cited within this chapter. This emphasis on meaningfulness also differentiates our theory of engagement from the notion of habit; as a process that is enacted largely for its own sake (characterised by repetition), the 'meaning' of which is assumed to be self-evident. Also antithetical to meaningful engagement – as it is understood in this thesis – is broadcasting and

the one-to-many mindset, hence the use of the term 'dialogue'. The term 'individual(s)', meanwhile, reflects the importance of dialogue as a specific form of communication, and of individual interpretations as underpinning an engagement dynamic. The term 'institution' reflects the fact that "elections, parties and parliaments, among the core institutions of representative democracy, [which] are failing in the eyes of many citizens" (Alonso, Keane and Merkel 2011, p.9), collectively inform the context of this study and its discussions.

Conclusions

This literature review chapter has provided an overview of key academic discussions and interpretations of political and parliamentary engagement. In addition, we have problematised the assumptions and information that these interpretations draw on. This has required examining some key facts and figures relating to political engagement indicators, as well as *re-examining* what they indicate. In doing so, we have shown the enormous variance within political science in interpreting similar sets of evidence, and thereby reinforced the value of the *citizen disaffection/cultural displacement* narratives as a means of describing this variance. Through seeking to address these varying scholarly interpretations, we have constructed a coherent definition of engagement; one that, crucially, takes account of citizen interpretations as part of a discussion on what politics and engagement 'mean'. This definition forms the basis of our theoretical framework, which the following chapter will elaborate, as well as helping to constitute – in more empirical terms – the basis upon which parliamentary engagement efforts can be judged (even in a prospective sense) as effective or ineffective. The following chapter – which describes our theoretical framework – provides further discussions on symbolic representation, citizens' interpretations of politics and Parliament, and the narratives that underpin these overlapping concepts. As a result, we will be well-placed to discuss parliamentary engagement in terms of an institution's capacity to shape and influence underlying (pre)conceptions.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework: conceptualising political engagement through narratives

Every life is in many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves.

James Joyce – *Ulysses*

Introduction

The preceding chapter detailed two academic narratives of engagement, for the purpose of contextualising this thesis within engagement literature and its dominant schools of thought. It also discussed the centrality of narratives in formulating citizens' interpretations of political crises, such as the expenses scandal. This chapter, in outlining our theoretical framework, will propose narratives as integral to understanding not only the literature on engagement, but engagement itself. In doing so, we acknowledge several innovative studies that acknowledge the importance of narratives, rituals, symbols and performances within politics and representation. We also identify several instances of parliamentary representation in which narratives and stories are explicitly deployed as communicative techniques. Narratives are therefore central to our theoretical framework because political science and Parliament have already acknowledged their value, conceptually and pragmatically. The chapter begins by outlining key academic definitions of narratives, and the relevance of narratives to engagement. One of the principle contentions of this chapter is that narratives – like representation and political engagement – describe a co-constitutive process (in this case, between a narrator and a reader/audience). In describing this process, and clarifying the difference between narrative and storytelling (and the relevance of both to political engagement) this chapter will propose an innovative visual analogy (utilising fractals) to demonstrate *engaging storytelling*. The analogy itself incorporates the theories and contentions discussed throughout this chapter into a clear and widely-applicable visual model. Another key function of this model will be to amalgamate two general scholarly interpretations of narrative: as a means of presenting/comprehending information, and as a means of connecting to (i.e. engaging with) information. The reason for employing fractals within this theoretical framework is their conductivity to analogising the appeal of a narrative: specifically, its capacity to contextualise and reflect a reader/audience.

2.1 – The meaning of a narrative

A narrative is a socio-culturally ubiquitous phenomenon; within an “infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times...there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative” (Barthes 1975, p.1). The ubiquity of narratives is derived from the fact that *narratives make sense*; that is to say, they encourage and facilitate the interpretation and processing of information. Human beings contextualise and structure the world through narratives, which are “a way of knowing carved out of experience, experience as it is inflected by particular cultural, geopolitical, and material circumstances” (Langellier 1999, p.136). Narratives constitute widely-accepted truths and social structures (Young 2000; Langellier 1999; Lyotard 1984) and, in this respect, they “are not called stories. They are called reality” (MacKinnon 1996, p.235). Narratives can therefore be conceptualised as a means of *situated knowledge*: a basis of subjective, intuitive certainty and experiential sense-making. In this respect they facilitate an impression of order and (perhaps more importantly) meaning, in response to disparate and even random information. A narrative implies not only a story, but also a sequence and, by extension, structure; for this reason it “*is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*” (Abbott 2008, p.3).

This conduciveness between narrative and the organisation of time is especially relevant in childhood and early cognitive development. The influence of psychoanalytical studies has been truly profound in this respect (Campbell 1968, p.4), while the discipline of Psychoanalysis is an effective means for explicating the adherence of political opinions to narratives and, by extension, the trauma associated with breaking from them (Dean 2014). Alasdair MacIntyre notes the way in which a young child, through narrative, “learns how to engage himself with and perceive an order in social reality” (1977, p.457). Moreover, without this crucial step of cognitive development, children are “unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words” (MacIntyre 2007, p.201). Martha Nussbaum proposes that narratives are “essential in cultivating the child’s sense of her own aloneness, her inner world” (2001, p.236), illustrating the simultaneous function of narratives in external *and* internal comprehension. The implication that self-understanding facilitates engagement with the external world is a crucial point of emphasis, and one that will consistently inform this theoretical framework. This engagement through narrative is highly interpretative and individualised, as concluded by MacIntyre, who observes that “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (2007, p.16).

A narrative can therefore be conceptualised to be “as Proust puts it, an “optical instrument” through which the reader may focus on certain personal realities” (Nussbaum 2001, p.243). This

emphasis on *personal realities* is an indispensable one, because it emphasises the subjective nature of many truths and realities (which constitute situated knowledge) that this and subsequent chapters will address. It also reinforces the importance of *experience* to a discussion of narrative, supported by the many texts that emphasise ‘self-recognition’ as part of the narrative process, or what Walter Benjamin describes (rather beautifully) as the “reader see[ing] himself living this written life” (2006, p.372) when an effective narrative is experienced. These observations are important to understanding narrative – like representation (see Chapter 2) – as co-constitutive; in other words, not simply ‘existent’. Barthes succinctly describes how the sense of time *and* meaning that a narrative facilitates is incumbent on each reader’s experience:

Each point in the narrative radiates in several directions at a time: when James Bond orders a whiskey while waiting for the plane, this whiskey considered as an index takes on a polysemic value; it is a sort of symbolic node which attracts and combines several signifieds (modernity, wealth, leisure). But considered as a functional unit, the ordering of a whiskey must work its way through several relays (consumption, waiting, departure) before it reaches its final meaning: the unit is "claimed" by the whole of narrative, yet on the other hand, the narrative "hangs together" only through the distortion and irradiation of its units. (1975, p.267)

The connection of the narrative (and its constituent ‘units’) to symbolic ‘signifieds’, as well as a sequential, structured sense of time, is determined by the experience of the reader/audience; specifically, how they experience the story narrated to them. The term ‘reader/audience’ – to which we will refer throughout this thesis – relates to the importance of conceptualising narratives in terms of both ‘specific’ (i.e. to an individual) and ‘broad’ appeal (i.e. to an audience), and acknowledging their relevance to each other. It also emphasises the relevance of this discussion beyond purely literary narratives.

When we refer to time in a narrative context (as in the extract above), we describe “a sort of *logical time*...bearing little resemblance to real time” (Barthes 1975, p.267, emphasis in original) but nevertheless exemplifying sequence and structure. We will provide a visual analogy of this relationship between the symbolic and structural, in order to (1) further clarify the distinctive effect(s) of a narrative, and (2) lay additional groundwork for the visual analogies we will employ in the final section of this chapter. The ‘symbolic nodes’ (i.e. individual moments or ‘units’ interpreted by the reader/audience) that Barthes refers to exert a profound effect on the narrative, warping its structure and simultaneously imbuing it with shape and form. The acceptance of these resultant narratives – and, by extension, their becoming entrenched as social truths – is incumbent upon familiarity and relatability; “what Wittgenstein calls ‘family resemblances’, easily available ‘dominant’ codes rather than those that are unfamiliar and against the grain, which is how power is reproduced” (Rai 2015, p.1188). The meaning of the

narrative, therefore, is left to the reader/audience and their consultation of what is meaningful, familiar, and *relatable to them*; to recall MacIntyre's phrasing, considering themselves 'part' of the story. This incumbency of meaning upon the experience of the reader/audience holds a great deal of importance; not only for a discussion of narrative and its relevance to political engagement, but as a means of visually conceptualising narrative as structurally warped and constituted by moments of subjective, symbolic resonance.

In visualising this interplay, Iris Marion Young's (2000) discussions of the intersection between narrative and representation – heavily influenced by Derrida – are crucial, particularly when addressing the concept of the *trace*. The relevance of representation (the pretext of Derrida's discussion) to theories of narrative is reinforced by the contention that “[e]verything begins by referring back (*par le renvoi*), that is to say, does not begin” (Derrida 1982, p.324, emphasis in original).⁴ The *renvoi* Derrida alludes to – translating literally as ‘referring back’ – is the *trace*, described by Young as

...a moment of temporalization that carries past and future with it...traces of the history of relationships that produced it, and its current tendencies anticipate future relationships. (2000, p.127)

The intersection between Derrida's concept of the *trace* as a continual ‘referring-back’ and the theory of narrative that we have discussed so far lies in the existence of a cultural heritage, providing a “stock of stories which constitute [a society's] initial dramatic resources” (MacIntyre 2007, p.216).⁵ These *traces* form the basis of what we might conceptualise as the linear, structural characteristic(s) of a narrative, shaped and distorted – through our reading of Barthes – by moments of symbolic resonance.⁶

An analogy of this process has been designed accordingly, and is provided in Figure 4 below. In this (somewhat simplified) visualisation we can see the interplay between symbolic resonance

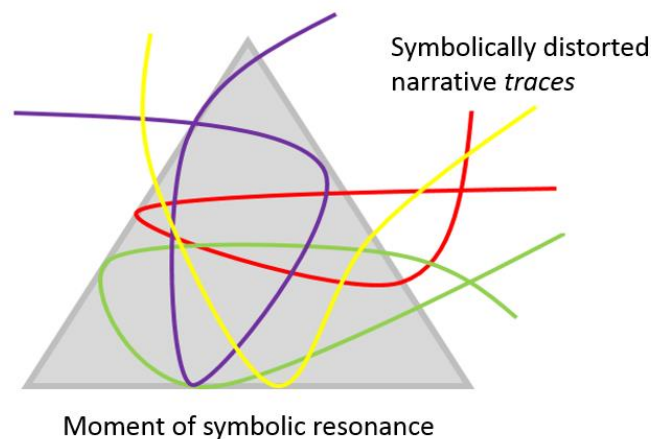
⁴ We will return to this specific point in Section 2.4, representing as it does a useful analogy for existing fractal interpretations of narrative.

⁵ Benjamin also calls our attention to importance of the *trace*, when attesting that “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (2006, p.367). The importance of this point to *storytelling* (as opposed to *narrative*, which remains our primary focus at present) will be discussed later in this chapter, and in a more empirical fashion in Chapter 5.

⁶ The extent to which narrative describes a ‘linear’ process (and, by extension, the extent to which it is shaped by the more subjective symbolism of its constituent ‘moments’) is a broader debate that is outside of the scope of this thesis. For a fascinating discussion of Arendt's dispensation with narrative linearity (along with the primacy of heritage that scholars such as MacIntyre emphasise) and alternative her theory of ‘crystallisation’, see: Benhabib 1990. Arendt's approach, writes Benhabib, strives to “break the chain of narrative continuity, to shatter chronology as the natural structure of narrative, to stress fragmentariness, historical dead ends, failures and ruptures” (1990, pp.181-182).

and narrative *traces*, the former (derived from the reader/audience's concept of 'the familiar') serving to warp and shape the trajectory of the latter (derived from existing cultural touchpoints). The moment (or 'symbolic node') is represented as a shape through which the *trace* travels and is accordingly distorted, shaped, and given form.

Figure 4 – A demonstration of narrative based on the paths of certain traces through a distortive 'lens' of symbolic representation, shaping the course of each narrative trace



The significance of Figure 4 derives from its illustration of *traces* as constituting the 'body' of a narrative (represented by the coloured lines) which are subject to profound changes in direction through a sufficiently meaningful (to the reader/audience) moment of symbolic resonance. Thus, the significance of the symbolic is its lensing, warping effect on narrative. We will be applying this notion of 'warping' later in the chapter when discussing our fractal theory of (effective) storytelling.

To relate Figure 4 back to Barthes' James Bond analogy, the course (*trace*) of the narrative is warped by the particular 'signifieds' attached (*by the reader/audience*) to a moment in which Bond orders a whiskey; in other words, what the reader/audience discerns in the meaning of a given moment. John Parkinson provides a historical example of this process, citing the symbolic effect of the Berlin Airlift in warping (and shaping) the narrative associations attached to the Tempelhof Airport. The 'trajectory' of its narrative *trace(s)* up to this point were guided by its historical association between the Airport and the Third Reich (which provided the commissions for its construction). Subsequent to the Airlift, however, the symbolism of the building changed, incorporating anti-authoritarian resistance, and hope (Parkinson 2009). The example of the Airport and the Airlift therefore represent "a perfect example of the way that events and their associated narratives can shift the meaning of a symbol dramatically in a relatively short space

of time” (Parkinson 2009, p.8). Parkinson’s study of the Tempelhof Airport thus illustrates the value of encompassing narrative into a study of representation. It demonstrates a salient notion; that both narratives and representative entities (i.e. symbols) are semiotically inconsistent, subject to surrounding events and inherently malleable. Having discussed (and visually analogised) academic interpretations of narratives, and unpacked the concept in more theoretical detail, the following section will apply its relevance to Parliament and political engagement specifically, as well as theories of political representation. In doing so we will show narratives to be instrumental within political science and its interpretation of political events, while also showing their salience to citizens’ corresponding interpretations. We will also demonstrate the way in which theories of narrative, engagement and representation have a great deal to contribute to one another, in particular their mutual incumbency on co-constitutive meaning-making.

2.2 – The academic relevance of narratives to political and parliamentary engagement

Within political science, narratives are invoked frequently, in order to discuss and examine myriad topics. This frequency can be attributed, at least partially, to the ubiquity of narratives; as political and commercial devices (Fernandes 2017; Salmon 2010) and even (relatively recently) constituting theoretical frameworks in their own right. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), for example, constitutes an academic viewpoint through which to empirically examine public policy and many other aspects of governance (Jones and McBeth 2010). Of particular relevance to Parliament is O’Byrne *et al.’s* (2014) empirical analysis of legislative hearings through the NPF. The academic relevance of narratives, then, is multi-faceted and highly transferable. In the discipline of political science specifically, narratives are typically utilised in fulfilling one of two explicatory functions:

1. *Context* – using ‘narratives’ as a shorthand for circumstances, socially-entrenched norms and popularly-held assumptions
2. *Motivation* – studying ‘narratives’ (and storytelling) as a direct appeal to act, as invocations that work through relatability and self-recognition

In political science studies, references to ‘narratives’ usually define the term according to function 1: as *a socio-cultural backdrop against which events take place*, and against which the events can be understood. This technique is academically intuitive (given that contextualisation and facilitating comprehension could be considered central to the scholarly remit), because, as

discussed in the previous section, it is *cognitively* intuitive. An example of this conceptualisation of narrative (as *context*) – and one that concerns Parliament directly – is discernible in academic accounts of the 2009 parliamentary expenses scandal, occurring as it did alongside a public narrative of perceived self-interest on the part of MPs (Flinders 2012b; Fox 2009; Fielding 2011). Narratives, in this case, constituted (to borrow Proust’s aforementioned terminology, via Nussbaum) the ‘optical instruments’ through which academics contextualised the expenses scandal and its fallout, specifically by drawing attention to the narratives that *citizens* were referring to in their processing of subsequent media coverage. Political science academics thereby describe what is known within narrative theory as ‘framing’; in this case, citizens’ attempts “to integrate local information into larger conceptual frameworks, the human processor accesses a store of situational and contextual knowledge” (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 2005). This is redolent of the concept of ‘situated knowledge’ we have discussed thus far, underpinned by dominant cultural narratives. Narratives of self-interest, of corruption, constitute the ‘frames’ by which citizens interpreted the ‘local’ information concerning the scandal, and sought to extrapolate it into a broader framework.⁷

The source of appeal, in a context like that of the expenses scandal, does not lie in a ‘welcome reception’ of the revelations, but in cultural familiarity and relatability. ‘Appeal’ is not (necessarily) synonymous with pleasure, only with the capacity to *make sense* of events and information. It also relates to the potentially traumatic cognitive experience of ‘breaking’ with an already embedded narrative – breaking with familiarity, in other words – even if that narrative is negative or defeatist in tone (Dean 2014). This aptly demonstrates the seductiveness of a narrative, even one that does not necessarily engender a positive view of the subject; instead, its cultural power lies in its capacity to *cohere* events and information, thereby connecting to ‘family resemblances’, or dominant codes of meaning (Rai 2015, p.1188). Familiarity with existing narratives is a key determiner in public reception of an event or political act (Fielding 2011; Abbott 2008). This is, in turn, directly relevant to what Saward refers to as the ‘cultural moment’ of representation, in which mutually-understood ‘codes’ and ‘ready made’ form a connection of familiarity and relatability between the representative and the (newly-formed) audience (2010, p.75). These observations hold direct repercussions for Parliament (and citizens’ engagement with it), because events such as the expenses scandal demonstrate what citizens were already *prepared* to think about the institution and its Members.

⁷ This is directly relevant to the discussions of heuristics in the following chapter, in terms of ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking and a consultation of a ‘readymade’ frame of reference (see Chapter 3).

The fact that a *negative* narrative of Parliament (and parliamentarians) was so readily accessed (and accessible) demonstrates a great deal about citizen perceptions of the institution (discussed further in Chapter 4). However, what is also important to reiterate is that – as Parkinson’s discussion of the Tempelhof Airport demonstrates – a narrative is never fixed, and its ‘meaning’ is never self-evident. The literature on narratives and counter-narratives shows how contestable narratives are, and their susceptibility to resistance in the form of *alternative stories* (Bamberg and Andrews 2004). Studies of narratives as ‘performances’ have drawn especial emphasis to the contested nature of narratives, as well as the co-constitutive dynamic between narrator and audience. Langellier defines performance as “the term used to describe a certain type of particularly involved and dramatized oral narrative” (1999, p.127); this emphasis highlights parallels with the theory of political engagement that is outlined throughout this thesis, as definitively *enacted* and co-constitutive. Performative theoretical lenses have also been applied specifically to Parliament as an institution, in which ceremonies and rituals have been afforded a major role in determining not only what Parliament is, but what it *means* (Crewe 2010; Waylen 2010). This emphasis on symbolism – as a way of determining meaning – is essential to unpacking perceptions of Parliament, both from within its walls and outside them (Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2018; Leston-Bandeira 2016; Parkinson 2013; Leston-Bandeira 2012; Parkinson 2009). The political efficacy of narratives in co-creating an experience, “empower[ing] the marginalised to bring their experiences to bear upon public debate” (Rai 2010, p.293) is therefore considerable, and potentially facilitates an institutional re-addressing of citizen perceptions. This could feasibly be done by *encouraging* and *telling* alternative stories.

There already exists some precedent regarding the UK Parliament’s utilisation of narrative as a means of engagement, though the nature of this utilisation remains inconsistent (see Chapters 4 & 5). Parliament’s political engagement projects include the relation of personal life-stories, and even stories of itself as an institution. Political and electoral representation, democratic heritage, and the impact of legislation on individuals’ experiences are presented as narratives and stories, to which citizens can personally connect and relate. More scholarly attention is needed as to the effects of these campaigns, and the ways in which they can be embedded into parliamentary practice. When performed successfully, the influence of narratives within political communication can be truly profound, as studies have shown within a partisan context. For example, an interesting case study concerns Obama’s use of narrative within his campaign speeches, specifically those relating to the concept of ‘the journey’. This, contends Escobar, creates “narrative structures that our brains crave, and it becomes emotionally compelling through the conflation of personal and collective struggles” (2011, p.115). The first part of

Escobar's argument – relating to the brain's affinity with narrative – is already well-covered ground in academic terms. However, the second part – relating to the *emotionally compelling*, and, later on, the rallying effect of narrative (Escobar 2011, p.115), is exactly this type of observation that is so lacking within political science. Political engagement is certainly an area in which non-partisan institutions – as well as parliamentary engagement campaigns – can learn valuable lessons from partisan storytelling campaigns, and their galvanising effects.

However, Escobar's study exemplifies the fact that, from an academic standpoint, the motivational (rather than contextual) efficacy of narratives has thus far been studied in the context of partisan politics rather than parliamentary politics. The political effectiveness of narratives – even though it represents a minority of academic interpretations (compared to *context*) – is typically focused around election campaigns (in the form of voting and other quantitative outputs). It also speaks to a broad academic tendency to discuss political engagement in terms of statistical quantifiers – voting being perhaps the most prominent (see Chapter 1). In the book *How Voters Feel*, Stephen Coleman dedicates an unusually large amount of attention to narratives as a topic in their own right, compartmentalising them into four main types: Ideal, Ritual, Routine and Pathological (2013, pp.34-75). Of these, the Ideal – relating to the tantalising alternative of Athenian democracy, based on a direct form of participatory democracy – hints towards the motivational appeal of narratives. However, through Coleman's account, narratives are a means of understanding rather than interpretation; a way “to frame the experience and meaning of voting” (2013, p.36). The Ideal is at no point ever examined in terms of *why* it is an Ideal in the first place. Instead, it is used essentially as a means of historicising the claims of direct democrats as presenting a viable alternative to virtual or representative democracy, further reinforcing the sole application of narrative in contextualisation.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that both Escobar and Coleman focus on *voting* in terms of applying narratives in a politically efficacious manner, since there is a clear sense of ‘quantifiable outcome’ in voting patterns, turnout, and electoral success (though as discussed in Chapter 1, their meaning is not self-evident). Nevertheless, the importance of political discussion to the effective functioning of democracy means that it is also vital to examine the effect of narratives on more nebulous permutations of political engagement, particularly given the precarious state (and status) of voting within the modern political sphere. Generational shifts in political standpoints hint towards a widely-held form of political engagement that is highly nuanced, emotionally-felt and irreverent (Manning 2015; 2013; Manning and Holmes 2013). Another consideration is the increasingly volatile behaviour of the electorate, in terms of fluctuations

and unpredictability in voting patterns (Mair 2013; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). In the scenario created by these two points – emotive engagement and electoral volatility – to focus on voting as an indicator of political values is to chase a theoretical red herring. Given the socially skewed nature of voting, it is also destined to be an unrepresentative summation of the power of narrative. Narrative – as underpinned by interpretation – requires a suitably qualitative study concerned with meaning and perception as both an input and an output, at least in order to examine the wider effects of storytelling on all permutations of the ‘political’. Exploring more nuanced permutations of narrative – and more varied case studies, outside the electoral sphere – is a necessary academic development.

This necessity stems not only from events like the expenses scandal – which serve to illustrate external perceptions of Parliament – but also the degree of symbolism that has already been observed and discussed by studies that take into account the institution’s ritualistic, ceremonial and performative components. This applies not only to the physical makeup of Parliament – i.e. the design and appearance of its constituent buildings – but also to the discourses that its publications and communications serve to exemplify (Lombardo and Meier 2017). Further research is needed into the relationship between *parliamentary narratives* and *parliamentary symbolism*, and the degree to which these two phenomena reinforced and entrenched each other. This research must also take into account the personalised, self-actualising forms of political expression that this thesis has discussed; specifically, the lack of dependence of these political expressions on institutions, for articulation *or* aggregation. In addition, as Parkinson has shown us, narratives and symbolism both exert great influence in determining (and potentially shifting) the ‘meaning’ of an institution. Parliament’s present and future significance is dependent to a large extent on these questions. The following section will discuss the efficacy of narratives (in co-creating meaningfulness and engagement) in greater detail by focusing upon the dissemination and relation of narratives. In the form of storytelling.

2.3 – Engaging storytelling: combining context and appeal

If we accept the premise that so much of life is lived, understood and contextualised through narrative, can we also accept that they are a positive force? If indeed we are ‘living this written life’, as Walter Benjamin put it, what does this tell us of the outward appeal of narratives? What of their own motivational richness? Is there a case for advocating ‘this written life’ in its own right, in order to avoid being ‘unscripted’ as MacIntyre warns? As we have discussed, contemporary academic accounts of political engagement are dominated by citizens’

understandings (i.e. observations) of politics, rather than their efforts to *interpret* (i.e. engage with) it (van Wessel 2016). Instead, van Wessel's own theory of political engagement ascribes more assertiveness to citizens, describing them as 'sense-makers' who are, as a result, actively engaged in the narratives that underpin their cultural environment (2016). We must therefore examine why certain narratives hold a cultural appeal – to sense-making citizens – in the first place. This can be done by examining their application and communication as stories; what we hear and what we tell, repeated until they become (in some cases) culturally entrenched narratives. For example, in unpacking the cultural appeal of existing narratives of distaste (in the context of the expenses scandal), academics (as well as practitioners) can potentialise new narratives (or 'counter-narratives') as a means of re-connecting citizens to the political sphere. Narratives, then, hold the means for diagnosing *and* treating the contemporary landscape of political engagement.

We will accordingly shift our emphasis from the contextual (which, as we have discussed, forms the majority of political science approaches to narrative) to the motivational and aspirational. In addressing the counter-narratives that we briefly touched upon earlier, Rai notes (through a 'performative' framework) the way in which

...counter-performances reflect the challenge that is posed to the hegemonic narratives of politics – what Chantal Mouffe (2007) would call an 'agonistic politics'. A performance that is able to effect change does so because the audience responds to an invitation to transformation and in so doing co-creates an alternative politics. (2015, pp.1188-1189)

This is a salient area of inquiry since it relates the theoretical aspects of political engagement to its practitioner counterparts; it holds the potential to reveal the practical benefits of the imaginative. This is not a new phenomenon; what is only recently-established, however, is its acknowledgement within political science. Hence, Fielding's observation that "before one of the most elemental political concepts – the nation – could exist in reality it had to be 'imagined' by those who read newspapers – and novels" (2011, p.224) stands out in its relative novelty. The same can be said of Landreville and LaMarre, who apply the notional appeal of narratives to participant-based research, investigating the effect of specific narratives on the intention for political discussion (2011). These conceptual frameworks (from which this thesis draws) could, and should, be given much more attention by practitioners and also by political scientists, as they both hint at the possibility to engage directly (and politically) *through narrative*.

Key to exploring a more active understanding of narrative is to highlight the distinction between narrative and storytelling. Langellier observes that narrative is what "surrounds us: pervasive, proliferating, multiplying, consolidating, dispersing", whereas stories are what "we tell each

other” (1999, p.125). Likewise, H. Porter Abbott defines a story as a “sequence of events involving entities” and narrative as “the representation of a story” (2008, pp.237-241). Both of these examples show storytelling to be an active process whereas narrative refers to an actualisation of storytelling mechanisms; narratives encompass the discourses and overlapping interpretations that allow us to communicate through stories. This is an important distinction to note, since it goes some way to explaining the perennial terminological ambiguity of narrative, and the notion that pinning down a cohesive – let alone a cross-disciplinary – definition of narrative is often elusive. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that scholars of narrative are often candid in their interchangeable use of these two key terms (Daigle 2016, p.27). It is crucial to recognise the distinction; particularly since narrative contextualisation is a widely-used device throughout political science, whereas narrative vis-à-vis storytelling is a nascent but essential realm of academic enquiry within this field.

The central appeal of narrative, as proposed by this thesis, is self-recognition; the ability to relate to a story through seeing oneself mirrored in it. This serves to further distance narrative from the realm of context, reinforcing the notion of narrative as valuable *in an active sense*; a means for inspiring agency, rather than the simple provision of information. In underlining this point, Walter Benjamin presents information as inherently temporal and relevant only *within* its context, whereas narrative transcends context through its lack of signposting. Contained within the narrative is an invitation to connect on the reader’s own terms, free from suggestion and prescription:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. (Benjamin 2006, p.366)

The impulse to connect in this way stems precisely from “the absence of an effective general mythology” (Campbell 1968, p.4) and, by extension, the impulse to invent meaning through individualised storytelling; through personal connection and association. This, as Joseph Campbell describes, is the root of the undimmed relevance of storytelling, which remains relevant through semiotic evolution, and its connection to what is definitively *human*:

The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change. (1968, p.4)

The crucial point here is that the very absence of ‘general mythology’ – i.e. a shared narrative that determines meaning in a universal sense – lies at the source of narrative inspiration;

specifically, the implication that meaningfulness is derived and interpreted. This corresponds with our earlier discussions of symbolically-meaningful moments, each of which “is perceived as a surface texture, while an in-depth dimension is maintained, and in this way narrative “moves along”...what is new never ceases to be what is expected” (Barthes 1975, p.270). There is – as Barthes and Benjamin both attest – *an inherent new-ness to narratives*, stemming from the conduciveness of stories to (re)interpretation and thereby distinguishing them (as Benjamin describes) from *information*. The difference between stories and information – and their dichotomisation in parliamentary discourse – is an important supplementary discussion and will be discussed later in the thesis (see Section 5.3). An essential point of emphasis at this point is the power of narrative for “the audience, whose members can complete the outline based on their own fantasies, emotional circumstances, and ideologies” (Bennett and Edelman 1985, p.164).

The effect and the appeal of narratives stems from their independence from information and other objective forms of meaning; they are different from ‘information’ in that they provide a cue only and – because of this very point – they remain relevant as long as this process can be repeated. Arendt makes a similar case when clarifying the difference between Socrates (whom we relate to through stories about him) and Aristotle (whom we relate to through information about his life):

...although we know much less of Socrates, who did not write a single line and left no work behind, than of Plato or Aristotle, we know much better and more intimately who he was, because we know his story, than we know who Aristotle was, about whose opinions we are so much better informed. (1958, p.186)

Arendt contends that the intimacy of knowing *who* a person is can only be ascertained through knowing their life story, whereas a person’s material output can, at best, only highlight *what* they were (1958, p.186). It is not the aim of this thesis to examine the ontological relevance of ‘knowledge’ to stories and information; nor does it aim to present stories as a superior means of engagement to information and political literacy. However, it does make the following proposition: that the intimacy encouraged by narrative (as opposed to pure information) would serve to considerably augment the existing (and prospective) efforts of Parliament to educate and inform. Stories are a wholly different means for *knowing* Parliament.

A useful bridging point between *knowing* in a contextual sense, and *knowing* in a motivational, aspirational sense, is to return to the concept of *self-recognition* which entails the ability (and thereafter the desire) to identify *with* a story. As such, it carries with it an overt motivational value. Self-recognition will be discussed in more structural, visual terms in the following section;

it holds a central importance to the *appeals* of narrative that we have discussed thus far, in terms of MacIntyre's references to considering oneself 'part' of a story, and Benjamin's descriptions of 'living this written life'. As proposed by Peter Verovšek, "narratives of the past are intimately tied to self-perception and collective identity in the present" (2016, p.530). This was hinted at earlier, in terms of the narrative's ability to facilitate subjective connection. However, Benjamin puts it in even more explicit terms when discussing the function of the storyteller, who draws on their own experience in order to communicate a narrative and "in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (2006, p.364). In this way, Arendt argues, "the fictional story reveals a maker just as every work of art clearly indicates that it was made by somebody; this does not belong to the character of the story itself but only to the mode in which it came into existence" (1958, p.186).

Relatability – specifically, the ability of the reader/audience to relate to the story in which, as Arendt attests, the teller is 'revealed' – stems from a perception of *possibility*. The meaningfulness of a story, derived from self-reference (see Section 2.1 and the discussion of the *trace*), also requires an ability to see this self-reference projected onto future possibilities:

Every intention of meaning is self-referential insofar as it also provides for its own reactualization by including itself in its own referential structure as one among many possibilities of further experience and action. (Luhmann 1995, p.61)

Thus *possibility* constitutes a kind of 'prospective self-reference' (i.e. the ability to relate to events and to possible future moments). Nussbaum concurs with this point as the route by which the reader/audience derives meaning from a story, stating that "[s]eeing events as general human possibilities, they naturally also see them as possibilities for themselves" (2001, p.241). In this way we can avoid talking of narrative in wholly abstract terms, but understand it to be a distinctly agential device. The practical applicability of storytelling is given its strongest affirmation – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – by Nietzsche, who, through his discussions on Greek myth, concluded that the use of narrative created a sense of meaning and purpose among the Greeks, in order to negotiate a barren and seemingly random existence. Thus, "to be able to live at all they had to interpose the radiant dream-birth of the Olympians between themselves and those horrors" (Nietzsche 1993, p.23). This point – which may appear at first to be a somewhat fatalistic one – can actually be viewed as a championing of the aspirational, through the telling of stories. Myths are perennially significant because they are *human*; that is to say, the creation of stories is a human response to concerns and anxieties that are intrinsic and without expiration (Nietzsche 1993).

From Nietzsche's viewpoint, the Greeks were motivated to action – inspired to live, in other words, and to overcome – by “the artistic *middle world* of the Olympians. In order to live, the Greeks were profoundly compelled to create these Gods” (1993, p.23, emphasis in original). Via this framework, the functionality of narratives is not limited to an artistic pursuit, or even a desire for context and comprehensibility; instead, their application denotes an act of pure agency and almost instrumentalist practicality. It is a survival mechanism that Nietzsche describes as a self-perception of human limitation, countered by another form of self-perception that employed embellishment and aspiration through narrative. Through narrative – the construction of stories that could be related to – reality could be made palatable and desirable. Kearney, pushing this argument even further, states that “the unnarrated life is not worth living” (2002, p.14). The creation of a narrative, then – as the Greeks appreciated – entails an act of vaulting ambition and an impulse to inspire through representation and association. This is not an argument that is relevant only to historical understanding; its relevance endures and will continue to do so. Narratives help us to understand, *and they inspire us to act*. Of especial interest here – in Nietzsche's description of “the Olympian world with which the Hellenic [i.e. Greek] ‘will’ held up a transfiguring mirror to itself” (1993, p.23) – is the metaphor; the concept of a *transfiguring mirror*. As an analogy it will form the basis of a visual representation of engaging storytelling in the final section; one that incorporates the academic concepts of co-constitution, self-identification, context and appeal that have been our focus thus far.

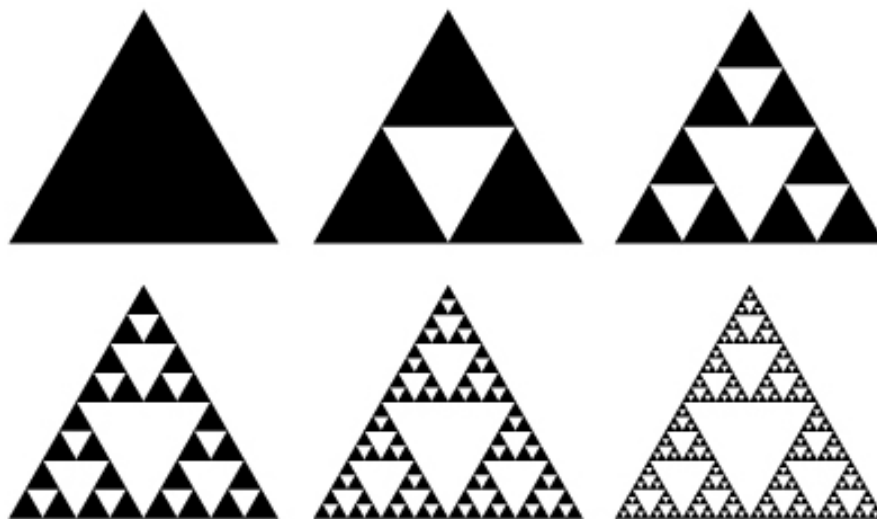
2.4 – Towards a fractal theory of narrative

In order to incorporate the definitions of narrative that we have discussed – and present a coherent, translatable conceptualisation – we will now present an innovative visual analogy based on fractals. This analogy will utilise the concepts of symbolic moments and *traces* that we presented in Figure 4 (Section 2.1), as well as Nietzsche's metaphor of ‘transfiguring mirror’ that was discussed at the end of the previous section. We will also (appropriately) be *referring back* to the previous section's discussion of Luhmann, and the self-referentiality of meaning. In particular we draw on Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis, defined as “the unity of the reproduction of the system's units” (1995, p.35). A (self-referentially) meaningful structure – according to this theory – must *reflect and reproduce itself*. The definition of narrative that we have constructed and elaborated so far is precisely this: a meaningful structure. Luhmann describes how “[r]eproduction that is self-referential, “autopoietic” on the level of its elements, must adhere to the type of element that the system defines. To this extent, it is reproduction”

(1995, p.35, emphasis in original). This reinforces the importance of the *trace* (in showing how a narrative must resemble itself at every stage), but it builds on this point by showing that a narrative must also resemble itself *at every scale*. That is to say, a narrative must contain *elements* (stories) that resemble it (i.e. are self-similar), with – as Luhmann shows – a limited degree of variation. Stories, in other words, are ‘the type of element that the system defines’. This concept of autopoiesis, as well as Nietzsche’s ‘transfiguring mirror’, can be analogised through the use of fractals.

Fractals are often shown as interlocking geometric patterns. Many of these patterns occur in nature (Falconer 2013, p.102-115); snowflakes, tree branch patterns and coastlines, to name just a few. A fractal pattern can be characterised as follows: any section of a fractal pattern (irrespective of the scale) *reflects* the larger pattern. In this sense fractals are known as ‘self-similar’; reflective of themselves at every level. Figure 5 displays the self-similarity within one of the most widely-recognised and simple fractal patterns (which renders it suitable for a fractal analogy), known as a Sierpinski triangle:

Figure 5 – An illustration of a Sierpinski Triangle pattern, showing at each stage a greater level of geometric complexity



The Sierpinski triangle has been chosen as our demonstrative fractal structure for two reasons. Firstly, its basic simplicity, compared to other much more complex and ostensibly incoherent forms of fractal pattern. In addition, it is a means of complementing the triangular shape of the ‘symbolic moments’ portrayed in Figure 4, and their ‘warping’ effect on narrative *traces*.

There are several academic precedents for using fractals (and their self-similar nature) as an analogy for understanding narratives. In elaborating our own theoretical framework, however, we can demonstrate these previous attempts to be incomplete in fully realising the benefits of their own analogies. Abbott (2001) and Shenhav (2015), for example, both cite the fractal characteristics of self-similarity and *recursion* – i.e. the continued repetition of a set visual pattern (Eglash 1999) – as an analogy for the pervasiveness of narrative. In a sense this answers the question of ‘how narratives work’: narratives always contain a replication of already-established narratives. Self-similarity and recursion can therefore be understood as a mechanism for continuation; they are the means by which narratives are (re)generated (Shenhav 2015, pp.60-68). This theory is reinforced by our discussion in Section 2.1, with respect to Derrida’s theory of meaningfulness; that it is ‘circular’, in the sense that attempts to communicate meaning must always be referential, in ‘referring back’ to their own precedents and contexts (1982, p.324). That there is an constant *re-telling* aspect to narratives is also supported by Macintyre’s aforementioned observation of a pre-existing ‘stock of stories’ within each society (2007, p.216). Narratives therefore derive their nature, their meaning, from repetition and referentiality. The fractal analogies discussed thus far are effective in visualising this process, making full use of the fact that (as Figure 5 shows) a fractal pattern is one of self-similarity and recursion; of continuation and repetition.

However, these analogies (particularly in the case of Shenhav) fail to answer, or even address, the question of ‘*why* narratives work’. Why, in other words, are self-similarity and recursion appealing? Answering this question involves examining a key element of the narrative dynamic; the reader/audience. It is on this very point that critiques of Shenhav’s fractal approach have been based; specifically, overlooking “the inherent agency of human actors” (Krebs *et al.* 2017, p.3). In ignoring the ‘human actors’ (i.e. a reader/audience) that a narrative must appeal to, the aforementioned fractal analogies compromise the usefulness of narratives *and* fractals as elements of a theoretical framework. In discussing the former, Barthes argues that “a narrative cannot take place without a narrator and a listener (or reader)” (1975, p.260). Simply put, there is no narrative without the reader/audience who (in addition to the narrator) *co-constitutes* the storytelling dynamic. Conversely, on the topic of fractals, the shortcomings of Shenhav’s analogy stems from its failure to identify self-similarity as an *impetus*, as well as *mechanism*, for the pervasiveness of (certain) narratives. Self-similarity must also be understood as a source of appeal; effective narratives allow the reader/audience – the ‘human actor(s)’ – to ‘complete the outline’ of the storytelling dynamic, as discussed in the previous section. To omit the centrality of the reader/audience (and the necessity of their recognition *of themselves* within a narrative)

from a fractal analogy is to omit the analogy's *raison d'être*, and the especial value of fractals as a means by which narratives can be understood.

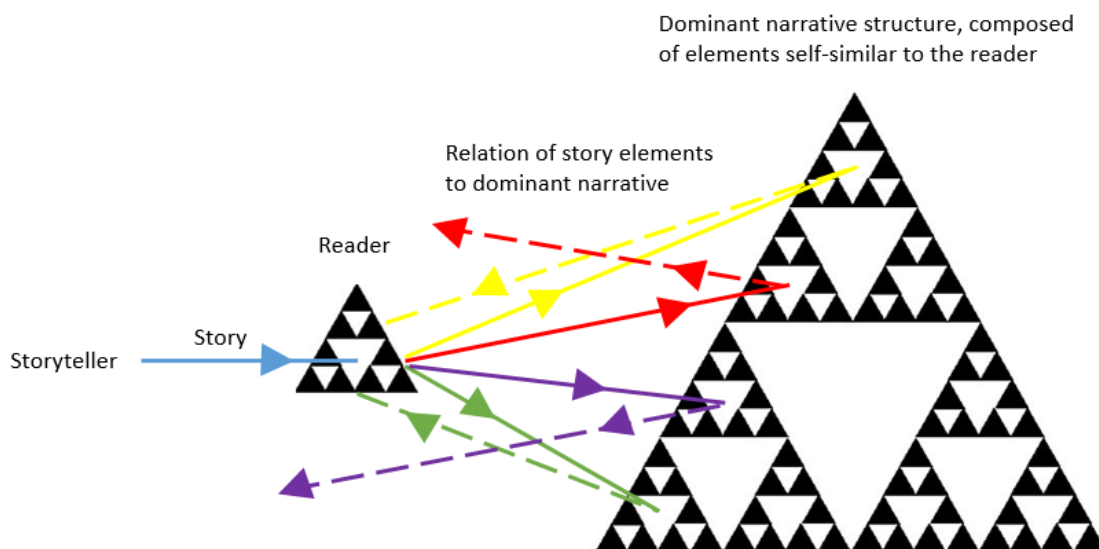
The quote that begins this chapter – taken from James Joyce's *Ulysses* – illuminates the importance of self-recognition to the reader/audience's experience of narrative. We encounter ourselves in 'robbers, ghosts, giants and old men', of whom stories are told and retold. This observation also speaks to a consistent point of reference throughout this chapter; the relevance of representation theory to narrative (and vice versa). In the case of the former – consistent with the 'constructivist turn' – representation encompasses the act of communicating 'the represented' to *themselves* (Lombardo and Meier 2012; Mansbridge 2011; Saward 2010; Parkinson 2009; Hinchman and Hinchman 2001). That is to say, a 'representative claim' is not only a claim about the would-be representative. It is also a claim to an audience that, in so doing, the would-be representative *constructs*. The intended audience can then, in effective instances of representation, coalesce around the representative claim and legitimate it. Narratives – what "people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others" (Kearney 2002, p.3) – hold value in exactly the same way; they are a means of representation in their own right. Narratives and representation both constitute a claim to self-recognition, portraying (in effective instances) a context within which the reader/audience *can recognise themselves*. We can summarise this notion as 'self-similarity' which, as we have shown, is a characteristic component of fractals.

At the beginning of this chapter we discussed the two forms of narrative as they are presented within political science: as contextual structure, and as motivation which functions through self-recognition and self-identification. The relevance of fractals to this study is their ability to encompass both of these functions; structure and (motivational) self-recognition. The validity of a fractal theory of narrative rests primarily on the following proposition; *that the function of narratives is never to precisely mirror reality*. Instead, the function of a narrative is to represent reality as it could be; reality as part of a broader semiotic structure, through which it can become contextual, meaningful and aspirational. The use of narrative "involves far *more* than a mere mirroring of reality" (Kearney 2002, p.12, emphasis in original), the basis of a rationale for Nietzsche's 'transfiguring mirror' analogy, which implies a kind of broadened, contextualised reflection (within something greater). This analogy could not be more relevant to fractals, since it denotes both reflection and transformation. Narratives are, in their own right, transfiguring mirrors of reality, simultaneously illustrating what is and what could be; they contextualise and they elevate, reflect and transform. Narratives are inherently fractal; they provide a context (i.e. a larger structure) made up of relatable, recognisable elements. Here we can relate back to the

theory of representation as a means of representing something to itself; as it is and as it could be, through holding up the same ‘transfiguring mirror’ described by Nietzsche.

Narratives – as this chapter has outlined – are a fractal means of representation that function through cultural self-recognition and transformation. They are a valuable means of engagement by virtue of the fact that to accept and legitimate a story that is told – as a reader/audience – *is to engage by definition*. Figure 6 illustrates this inherent engagement with a story that is *told* to the reader/audience, and – through its fractal nature – incorporates the reception of stories with the consultation of a self-similar narrative background of situated knowledge:

Figure 6 – A fractal analogy for an instance of storytelling, showing the reader/audience’s relation of narrative *traces* to the ‘frame’ of their contextualised knowledge



In relating Figure 6 back to Figure 4, we can conceptualise Figure 4 as constituting a single element of the narrative framework that is shown, on a broader scale, within Figure 6; to borrow Luhmann’s aforementioned terminology, Figure 4 constitutes a self-similar element within a system (Figure 6). Figure 4 shows the way in which, based on the subjective symbolic meaningfulness of a given narrative moment, narrative *traces* are curved and warped. What Figure 6 demonstrates is the way in which the *traces* are curved and warped in order to return (*renvoi*, to recall Derrida) to the reader/audience, or away from them (a process upon which the relatability – i.e. the effectiveness – of a story is incumbent).

The fractal analogy demonstrated in Figure 6 can be directly applied to the 2009 expenses scandal (see Section 1.3). The reader/audience was exposed to stories of corrupt, selfish politicians (generated by the news media) which were interpreted in accordance with the reader/audience's situated knowledge (which was, in turn, constructed from narrative elements and assumptions that were *self-similar, and thus relatable, to them*). In this way the news stories can be said to have 'made sense', inasmuch as they were accepted, legitimated, and reinforced amongst a citizenry that was already "acutely attuned to crisis narratives" (Flinders 2012b, p.10) through their existing exposure to 'corrupt politicians' narratives (Fielding 2011) and the media's framing of the contemporaneous global financial crisis. The citizenry's familiarity with 'crisis narratives' was instrumental in their relation of 'crisis stories' to their own situated knowledge; a knowledge that *encompassed* 'crisis narratives'. Self-similarity was derived from the fact that individual *stories* of corrupt politicians reflected (or even matched) broader cultural *narratives* of corrupt politicians. The case of the expenses scandal exemplifies the way in which negative preconceptions can be self-reinforcing and prophetically self-fulfilling. It also shows us that 'appeal' does not have to be understood in positive terms (i.e. in facilitating pleasure), but instead must fundamentally (and contextually) 'make sense' of *new* information alongside *existing* preconceptions.

Representation, engagement and narrative are the three crucial tenets of the theoretical framework of this thesis; all three concepts rely on a co-constitutive dynamic underpinned by a sense of cultural meaningfulness. Fractals embody and illustrate this cultural meaningfulness, reliant as it is on reflection and transformation. They are visual analogies that encompass the varying approaches to narratives that we have now explored; they also analogise why narratives are so practically and culturally engaging. They will be a crucial point of reference when exploring the culturally-embedded narratives that underpin current forms of political engagement by Parliament, as well as the proposition of new narratives (and counter-narratives) with which to strengthen citizens' connection to it. We will, in these instances, compare individual cases of prospective parliamentary storytelling against the 'template' shown in Figure 6, in order to examine their narrative elements, their construction and presupposition of a particular audience (as well as itself), and the likelihood of these proposed stories reaching and connecting to that same audience. Another key point to consider is that Figure 6 demonstrates a story that is being *told*; as we will discuss, instances in which stories are *presented* or made available, rather than discernibly told, are unlikely to hold the same resonance as an effective instance of *storytelling*. The reason for this stems from our earlier discussions on 'one-way

engagement' (as a misnomer) and 'broadcasting' in lieu of engagement (see Section 1.4); the latter necessitates a dynamic, rather than one-to-many communication.

This distinction is central to the conception of narrative that is employed throughout this study, effectively analogised through the use of fractals. It is also vital in understanding the parallel between narrative and political representation, and (in both cases) what constitutes a 'successful' application; namely, the formation of co-constitutive meaning and the capacity of the audience to recognise themselves in what is communicated to them. Narratives, as we have shown, are a means of perceiving local information and relating it to broader frameworks, with the reader/audience paying constant reference to self-perceived, individual truths. Engagement is thus shown to be an active process of (re)interpretation, rather than 'observance' or even 'understanding'. Like the audience that engages with it, narrative encapsulates a human construct and a human dynamic. Narrative is a means of contextualisation, and a means (and impetus) *to engage with that context*. The effectiveness of certain narratives (as related through storytelling) over others, in creating these ideal conditions, will be discussed in subsequent chapters, utilising the fractal analogy in order to analyse parliamentary attempts to engage via storytelling. It is at this point that we can make a conclusive break with *context* as the sole application of narrative within political science. The usefulness of stories is not limited to their explication of engagement, but also encompasses their *appeal* to it. Storytelling, in other words, *is* engagement.

Conclusions

This chapter has outlined a fractal theory of narrative based on the co-constitutive meaning-making inherent in a successful act of storytelling. In doing so we have utilised Derrida's theory of the *trace* (as illustrating the shaping effect of symbolic meaning on narratives) as well as the emphasis on self-recognition present within narrative theory (as well as constructivist readings of representation). The value of this theoretical framework derives from its incorporation of *context* and *appeal*; two ways in which political science studies conceptualise narratives, reflecting the dual source of their effectiveness. A fractal analogy shows the way in which *appeal is derived from context*; specifically, the capacity to see oneself reflected and contextualised in an effective story. In subsequent chapters we examine storytelling initiatives utilised by Parliament, in terms of their fidelity to narrative (as it is defined by this theoretical framework) and by extension their prospective effectiveness based on the audience (and the representation of Parliament) that they construct. In doing so we will utilise the fractal analogy that this chapter

has elaborated. We will also examine whether a coherent, holistic narrative of engagement exists at an institutional level within parliamentary bodies that possess some form of engagement remit. In establishing the way in which public and institutional stories and perspectives can be thus analysed, the following chapter will discuss our methodology. This will demonstrate the relevance of the narratives we have discussed as 'frames' and 'heuristics' that often form the basis of participant responses, and in their own right are worthy of close examination.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

I could tell you what's happening, but I don't know if it would really tell you what's happening.

'Snow' – *Solaris*

Introduction

This chapter details the methodology used for this research; its primary aims and objectives, the fieldwork sequence, and subsequent analysis. The fieldwork applied a mixed-methods approach that encompassed focus groups, elite interviews, questionnaires, and a Critical Discourse Analysis. The methodological framework used here – building upon Stoker, Hay and Barr's (2016) application of Kahneman's 'fast/slow thinking' thesis to democratic politics – provided a rationale for utilising the questionnaires and focus groups/elite interviews in a particular sequence. This mixed-methods approach also facilitated an invaluable degree of cross-comparison and substantiation within our research findings. It allowed several types of response to be gathered – even from the same participants – and was therefore consistent with the theoretical framework in avoiding, as much as possible, a compartmentalisation of responses into categories established beforehand (see Chapter 2). This is especially significant when considering the conceptualisation of engagement throughout this thesis; as a dynamic between the institution and individual(s). The mixed-methods research aimed to capture viewpoints from both sides of this dynamic: institutional viewpoints toward citizens, and citizen viewpoints toward the institution. Moreover, it also allowed for self-reflexive viewpoints to be captured and analysed; institutional viewpoints toward Parliament, and citizen viewpoints toward the citizenry.

3.1 – Methodological framework and research aims

One of the fundamental aims of the fieldwork was to avoid the compartmentalisation of participant feedback into pre-existing categories, an issue that pervades much contemporary political science research, as van Wessel (2016) and Manning (2013) discuss. With this in mind it was important to utilise the fieldwork methods in such a way as to allow participants to set the boundaries of their own definitions (regarding contentious terms like ‘politics’ and ‘engagement’). Another basic premise was that the participants would describe (and relate to) politics in a more self-actualising manner if they were provided with a forum in which they could draw upon their own life experiences. This provided a rationale for using focus groups, which – in supplementing questionnaire data – would enable the gathering of responses that drew upon participants’ life experiences to a much greater degree (Gamson 1992). The fieldwork was therefore designed to give as many bases for comparison as possible, to show the ways in which participant responses were (depending on the context) highly subjective and nuanced, and thus difficult to easily compartmentalise. Researchers are often aware of how ‘loaded’ certain political terms are, to the extent that their fieldwork questions are prefaced with an ‘apologetic’ tone:

Interviewer: So um, do you um – how to ask this without sounding wanky? – do you identify as being um, left wing? Sounds silly but,

Gillian: Um, I suppose as other people would define it, I guess.

Interviewer: But you wouldn’t define it like that?

Gillian: Um, well I guess I would say I quite strongly disagree with everything that would be considered as right wing [laughs]. So yeah, so I wouldn’t be insulted if someone said that to me, but I, I don’t think it’s really so important, I mainly look at things on an issue by issue basis. (Manning 2013, p.27)

In acknowledging this complexity, the techniques used within this methodology were designed to capture (and subsequently analyse) individual viewpoints and collective narratives. As Vromen concludes, “qualitative interview based researchers do not attempt to make generalizations to a broader population based on the small sub-section they study” (2010, p.259); qualitative techniques such as focus groups and elite interviews typically capture a smaller (and less generalisable) dataset than quantitative methods (Punch 1998, p.242). Instead, as Rhodes and Tiernan attest, the usefulness of focus groups and other qualitative techniques is in gathering “individual and collective stories” (2015, p.210), rendering them invaluable for our research.

The PhD study sought to avoid participants responding in terms of politics ‘as other people would define it’, and instead to encourage participants to set their own definitions. Marsh *et al.*

(2007) demonstrate the value of non-prescriptiveness to an enriched discussion of engagement, achieving this through interactivity and open-ended questions. This avoidance of imposed terminology is reflected in the methodological framework and the mode of analysis, including coding methods (see Section 3.5). Two sets of questionnaires were used within the PhD fieldwork, to be followed by focus group discussions, thus providing participants with two opportunities for reflection. This was underpinned by the premise that the order in which the fieldwork methods were applied would influence the degree to which participants answered reflexively, as opposed to providing heuristic responses (see Section 3.3). A narrowness in defining key terms stems, we would argue, from a failure to acknowledge evolutions in politics and engagement; in other words, how they are applied and understood by citizens. Stoker *et al.* (2016) show that certain methodological techniques encourage specific modes of thought among participants; discussive conditions gain discussive (and, crucially, more personal) responses. Citizens are not simply 'handed-down' pre-existing views of politics; they interpret it for themselves (van Wessel 2016). While the *cultural displacement* narrative acknowledges subjective interpretations as crucial to understanding engagement in a theoretical sense, Stoker *et al.* provide elements of a methodological framework for *recording* these interpretations. As the following section will discuss, the mixed methods research was designed in order to facilitate, at every stage, a greater degree of deliberation and self-reflection. This would demonstrate the way in which each participant showed a capacity for a nuanced political standpoint, serving to problematise a 'compartmental' approach to studying political engagement.

The majority of the fieldwork for this study was facilitated through parliamentary engagement sessions; educational workshops that were organised and facilitated by parliamentary staff. They were open to citizens and held in various locations. Some took place within the Parliamentary Estate in Westminster, with a group of citizens visiting, while others took place outside Parliament, with staff members visiting local public forums across the UK. The premise of the workshops was to emphasise the relevance of Parliament through providing information on its history and functions, and ways in which citizens could (via Parliament) participate in politics. The reason for using engagement sessions as a fieldwork platform was twofold. Firstly, the session attendees represented a group of potential research participants who were able (and likely willing) to discuss politics *and* Parliament (since the engagement sessions aimed to illustrate the intersection(s) between the two). Secondly, the sessions were – as well as a means of *facilitating* the fieldwork – a *subject* of it, since they constituted a key example of

recent parliamentary engagement initiatives. The fieldwork methodology therefore aimed to capture citizens' attitudes *before and after* the sessions:

1. Pre-session
 - a. Whether citizens felt the session *would strengthen* their interest in politics
 - b. What attitudes (towards politics and Parliament) citizens expressed before the session
2. Post-session
 - a. Whether citizens felt the session *had strengthened* their interest in politics
 - b. What attitudes (towards politics and Parliament) citizens expressed after the session

The sessions therefore provided a venue for gathering (via questionnaires and focus groups) perspectives on politics and Parliament; in addition, analysis of these perspectives (in terms of how they changed, if at all) potentialised an analysis of the influence of those engagement sessions.

Analysing the influence of the engagement sessions was also envisaged through comparing them with non-parliamentary sessions. The fieldwork involved attending several engagement sessions which were premised upon political engagement, but were not organised by Parliament and therefore differed in format and (potentially) objectives. Instead, these sessions were organised by charities and single-interest groups, albeit still with a focus on engaging with politics (often through Parliament). The aim here was to establish whether the parliamentary or non-parliamentary engagement sessions were considered by their respective attendees to be more effective (through using the same methodologies, as detailed in the next section). In doing so, commonalities could be established as to how the research participants, across all types of session, conceptualised 'successes' or 'failures' in this context. More broadly, it would facilitate discussion as to whether Parliament (in terms of symbolic representation; what it 'stood for' and evoked for the session attendees) influenced the effectiveness of its own engagement sessions, whether positively or negatively. Examining sessions that took place inside and outside of Westminster, as well as non-parliamentary sessions, was highly significant in investigating how citizens might relate differently to Parliament according to the context and location of the session.

Furthermore, attending only Westminster-based sessions would have skewed the sample around participants based in (or able to travel to) London. This raises issues inasmuch as London is somewhat 'politically anomalous' within England as a whole. In the 2016 European Union

membership referendum, for example, “London, with its young, well-educated and ethnically diverse population voted to Remain. The rest of England together with Wales opted to Leave” (Curtice 2016, p.6). A recent Hansard Society audit also observed London’s distinctiveness in terms of respondents’ professed knowledge of the EU, perceived political efficacy, and satisfaction with Parliament. It was concluded that “[s]atisfaction [with Parliament] appears to improve the nearer you are to Westminster” (Hansard Society 2017, p.27). The fact that “[g]oing out to communities *across* the UK is now recognised as an essential part of the public engagement strategy” (Walker 2011, p.275, emphasis added) implies a certain degree of institutional awareness relating to this issue. Furthermore, the contention that Parliament’s engagement strategy needs to “talk to multiple publics in multiple ways” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.6) is highly relevant in geographical terms; that is to say, the notion that Parliament is ‘experienced’ in different ways according (partly) to the region in question. This observation provides an inducement against presenting a London-centric dataset as representative of (geographically) wider opinion. It also necessitates an examination of whether some or all of the engagement sessions we have discussed attracted ‘usual suspects’ (i.e. the already-engaged), a question that the mixed methods research (particularly the quantitative elements) also sought to address.

3.2 – Mixed research methods

A mixed-methods approach was employed in order to capture as many points of view as possible, from both sides of the institution-citizen dynamic. In addition, the mixed-methods approach allowed for a ‘sequencing’ of fieldwork activities that captured citizen attitudes at several different stages, consistent with the framework of ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking that we will discuss in the next section. This allowed for detailed insights into the nuances of participants’ viewpoints on politics and Parliament. The fieldwork methods are detailed as follows:

Questionnaires

Two sets of questionnaires were given to the engagement session attendees; the first was given out before the engagement session began, and the second was given out after the session ended. In total, 538 completed questionnaires were collected (comprising pre- and post-session questionnaires), drawn from 21 parliamentary engagement sessions and 3 non-parliamentary engagement sessions (see Appendix 1). In this thesis, ‘parliamentary/non-parliamentary’ (in the

context of an engagement session) refers to the organiser: either Parliament, or a non-parliamentary organisation. 'Westminster/non-Westminster', on the other hand, refers only to location; whether the engagement session took place within the Parliamentary Estate, or in another area. Thus within the thesis there will be references to engagement sessions that were, for example, 'parliamentary' and 'non-Westminster', meaning that (in this case) they were organised by Parliament and took place in a location *other than* the Parliamentary Estate.

The same two sets of questionnaires were given out at the parliamentary *and* non-parliamentary engagement sessions, with no changes to the design or to the questions (so as to aid cross-comparison). The questionnaires included demographic questions on age and gender, as well as indicators of political participation (see Appendix 2): asking whether the respondent was a member of a political party, and whether they had voted in the last general election. This was followed by a 'word-association' question: "*What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the word 'politics'?*" The questionnaire then presented 15 closed questions, each in the form of a Likert Scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". A balanced scale was used, mixing positive and negative statements so that a 'high' Likert score would not always be equated with strong disagreement, and vice versa. This was done to ameliorate the effects of acquiescent bias, by which participants tend to agree or disagree without consulting the question (Furr 2011, p.23).

The pre-session questionnaires were designed to be virtually identical to the post-session questionnaires, for the purposes of comparison and quantitative analysis. The demographic questions were only included on the first set of questionnaires, since re-establishing demographic information was unnecessary. The word-association question, and the 15 closed questions, were the same in both sets of questionnaires. The purpose of the questionnaire(s) was clearly stated at the beginning of the session, and avoided implying the desirability of any particular response. Completed questionnaires were kept anonymous and confidential. These steps were taken to reduce the risk of extreme response bias and social desirability bias, both of which can be caused by a preconception of one type of answer as more 'positive' or 'desirable' than another (Rovai, Baker and Ponton 2013, p.348; Fowler and Cosenza 2009, pp.389-90). The returned questionnaires were then coded and analysed using SPSS and (in the case of the word-association question) NVivo.

Questionnaires were utilised in order to complement the data gathered by the focus groups which, "[u]nlike traditional quantitative research...are centrally concerned with understanding attitudes rather than measuring them" (Luntz 1994). Measuring the attitudes of the session attendees and how these attitudes changed (and, by extension, the influence of the engagement

sessions) was an important precursor to establishing why they had (if at all). Bearing in mind the discussions on avoiding compartmentalisation that took place earlier in this chapter, the notion that “[q]uantitative data are necessarily structured in terms of the number system, and reflect researcher-imposed constructs” (Punch 1998, p.61) is highly significant, but is addressed through the use of a mixed-methods approach. On a practical level, it was far more feasible to compare pre- and post-session attitudes using questionnaires than focus groups, especially since the engagement sessions were sometimes attended by as many as 40 people. The use of questionnaires allowed for the capturing of a much larger volume of input (i.e. outside of those who volunteered for the focus groups). Moreover, the use of two sets of questionnaires allowed a direct comparison between viewpoints from *the same set of respondents*, thereby validating subsequent discussions as to the effect of the engagement sessions.

Focus Groups

A total of 15 focus groups (see Appendix 3) were held with citizens and parliamentary staff members (to be complemented by elite interviews, as the following sub-section describes).⁸ There were two main types of focus group: ‘citizen’ and ‘staff’. They were conducted with members of the public and members of parliamentary staff, respectively. There were several types of location and context for the citizen focus groups, all of which were taken into account at the analysis stage. For example (as with the engagement sessions), some focus groups took place within the Parliamentary Estate while others did not. Moreover, some focus groups took place after parliamentary engagement sessions, and some after non-parliamentary engagement sessions (the parliamentary/non-parliamentary distinction is discussed in the previous sub-section; see above).

The focus groups have been categorised as follows:

⁸ In two instances, a citizen was interviewed rather than taking part in a focus group. These were run in accordance with the same structure and format as the focus groups (see Appendix 4 for details). The reasons for this are as follows:

1. Only one focus group volunteer stayed behind after a parliamentary engagement session on 17 May 2018 (see Appendix 1 & 3), therefore a focus group discussion was not possible. The research participant was interviewed by the Author in accordance with the focus group structure and format. The research participant is cited as: Citizen Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2018, Westminster
2. One attendee of a non-parliamentary engagement session was present for the engagement session and left the venue straight after. When the attendee returned, the focus group had already finished, but the attendee requested to take part in the fieldwork regardless. Therefore they were interviewed by the Author in accordance with the focus group structure and format. The research participant is cited as: Citizen Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 19 June 2018, London.

Both of these instances are listed in Appendix 3 (and relevant footnotes) as ‘Citizen Interviews’.

- Citizen Focus Groups
 - Parliamentary (taking place after a parliamentary engagement session)
 - Westminster (taking place within the Parliamentary Estate)
 - Non-Westminster (taking place outside the Parliamentary Estate)
 - Non-parliamentary (taking place after a non-parliamentary engagement session)⁹
- Staff Focus Groups

The term ‘citizen’, in connection with the focus groups, is used to describe any group which *did not* include parliamentary staff (no staff participants were ever present in citizen focus groups, and vice versa). The term ‘parliamentary’, as discussed in the previous sub-section, refers to the organiser of the respective engagement session (either Parliament or a non-parliamentary organisation), while ‘Westminster’ refers to the location of the focus group (inside the Parliamentary Estate or in a different UK location). All non-parliamentary focus groups took place outside the Parliamentary Estate, and all staff focus groups took place inside it.

The questions used for the citizen focus groups (whether parliamentary or non-parliamentary) were based on the experience of the engagement session (see Appendix 4). This was intended to complement the material gained through the returned questionnaires, and determine how the responses gained through the citizen focus groups corresponded with the aggregated quantitative data. Appraisal of the engagement session was followed by discussing interpretations of ‘engagement’ and ‘politics’, as well as gathering participants’ opinions on the UK political landscape. This developed into recommendations for strengthening engagement, and Parliament’s role within this context. The focus groups were semi-structured in order to encourage individual interpretations while retaining a broad focus (albeit one that could be structured around the discussions). “Reduced researcher control” within focus groups “enables focus group participants to follow their own agendas” (Wilkinson 2004, p.181); this point is highly pertinent to encouraging reflexive and organic discussion, enabling and encouraging participants to draw on their own experiences. *Which* experiences the participants chose to draw on, and the way in which telling stories of these experiences substantiated the participants’ arguments, was a key focus of subsequent analysis.

⁹ Non-parliamentary focus groups are referenced in footnotes as ‘*Focus group with Author (non-Parliamentary)*’.

Utilising focus groups was highly conducive to the theoretical framework for this thesis (see Chapter 2), which emphasises the value of storytelling as a means of insight into ‘situated knowledge’ (contextualised interpretations, drawing upon personal experience). Examining situated knowledge relating to the institution from *within* the institution was also valuable in complementing external perceptions. The staff volunteers were sorted by the researcher into focus groups, so that each one comprised a range of responsibilities and experience levels. The intention here was to expose each staff member to as many viewpoints as possible (from different departments, for example) within the space of a single focus group. The staff focus groups began by each staff member introducing themselves and their job role, since the participants were drawn from different departments. This not only served as an ‘ice-breaker’ question but also facilitated explicitly cross-departmental discussions. The wording of questions was kept as similar as possible between focus groups, to facilitate the comparison of responses. Discussions were recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to NVivo for analysis.

An additional benefit of staff involvement was its being consistent with this study’s definition of engagement; a dialogue between institutions and individuals. Examining perceptions *across* this citizen-institution dynamic was therefore essential: citizen perspectives on Parliament, parliamentary perspectives on citizens, but (crucially) also citizens’ perceptions of themselves, and internal (i.e. staff) perspectives on Parliament. The staff focus groups were an invaluable forum for demonstrating how different departments within Parliament related to each other and, more broadly, how those ‘within’ Parliament conceptualised and engaged with it. This would be of great benefit in the discussion of parliamentary ‘narratives’ or ‘cultures’ of engagement, described by those who had direct experience of the institution (and at least one of its constituent departments). “Consideration of the likely dynamics...produced by any particular combination of individuals” (Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook 2009, p.598) was therefore essential in facilitating these discussions, validating the composition of each focus group in order to ensure that different departmental staff could hold these kind of discussions. This facilitated the gathering of viewpoints between departments (i.e. perceptions of certain departments by other departments), which complemented staff discussions of their own departments. As discussed in Chapter 4, the very fact that these inter-departmental discussions were taking place was remarked upon by the participants as a (welcome) novelty.

Of the citizen focus groups, a majority took place after *parliamentary* engagement sessions. The relatively small number of non-parliamentary engagement sessions studied within this fieldwork reflects the fact that *parliamentary engagement* is our core focus. More practically, Parliament runs engagement sessions more frequently than these other organisations (an indication of the

substantial resources it can draw upon). All focus group participants were composed of non-remunerated volunteers, raising the question of self-selection bias and its repercussions for the generalisable findings. It is arguable that these groups represent an unusually high degree of engagement. At this point we can reiterate that it is not the objective of this thesis to assess UK engagement. All three objectives relate to the interpretations of those who are sufficiently engaged to attend parliamentary engagement sessions; nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter 6, the extent to which the attendees represented 'usual suspects' is open to problematisation. An equally significant clarification relates to the decision to conduct all of the focus groups in person rather than online. Though certain "physical, geographical, [and] time constraints" can be overcome by using Facebook, for example, as a focus group medium, the fact remains that "participants [are] limited to Facebook users and those who [do] not object to be Facebook users" (Lijadi and van Schalkwyk 2015, pp.7-8). Online focus group discussions, as with offline discussions, often encounter significant co-ordination and recruitment difficulties (Moore, McKee and McLoughlin 2015). In this study, the running of focus groups after parliamentary/non-parliamentary engagement sessions (as an existing group of participants) helped to nullify these difficulties.

Elite Interviews

The fact that three of the fieldwork discussions (with parliamentary staff) took the form of elite interviews – rather than involving them in focus groups – was largely due to expediency. The schedules of the interviewees were extremely constricted and would have been difficult to fit around the availability of others. Each of the staff elite interview participants were closely involved in parliamentary engagement strategy, and as such were well-placed to comment on Parliament's engagement culture (or lack of) and describe their personal definitions of successful engagement. The inclusion of a citizen elite interview (conducted with the director of a public participation charity; see Appendix 3) was derived from a similar rationale; providing a broader perspective of non-parliamentary engagement *and* on Parliament as they saw it. This interview participant was responsible – within their organisation – for running non-parliamentary engagement sessions, rendering their perspective extremely useful. The roles of the elite interviewees – each of which entailed a substantial engagement remit – meant that they could also provide an assessment of contemporary UK engagement. As such they represented (in the case of the staff elite interviews) a bridging point between the views of citizens and those of staff members. These interviews were also intended to clarify specific aspects of Parliament's engagement culture, the findings from which could be considered

alongside those of the focus groups and questionnaires. The questions used in the elite interviews were kept as similar as possible to the focus groups (see Appendix 4), to provide a reliable basis for comparison. As with the focus groups, the elite interviews were recorded by the researcher, transcribed and uploaded to NVivo for qualitative analysis.

Elite interviews were undertaken in order to gain additional insights into the ‘collective stories’ discussed previously, in relation to focus groups. As Kelso states, a highly relevant point when discussing Parliament’s engagement efforts “is the fact that Parliament does not function as a ‘unified’ institution...and therefore also lacks the means to approach political disengagement in a holistic fashion” (2007, pp.365-366). An analysis of the staff focus groups and elite interviews therefore aimed to engage with Kelso’s argument through ascertaining whether a coherent parliamentary engagement culture existed. Examining questions of coherent objectives (and conceptualisations of success) also provided a rationale for holding the additional elite interview (with the public participation charity director). This would provide additional detail as to how far the aims and objectives of engagement sessions could vary, according to the organising body. In further addressing this question, a focus group was held with three staff members from another non-parliamentary organisation (which ran non-parliamentary engagement sessions), subsequent to a *parliamentary* engagement session that they attended. The presence of these practitioners within a parliamentary engagement session, and the opportunity to run a focus group with them afterwards, was extremely valuable in examining a parliamentary engagement session through a non-parliamentary engagement perspective.

Select Committee Reports

A Critical Discourse Analysis of parliamentary select committee reports was also undertaken in order to examine institutional viewpoints on engagement. This further reflects the theoretical framework’s emphasis on engagement as a citizen-institution dynamic and, as a result, investigating perspectives from both sides. The fieldwork therefore included an investigation of a system within Parliament that had a clear remit for public engagement. “In many ways”, according to research commissioned by the Liaison Committee, “it is the select committees that have evolved as the interface between the institution of Parliament and the public” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.5). Select committees, in constituting this interface, present (through reports published during each parliamentary session) an engagement discourse that this study aimed to analyse. Select committees “represent important deliberative spaces where policy problems are identified and framed, and where public input is vital” (Hendriks and Kay 2017,

pp.2-3). However, this study sought to problematise a characterisation of all select committees in this way, especially since previous research has observed “an engagement landscape that is inconsistent across the whole committee structure. Public engagement has not yet been fully embedded into the culture of parliament” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.7). In order to examine this question in more detail, four committees were selected for analysis, representing a broad array of parliamentary interests and responsibilities:

1. Health and Social Care Committee (HSC)¹⁰
2. Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (HCLG)
3. Petitions Committee
4. Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC)

Published reports from each committee, across the 2015-16 and 2016-17 sessions, were examined (see Appendix 5). This provided a sufficient number of reports (56 in total) to perform a Critical Discourse Analysis, with the objective of establishing whether – as evidenced through discourse – select committees privileged particular forms of public input (and therefore certain *publics*) over others, thus problematising Hendriks and Kay’s summary.

Having detailed the methods of data collection that this PhD study employed, Section 3.4 will describe the qualitative and quantitative analysis that was applied. However, first it is important to point out that the sequence in which these methods were applied – particularly the questionnaires and focus groups – was highly significant to the data collected. Thus, Section 3.3 will provide an account and rationale for the particular fieldwork sequence, and the way in which it displayed a crucial consistency with this study’s theoretical framework.

3.3 – The fieldwork sequence

The fieldwork sequence applied by this PhD study builds upon a recent investigation by Stoker *et al.* (2016), who apply behavioural psychology to analyse the effects of specific techniques (and the sequence of these techniques) on political discussions. The basis for Stoker *et al.*’s study is Kahneman’s (2012) thesis of ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking, which posits the following:

- Non-deliberative scenarios elicit instinctive, heuristic responses (‘fast’ thinking)

¹⁰ Between the 2016-17 and 2017-19 parliamentary sessions the name of the Health Committee was changed to the Health and Social Care Committee. Between the same sessions, the name of the Communities and Local Government Committee was changed to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. All bibliographical references correspond to the name of the Committee at the time of the relevant report’s publication.

- Deliberative scenarios encourage nuanced, reflexive contributions ('slow' thinking)

Stoker *et al.*'s study concluded that hostility towards politics was more common during non-deliberative exercises, such as word-association. Conversely, discussive, deliberative tasks (e.g. focus groups) prompted decreasing negativity, with participants citing lived experience rather than normative assumptions (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016). This approach is consistent with the 'cultural displacement' narrative discussed in the Literature Review and theoretical framework; that apathy and negativity towards politics, though existent, can often be exaggerated through narrow definitions of 'engagement'. The consistency derives from Stoker *et al.*'s finding that, as their methods became more discussive, participants conceptualised 'politics' with increasing nuance, while decreasing their use of heuristics (defined by Kahneman as ready-made, instinctive responses that can be 'mapped' onto difficult questions (2012, pp.98-99)).

Focus groups were therefore an essential fieldwork component as they have been shown to facilitate 'slow' thinking; in other words, they allow for considered participant responses which rely less on heuristics. Engagement is defined by this thesis as co-constitutive, emphasising the importance of individual standpoints and subjectivity. It is therefore paramount to identify and utilise methods by which these standpoints can be expressed by participants. Focus groups were particularly conducive to this objective, allowing participants to answer questions based on their own frames of reference (Vromen 2010; Luntz 1994). Secondly, the theoretical framework also described narratives and storytelling as significant (and under-researched) *vis-à-vis* engagement. Focus groups facilitate the relation of personal stories to broader cultural narratives (Gamson 1992, pp.142-143), thus they represented a crucial facet of our fieldwork. The focus groups were applied in a citizen and staff context, with a view to utilising their value in "understand[ing] the 'mood' of the electorate" (Vromen 2010, p.259). The pre-session questionnaire, by contrast, was designed to facilitate 'fast' thinking, the first (non-demographic) question being a word-association task (see Appendix 2). The second questionnaire provided the opportunity for feedback on the engagement session (which was, in itself, a discussive forum), as well as a second set of political standpoints that could be directly compared. The focus groups, meanwhile, were intended to encourage further reflection and reflexivity. The sequence of the fieldwork techniques is illustrated below, in relation to the engagement session and Stoker *et al.*'s application of the 'fast/slow' thinking dynamic:

Figure 7 – Chronology and structure of the fieldwork, encompassing the methods used, participant activities, and the mode of thought

Fieldwork process	Participant process	Mode of thought
Questionnaire 1	Instinctive response	'Fast'
Engagement session	Discussion	↓
Questionnaire 2	Reflection	
Focus group	Further reflection	'Slow'

The macro-structure provided in Figure 7 gives an indication as to how 'fast' and 'slow' thinking both develop alongside the quantitative and qualitative methods. As Figure 7 illustrates, the sequence of fieldwork processes was designed to facilitate different modes of thought. Kahneman's work in behavioural psychology, and Stoker *et al.*'s application of this within political science, both show these modes of thought to profoundly influence participant input. Subsequent quantitative and qualitative analysis would be based upon the extent to which the engagement sessions *and the fieldwork methods utilised* successfully drew out 'fast' and 'slow' thinking, and what type of participant responses were characterised by each. Of particular interest, for example, would be the types of heuristic that participants referred to when in 'fast' thinking mode, and the types of story that were referenced and communicated in 'slow' thinking mode. Another research question relates to whether 'slow' thinking did indeed manifest in a greater degree of positivity (or, perhaps, a lesser degree of intuitive cynicism) towards politics and Parliament. The methods by which these questions were addressed will be discussed in the following section.

3.4 – Quantitative analysis

SPSS analysis

Questionnaire responses, as well as the contextual factors discussed earlier, were coded using SPSS in order to identify trends and themes across different engagement sessions. The following variables were coded:

- *Pre/post questionnaire* – whether the questionnaire was filled out before or after the session
- *Parliamentary/non-parliamentary* – whether the engagement session was organised by Parliament or by a different organisation
- *Westminster/non-Westminster* – whether the engagement session took place within the Parliamentary Estate, or outside it
- *Individual characteristics* – the participant’s age group and sex
- *Engagement quantifiers* – whether the participant was currently a member of a political party, and whether they voted in the last general election
- *Questionnaire responses* – responses to 15 separate statements using a Likert scale

The objective of the *pre/post questionnaire* variable was to discern whether the engagement session had made any difference to the attitudes of attendees. The *parliamentary/non-parliamentary* variable was included in order to establish whether engagement sessions organised by Parliament, or by a different organisation, indicated a greater or lesser influence on their attendees. The *Westminster/non-Westminster* variable was included in order to discern the influence of Westminster as a physical (and/or symbolic) setting. Parliament’s symbolic importance and ‘abstract’ qualities (and the practical significance of both) are key areas of interest within this thesis (see Chapters 1 & 2), reflecting the inclusion of relevant variables to address this. The *Westminster/non-Westminster* variable was therefore included to help quantify symbolic and abstract factors with respect to engagement session influence. *Individual characteristics* provide a demographic basis of comparison; for example, in investigating whether a certain age group or gender revealed the most significant attitudinal changes.

The inclusion of *engagement quantifiers* requires some clarification since, in the Literature Review (see Chapter 1), we discussed the unsuitability of certain quantifiers as (self-explanatory) indicators of political engagement. This study avoids using *engagement quantifiers* (e.g. party membership and voting) as an objective shorthand for political engagement. Instead, it examines the subjective nature of these quantifiers; for example, the relationship between party membership/election voting and participants’ self-perceived political engagement. These subjectivities were also examined through the focus groups and elite interviews; for example, whether participants’ self-perceptions of being politically engaged (expressed through the questionnaires) were couched in terms of tangible quantifiers (e.g. voting, party membership, and activism) or attitudes (e.g. trust, citizenship, proactivity) elsewhere in the questionnaires and/or in a focus group scenario. In this sense, *engagement quantifiers* were studied in relation to the subjective meaning that they were afforded by the participants. In the case of the

questionnaires, the term 'politically engaged' was not mentioned within the questions, due to the researcher's intention to keep the language clear and unambiguous. In lieu of this phrasing, participants responded to the following statement: "I would describe myself as a political person". This question was part of an effort to establish the 'type' of participants that were attending parliamentary engagement sessions; whether they were especially engaged individuals or broadly representative of the populace. Partly, this was to indicate whether the sessions only attracted those who were interested already (another potential quantifier of (un)successful engagement).

Quantitative analysis was used in order to investigate the relationship between the first five sets of variables (listed above) and the attitudes expressed through the *questionnaire responses*. The influence of the engagement sessions was thereby inferred from examining questionnaire responses and the factors that were significant. Only one of the questions within the questionnaire referred directly to the engagement session ("Q1: this session has/will increase my interest in politics"). The remaining 14 questions addressed attitudes; comparing the two provided an additional basis for establishing effectiveness. This entailed examining which of these attitudes (if any) changed, and why. For example, it would be possible for a group to profess greater understanding of Parliament and Government, but not greater satisfaction towards either. *Questionnaire responses* were analysed through SPSS using descriptive statistics, in order to determine the association between these variables (for example, participation in elections and self-describing as a 'political' person). Moreover, examining participant responses in terms of Mean, and Standard Deviation, allowed us to observe not only the degree of attitudinal change but the degree to which participant attitudes converged or varied. The responses were also grouped according to their respective engagement sessions, so individual sessions could be cross-compared and studied individually. Quantitative resources such as the European Commission's 'Eurobarometer', and the Hansard Society's Political Engagement audits, provided a basis for comparison in terms of whether participant attitudes differed from these established studies.

Word association categories

In both questionnaires, one of the first questions was *open* (see Appendix 2), providing participants with a word-association exercise: "What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the word 'politics'?". Because the question was included in both questionnaires, analysing responses quantitatively could – in a similar way to the *questionnaire responses* –

indicate attitudinal shifts as a result of the engagement session experience. Stoker *et al.* provide a quantitative means of analysing open text-based questions, using word association categories to group responses thematically, as follows (2016, p.8):

- Deception (lies, spin, broken promises, unfulfilled pledges, etc.)
- Corruption (corrupt conduct, scandal, legal criminality, cheating, etc.)
- Feather-nesting (expenses overpaid, multiple houses, side-payments, nepotism, etc.)
- Self-serving (self-interested, self-regarding, unprincipled, ambitious, etc.)
- Politicking (confrontational, canny, mudslinging, not listening)
- Privileged social background (public school, 'old boys' clubs)
- Boring (mind numbing, dull, uninteresting)
- Incomprehensible (confusing, impossible to understand, a mess)
- Other (cuts, slow to respond)

Stoker *et al.*'s study focuses on negative responses, opting not to list neutral or positive word association categories. The reason given is that only "a small proportion [of the 209 word association responses] were neutral and only seven were in any sense positively connoted" (2016, p.8). The vast majority of responses, meanwhile, "associated politics with...unambiguously pejorative connotations" (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016, p.8). The small number of positive responses "were focused around the idea that politics is needed and provides a service", and "was seen to express ideals" (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016, p.8). Neutral responses, meanwhile, identified aspects of the political process in an objective, descriptive sense (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016).

The negative categories used by Stoker *et al.* were utilised for this study, and used as codes for analysis in NVivo. The number of word association terms in each category could then be uploaded to SPSS for frequency analysis (as well as being compared with Stoker *et al.*'s findings). This thesis also sought to build on Stoker *et al.*'s research through establishing neutral and positive categories. We contend that it is useful to examine even a small number of positive responses, and highlight thematic overlaps; in other words, identifying certain aspects of politics that attract positivity. Another reason for detailing positive responses was our use of prospective (pre-session) and retrospective (post-session) questionnaires, in contrast to Stoker *et al.* This allowed for direct comparison, and an analysis of progression in positivity/negativity (if any) between the start and end of the session. Drawing on the findings of the Stoker *et al.* study (2016, p.8), the neutral word association categories were designed to be descriptive rather than thematic:

- Neutral Responses
 - Parliament
 - Government
 - Democracy (citizenship, transparency, accountability etc.)
 - Parliamentary/extra-parliamentary
 - Parliamentary and partisan engagement
 - Extra-parliamentary engagement (lobbying, petitioning etc.)
 - Geography (international, local etc.)
 - Power (influence, law, control, leadership etc.)
 - Process (strategy, decision-making etc.)
 - Representation (people, equality, voices, rights, freedom)
 - Other (history, media, news)

The positive word association groups (listed below) were relatively few in number for the same reason, namely the expectation (informed by the Stoker *et al.* study) that there would not be many positive responses to categorise:

- Positive Responses
 - Progress
 - Importance
 - Community
 - Interest
 - Involvement encouraged

The differences between positive and neutral responses were often subtle. For example, several participant responses used the word ‘change’, which was ultimately coded as positive (under the *Progress* category). Obviously ‘change’ can encompass positive and negative connotations. However, since negative responses often focused on continuity (i.e. a patent lack of change), ‘change’ was coded positively, as an antithesis; as ‘progress’. Other responses, such as ‘debate’ and ‘adversarial’, were open to similar problematisation. ‘Debate’ can be construed negatively (in the context of adversarial, ‘bear pit’ politics) and positively (recognition of pertinent issues). It was, however, coded as a neutral response, being an everyday aspect of parliamentary (and political) procedure. Conversely, ‘adversarial’ was coded as a negative response, since – in contrast to ‘debate’ – it clearly presupposed a specific attitude and atmosphere. As discussed throughout this chapter, a benefit of using two questionnaires is in establishing a basis for comparison. The engagement sessions provide, in their own right, a forum for discussion, facilitating a ‘slower’, more reflexive mode of thought, even before the focus group discussion.

Through frequency analysis, the word-association exercises in both questionnaires provided a means for quantitatively analysing the shifts in theme and tone within participant responses, prompted by the engagement session.

3.5 – Qualitative analysis

NVivo analysis

Qualitative analysis was conducted primarily through NVivo. The analysis employed “thematic coding...involv[ing] a balance of deductive coding (derived from the philosophical framework)”, as well as “inductive coding (themes emerging from participant’s discussions)” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006, p.89). This interplay was reflected in the grouping of NVivo codes under two ‘tiers’: Broad Topics, and Specific Themes. These tiers (along with their corresponding codes) are listed below:¹¹

1. Broad Topics (‘deductive’ tier): reflecting the (semi-) structure of the focus group
 - a. Expectations of politics and politicians
 - b. Introducing oneself
 - c. Issue-based politics
 - d. Level of UK engagement
 - e. Self-identifying as engaged/non-engaged
 - f. Systemic issues (e.g. electoral landscape)
 - g. Thoughts on engagement session (if applicable)
 - h. Thoughts of MPs, compared with view of *an MP*
2. Specific Themes (‘inductive’ tier): independently raised by participants
 - a. *Change or decline* narrative
 - b. Defining political engagement
 - c. Defining politics
 - d. Definitions of Parliament
 - e. Events
 - f. Means of engaging
 - g. Parliament’s engagement culture

¹¹ Note that these codes are in alphabetical order, rather than the typical order in which they were raised by the researcher/participants.

- h. Storytelling
- i. Technology

The first tier (Broad Topics) corresponds to the questions asked by the researcher, and direct participant responses; commonalities between the responses (if applicable), general tonal similarities, and so on. The first tier was explicitly guided by the theoretical framework, and the aims and objectives of the methodology (hence its 'deductive' nature). We have previously discussed the functions of focus groups in allowing participants to follow their own 'agenda'. The first tier corresponds to the 'agenda' of the researcher, while the second relates to that of the participants.

The second tier (Specific Themes) consists of themes that the participants raised themselves. This tier was useful in collating overarching interpretations and common sentiments, as well as comparing the number of references grouped within each code (which helped to indicate how pervasive they were as topics of discussion). The number of references relates to the number of times a focus group/elite interview extract was manually linked to an NVivo code. The number of references within the 'Broad Topics' codes is not so illuminative, since they correspond to the researcher's questions in each focus group (see Appendix 4); their frequency was therefore relatively consistent. The codes within the second tier were built around participants' interpretations of the core topics; particularly what they volunteered as input (hence this tier's 'inductive' nature). The tiering system also allowed matrix queries to be run on NVivo, invaluable for identifying patterns and tendencies across groups of participants (Bazeley and Jackson 2013, p.141). Using matrix queries, those who expressed a negative view of political engagement across the UK (code 1d) could, for example, be coded in terms of whether they also adhered to the 'change' or 'decline' narrative (code 2a) discussed in the theoretical framework. Having two 'tiers' of codes made this process much more straightforward, in order to identify trends between participant responses (Broad Topics) and the topics they went on to raise themselves (Specific Themes).

Examining the number of references for each code provides a means of examining the salience of certain topics, as well as thematic connections between them; for example, the number of references made to a Specific Theme like 'technology' (code 2i), when discussing a Broad Topic such as political engagement. This is useful for examining conceptual relationships, such as the perceived usefulness of new technologies as channels for participation. We can examine how synonymised these two concepts are, since NVivo (as a text-based analysis program) allows us to view the context in which terms are associated and connected. Here we can see the value of establishing a second tier of coding for 'volunteered' topics, since the number of times these

topics are raised indicates how prominent or pertinent they are from the viewpoints of the participants. The first tier of NVivo codes, being centred on the researcher's questions, concentrated on themes and tones rather than frequency; for example, participants' thoughts on whether politics was becoming more issue-based (code 1c) or self-identifying as engaged (code 1e). The question here was not how frequently these topics came up (since they were questions posed consistently by the researcher) but the variance of responses when answering them. In the case of these two codes, recording (and coding) participant responses helped to establish a range of issues that could be considered 'political'. It also provided a means for examining the ways in which participants could describe (and legitimise) their own engagement.

Narrative analysis

The focus groups and elite interviews, and subsequent NVivo analysis, were also intended to investigate narrative and storytelling. This was done in two principle ways. The first way relates to examples of parliamentary stories and storytelling that were discussed in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2). Participants were openly asked for their opinions on engagement through storytelling (not necessarily in reference to specific campaigns). The second way entailed participants elaborating their own political positions through narrative; telling stories about themselves to situate their self-perceived political engagement. This is key to exploring the interpretations of politics and engagement that we have discussed thus far, especially since storytelling is particularly conducive to "understanding people's interpretation[s]...the narratives or stories that people tell of their lives, and the way they construct their narratives, are rich sources of data that can be used to explore social life" (Willis 2010, p.424). This was a less 'transparent' method of investigation (compared to openly asking for participants' opinions) and relied more upon subsequent NVivo analysis. Chapter 2 discusses the personal intuitiveness of narratives and storytelling; one of the intentions of the fieldwork was to observe this directly, within a discussive environment. It was also important to note when these instances occurred; whether they typically took place nearer to the end of the discussion, for example, and what this indicated about the typical 'arc' of a focus group session.

Narrative theory conceptualises two ways in which narratives – "representation[s] of a story (an event or series of events)" (Abbott 2008, p.237) – can be communicated to others:

- Diegesis – representation of a story through *telling* it
- Mimesis – representation of a story through *imitation*

The fieldwork methodology therefore aimed to identify instances in which either or both of these devices were evident, and establish commonalities in their usage. Narratives are told and presented through *diegesis*. Through *mimesis*, by contrast, the participants are *simulating* a narrative; referencing a particular interpretation (not necessarily *their* interpretation) often through imitating it (for example, speaking as a supposed adherent or participant). Mimesis thus represents a point of interplay between a focus of this research (narrative) and the emergence of a participant-generated theme (simulated interpretations). There are two main points to note here: that instances of mimesis are confirmations of popular narratives through their simulation by participants, and that the use of mimesis (itself *a narrative device*) highlights the appeal of narratives in communicating personally-felt truths. In the previous chapter we discussed the non-sequential characteristics of narrative; that a narrative need not be tied to a sequence of events. It need only relate to a theme that is meaningful to the storyteller. Here we see this factor at play; the relation of a narrative through a simulated voice, communicated by the participant. Its relationship with *mimesis* and ‘othering’, and the effect of the focus group – in accordance with ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ thinking – formed the basis of narrative analysis.

Outside of analysing participant responses, narrative analysis was also applied to two recent parliamentary engagement initiatives, both of which were publicised in the same year. These initiatives are *The Story of Parliament* (House of Commons Enquiry Service 2016) which, available as a booklet and poster, provides key details about Parliament and its development, and *Your Story, Our History* (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b). The latter is a series of YouTube films commissioned by Parliament, depicting individuals discussing their life stories and the relevance of parliamentary legislation to them. In doing so, key topics such as racial equality and gender relations are addressed. Narrative analysis was used in order to establish which of these initiatives displayed the most fidelity to the concept of (effective) storytelling, as it is set out in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2); that is to say, whether these stories were in fact *told* or merely disseminated as another form of information. Narrative theorists have, for many years, acknowledged and studied “the management of narrative information through the manipulation of point of view” (Bauman 1986, p.34). This area of inquiry is invaluable in examining underlying power dynamics (along with the Critical Discourse Analysis discussed in the following sub-section). Our narrative analysis therefore aimed to investigate and identify such crucial elements as the identity of the narrator, and who (or what) the story was presented as ‘belonging’ to. The relevance of this question stems from the authority claim inherent in the role of *narrator* (Bauman 1986), which potentially reflects upon who is presented as having the *right* to the story, and the right to tell it (Welch 2009).

In addition, the narrative analysis aimed to examine what type of audience (and, for that matter, what type of Parliament) was being 'constructed' through these stories, consistent with a constructivist interpretation of political representation (Disch 2015; Saward 2010). Through narrative analysis these initiatives could be studied in terms of their feasible effectiveness in reaching their conceptualised audience, and – by extension – their likelihood of (co-)constituting effective parliamentary engagement. The differences between the two initiatives in this respect would also demonstrate the degree of variance as to how *storytelling* as a method is understood and practiced across different engagement efforts and departments, and therefore across the institution of Parliament. Moreover, the construction (i.e. presupposition) of an audience raises a potential discussion as to whether parliamentary engagement initiatives of this type prioritise certain audiences over others (and, by extension, prioritise engagement with certain publics). The latter question is a fundamentally important one, addressing the specific type of engagement dynamic that is currently conceptualised at an institutional level. This question of 'prioritised publics' was also addressed through Critical Discourse Analysis of select committee reports, as discussed below.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In addition to narrative analysis, a Critical Discourse Analysis was also utilised in order to explore the relationship between stories and information; in this case, the extent to which they were dichotomised within select committee reports. This mode of analysis aimed to establish the parliamentary discourse relating to both terms and, specifically, whether one represented a more perceptibly legitimate form of public input than another. This relates back to the question of 'usual suspects'; not (in this case) regarding engagement session attendees but to the form of expertise and input that select committee reports typically draw upon. The discourse analysis followed Fairclough's "three-dimensional framework of analysis" (Jacobs 2010, p.356):

1. Textual Analysis
2. Discursive Practice
3. Social Practice

The textual analysis entailed examining select committee reports that utilise terminology pertinent to narrative and storytelling. The context in which terms such as 'story' and 'anecdote' appeared was analysed on the basis of its location within the broader text, and the preceding and subsequent terms within the respective sentence. The latter was instrumental in determining a discourse of story 'ownership'; in other words, which (or perhaps more

importantly, *whose*) stories were included in published parliamentary material. This could range from individual testimonies and anecdotes to news stories (which, given their relevance to ‘framing’ political events such as the expenses scandal (see Chapters 1 & 2), are also highly significant). The discursive practice, meanwhile, consisted of examining the rhetorical devices used within these texts. This was of especial interest in terms of establishing the variance between different reports (and, by extension, different committees) in their approach to, and treatment of, stories in comparison with ‘information’ and ‘data’.

The last ‘dimension’ – social practice – involved linking these findings to the other qualitative findings of this thesis, to help establish a sense of parliamentary ‘culture’ (or discourse) with regard to narrative and storytelling. For instance, the elite interviews, as discussed previously in this chapter, were designed to investigate Parliament’s engagement culture, as was also the case with the staff focus groups. Comparing the findings of the elite interviews and focus groups to those of the Critical Discourse Analysis can contribute to a clearer understanding of the institutional perspective(s) toward stories, information, engagement and ‘publics’. Establishing a parliamentary discourse was also essential to our examination, in detail, of the dynamic between Parliament and individuals, a dynamic that constitutes our fundamental definition of parliamentary engagement (see Chapter 2). This dynamic was studied according to the question of whether input was effectively facilitated or even desired, and if so, whether certain types of public input (and, by extension, certain *publics*) appear favoured and privileged through their inclusion in published parliamentary material. Analysing this dynamic through its associated discourse(s) can reveal a great deal about a presupposed (and manifest) balance of power (Fairclough 2015, pp.73-100). The “constraints on contents, relations, and subjects” (Fairclough 2015, p.98) exercised by one agent over another (for instance, an institution over citizens), and visible through discourse analysis, is invaluable in studying and contextualising the *dynamic* of engagement that this thesis addresses.

Conclusions

This chapter has presented the numerous techniques that were used to capture the way participants frame engagement; drawing on heuristics and other instinctive devices, as well as providing nuance through personal experience and narratives. In elaborating the mixed-methods approach that this PhD study pursued, we have also shown the ways in which the methods were designed to complement, enrich and substantiate each other, thus avoiding an assumption of one *form* of response as being definitive and/or self-explanatory. The quantitative

elements of this methodology were highly significant in gathering a large volume of data relating to participants' attitudes toward Parliament and politics, as well as their preconceptions (regarding likely efficacy) of the engagement session they attended. Quantitative analysis was also valuable in establishing the more demographic aspects of the body of participants; whether they represented, for example, an especially engaged and/or participatory cohort, thereby raising questions as to the issue of 'usual suspects'. The qualitative analysis, meanwhile, was important in subsequently *understanding* the attitudes observed, as well as investigating the narratives that proliferated among citizens (and their various standpoints on engagement) and within Parliament. The latter necessitated an analysis of the select committee reports and engagement initiatives outlined above, in order to examine whether – alongside the question of 'usual suspects' – a certain type of public input (and, by extension, a certain type of public) was facilitated, encouraged and desired by Parliament. The following chapters present the empirical findings of this research.

Chapter 4 – Narratives of parliamentary engagement

To read this poem one must have myriad eyes...

Virginia Woolf – *The Waves*

Introduction

This chapter examines the various ways in which parliamentary engagement – and Parliament as an institution – are understood inside and outside of Westminster. In doing so, we will identify, investigate and problematise dominant narratives of Parliament; narratives that are visible among the citizenry (with respect to Parliament and engagement) and within Parliament itself (with respect to the citizenry and the institution). These narratives underpin citizen perceptions of parliamentary engagement, as well as Parliament's own culture of engagement. Counter-narratives will also be discussed in their capacity to resist dominant narratives that inherently restrict engagement. These counter-narratives also problematise the concept of a single parliamentary engagement narrative. This thesis has put forward a definition of engagement as *a consistent and meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)*. Dialogue is co-constituted, and incumbent on mutually understood and accepted meanings, constructed through engagement (i.e. active interpretation) with a perceived context (van Wessel 2016; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Whether engagement *means* the same thing across Parliament (and its myriad departments) is a question that this chapter will address. We will also be examining what Parliament *means* to citizens in the context of engagement, and what citizens perceive to be the present state of parliamentary engagement. The techniques that participants use to create and express these meanings – which were captured and examined through focus groups and elite interviews, and subsequent qualitative analysis – will lead us into the next chapter, which further discusses narrative (in the form of storytelling) as an active device for engagement.

4.1 – “Political engagement in those days”: investigating narratives of *change and decline*

As the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement points out, “Political engagement can be measured in terms of what people think, but also in terms of what they do” (2018, p.68). We can expand on this by also examining what participants perceive about broader social attitudes; *what they think people think*, to employ what might seem at first to be a tautology. The participants in this study seldom assessed their own political engagement without referring to a broader narrative. Dominant narratives, after all, are an imperishable form of situated knowledge (Young 2000; Young 1996; Lyotard 1984); i.e. subjective sense-making. This is especially relevant to political efficacy, a key tenet of successive Hansard Audits (2018; 2017; 2016) and many other studies of engagement and participation (Dvořák, Zouhar and Novák 2017; Sloam 2014; Zúñiga, Copeland and Bimber 2014; Parkinson 2009; Kulynych 1997), because efficacy implies a judgement about oneself and broader society, thereby *drawing upon* situated knowledge. Perceptions of efficacy denote two inextricable sentiments: the speaker’s self-perceived capacity to effect change, and their perception of the capacity of others to do so. This is encapsulated in the following statement: “When *people like me* get involved in politics, *they* really can change the way that the UK is run” (Hansard Society 2018, p.42, emphasis added). Responses to this statement were used as quantifiers for the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement (2018). Notably, the respondent is being asked to provide an answer on behalf of *others like them*, entailing a presupposition of how others feel. An expression of low efficacy, therefore, should not (and cannot) be extricated from a corresponding social narrative. Discussions of engagement rely on frames of reference – on narratives – which indicate broader social perceptions.

This links to a broader point regarding participant responses, which often involved a comparison to a broader society or community. Statements on politics were often comparative in this sense, exemplified in statements such as: “I’m interested in [politics], probably more so than some of the people I know.”¹² Given the evident importance that the participants attached to context (and the value of collecting these perspectives), it was essential to establish whether *cultural displacement* (i.e. *change*) or *citizen disaffection* (i.e. *decline*) (Loader 2007) was the more pervasive narrative of contemporary political engagement. As described in Chapter 2, narratives do not just provide context; they exert an effect. As Gamson writes, “how people construct meaning is, in fact, a series of parallel stories in which patterns emerge through juxtaposing the

¹² Citizen Focus Group Participant 7A. *Focus group with Author*. 21 March 2018, Marple.

process on different issues” (1992, p.9). These ‘parallel stories’ denote individual attempts to explicate experience, partly through consultation of a reference frame; thus the choice of frame is highly significant. Narratives are highly relevant here; as Bennett and Edelman describe, the “narrative frame” is a means of situation in the social world (1985, p.159). We will first examine participants’ perceptions of contemporary levels of engagement – shown in Table 3 below – and whether these reflected *change* or *decline* narratives, and what factors were used to construct a ‘narrative frame’. As Loader points out, *citizen disaffection* and *cultural displacement* narratives rely on different understandings of engagement. Thus “formal institutions and procedures...such as representation, parties, parliaments and voting” quantify *citizen disaffection*, while *cultural displacement* embraces “deinstitutionalised forms of political engagement...enacted within networks and spaces” (Loader 2007, p.3).

At a scholarly level, as Manning argues, studies of engagement that stress *decline* generally employ “quantitative methodologies and orthodox (hegemonic) notions of politics”, which “privileges a notion of institutionalised politics and holds the activities of political parties and electoral politics at its core” (2013, pp.18-19). The participant input captured below in Table 3 bears this tendency out:

Table 3 – Perceptions of level of UK engagement (as a % of total coded input) across all interviews and focus groups

Positive (39%)	Neutral (26%)	Negative (35%)
<p>...you get lots of young people who support Greenpeace, whatever, want to stop roads being built, obviously are active politically, but just see politicians as grey, middle-aged and not addressing issues they feel strongly about.¹³</p>	<p>I think it’s education as well, that can help, definitely in school, particularly, you know, challenging views as well...it is part of the curriculum, but you can engage the kids in that way.¹⁴</p>	<p>It’s sad to say when you’re looking at things such as if England got to a World Cup final, more people would tune in to watch that than would vote in an election.¹⁵</p>

¹³ Staff Focus Group Participant 3C. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

¹⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participant 1B. *Focus group with Author*. 14 November 2016, Darlington.

¹⁵ Staff Focus Group Participant 1A. *Staff focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

<p>...young people really care about the world they live in, they're asking their MPs to interact with them...so outside of that kind of 'once every meant-to-be five years' turnout, I think people do care, but they are engaged ...¹⁶</p>	<p>...social media gives you a forum to [engage] ...when I was your age we didn't have anything like that so if you did want to have a debate you pretty much had to turn up in person or write a letter...¹⁷</p>	<p>...my friends outside of the Politics 'zone' probably aren't, they're not very interested... they're sort of fed up with how everything is now, they're fed up with Brexit, they're fed up with the same old, same old parties.¹⁸</p>
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As Table 3 shows, negative perceptions were typically framed with reference to institutions (or engagement with institutions); to parties and unions, and to electoral participation. Conversely, positive accounts focused more on intangible factors; on issues and feelings, while critiquing (implicitly or explicitly) turnout as a meaningful indicator. Their overarching sentiment – to quote William Bruce Cameron – was that “not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (1963, p.13).

Positive and negative descriptions of the level of UK engagement occurred in very similar frequencies, as Table 3 shows (as percentages of total coded input). Also evident is a relative absence of neutrality (i.e. typically descriptive statements, or objective recommendations for improvement); that is to say, little alignment with a *status quo*. Reinforcing this point is the fact that in several instances, participant input was coded as both negative *and* positive. The level of positivity expressed by participants (towards engagement) often depended on whether institutions formed part of their frame. A dichotomy was continually drawn between engagement through traditional, formal channels (i.e. the type of engagement in which Parliament was seen to be naturally relevant), and forms of engagement that were more inherently personal, ethical, and informal. The following statement from a staff focus group participant, drawing specifically upon Hansard Society research, exemplifies this dichotomisation:

I think it was in the Hansard thing, basically just like people have a, people want more democracy but they want less politics, and I think that's what summarised that a bit. People are still very active and willing to get involved in things, maybe

¹⁶ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

¹⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2C. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

¹⁸ Staff Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

not along the traditional party lines anymore, but I do think that it's a bit, being involved in parties is like, not particularly fashionable anymore...¹⁹

As demonstrated by the above extract, the research participants often recognised that the question of engagement was subject to considerable nuance, and depended on what they understood themselves (or others) to be engaging *with*. As discussed previously, these judgements typically relied on a frame of reference and were thus comparative in nature. Table 3 illustrates a preponderance of perceived change (positive and negative), relative to a *status quo* (neutral). This tendency also reflects the literature on engagement more generally; that the question is not whether change has occurred, but what the change signifies (see Section 1.1). Discussing perceptions of engagement in terms of *change* and *decline*, rather than positive or negative assessments of the level of UK engagement, captures the nuances evidenced by the participants, since *change* and *decline* are not reducible to 'positive' and 'negative'. Instead they reflect the fact that the majority of participants spoke in terms of change and not *status quo*; the primary difference lay in the type of change that was discussed, and the basis for comparison, as Table 4 demonstrates:

Table 4 – Examples of participant input adhering to *change* and *decline* narratives

Change (cultural displacement)	Decline (citizen disaffection)
...I know a lot of people who are very passionate about issues, perhaps more so than the average 60-plus voter who will just turn up and vote and won't go beyond that, that engagement. ²⁰	But political party membership's rock bottom now, and trade union membership's rock bottom. Nobody joins things. ²¹
...turnout at general elections is lower than it was...in the mid-20th century. On the other hand, I would argue political engagement in those days was pretty basic. ²²	I think people have just lost a little bit of faith in that, because through the years it hasn't really worked for them. ²³

¹⁹ Staff Focus Group Participant 2D. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

²⁰ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4B. *Parliamentary focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

²¹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5B. *Parliamentary focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

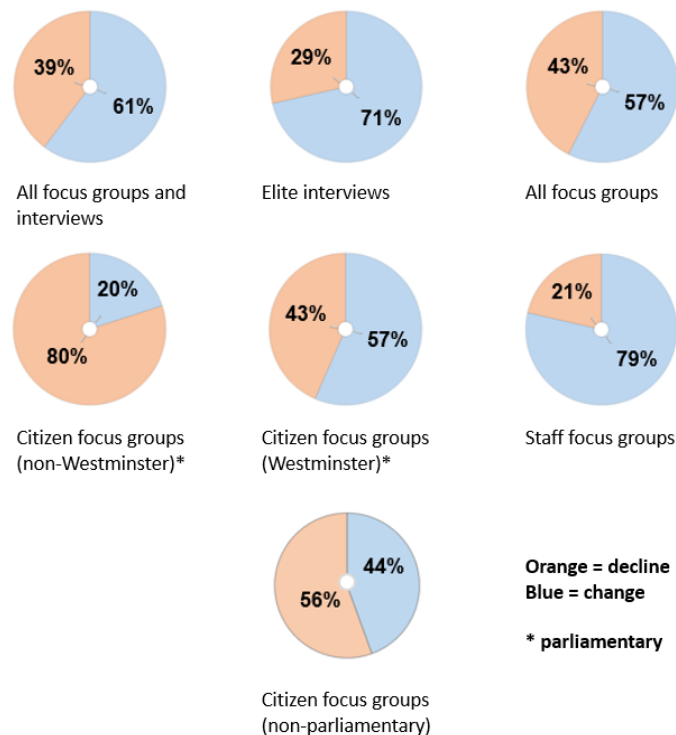
²² Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Staff interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

²³ Citizen Focus Group Participant 3A. *Parliamentary focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster.

<p>...certainly in terms of, yeah being engaged with what's going on, having a view, probably talking about it a certain amount with friends and colleagues.²⁴</p>	<p>...I think, political parties and the mechanisms of Parliament, you know, I think there's a general disillusionment with the way things work...a lot of which is very well-founded.²⁵</p>
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Discussions of *change* and *decline* were useful in framing responses according to a definition of engagement (as with the positive and negative perceptions captured in Table 3), but also according to a judgement of *traditional* engagement. That is, “political engagement in those days” and engagement as it would have occurred to “the average 60-plus voter” (see Table 4). A commonality is visible across Table 3 and 4: describing positive change required either expanding one’s definition of engagement beyond institutional engagement, or consciously contrasting it with traditional engagement. In further establishing what this indicates about perceptions of institutions, Figure 8 shows the preponderance of statements adhering to the *change* or *decline* narrative, according to the setting (and by extension the type of group):

Figure 8 – Adherence to *change/decline* narrative, according to group type



²⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2C. *Parliamentary focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

²⁵ Citizen Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 23 February 2018, York.

The respective prevalence of the *change* and *decline* narrative is expressed as a percentage of associated statements (see examples in Table 4). At the bottom of these visualisations is one entitled ‘citizen focus groups (non-parliamentary)’; these groups (not organised by Parliament, but sharing a broad overlapping focus on engagement) were analysed in the same way as their parliamentary equivalent, as discussed in the Methodology (see Chapter 3).²⁶

The most immediate difference between the visualisations in Figure 8 is that of the citizen focus groups compared to the staff focus groups and elite interviews. Staff focus groups and elite interviews all took place in Westminster. There is also a notable difference between the citizen focus groups that took place in Westminster, and those that took place outside it (adhering primarily to *change* and *decline* narratives respectively); the latter includes non-parliamentary focus groups, as we can see above. On the basis of these visualisations, it would appear that the likelihood of participants discussing engagement in terms of *decline* rather than *change* is higher if the focus group takes place outside Westminster. On the same basis it would also appear that, from a staff viewpoint, the dominant narrative when discussing engagement is that of *change* (both the elite interviews and staff focus groups indicate a preponderance of around three-quarters). This raises the question of “*who comes to Westminster?*” As the methodology chapter points out, the Westminster-based parliamentary engagement sessions (and the subsequent focus groups) are composed of people who could (and *did*) travel to Parliament, whereas the focus groups from the parliamentary sessions outside of Westminster comprise people who ‘have been travelled to’; a Parliamentary staff member has travelled to their local area to conduct a parliamentary engagement session. This distinction potentialises a difference in the type of research participants that these events attract. Indeed, the participants sometimes identified themselves to be part of a group that would be more engaged than others:

4A: The issue I’ve got is that I’m a Politics student and so are all my friends, so I’ve got a bit of a skewed view.

4C: Yeah there is a bit of a bubble.²⁷

The demographic elements of the first question – *who comes to Parliament?* – will be addressed later in the thesis (see Chapter 6). At this point it is important to note that the perceptions

²⁶ Here we should reiterate that in Figure 8 (and throughout this thesis), ‘citizen’ and ‘staff’ refer to the focus group participants, while ‘parliamentary/non-parliamentary’ refers to whether the relevant engagement session was organised by Parliament or not. ‘Westminster/non-Westminster’ refers to whether the session took place within the Parliamentary Estate. For a detailed discussion of these distinctions please refer to Section 3.2 (see ‘focus groups’). For a full list of focus groups and elite interviews, see Appendix 3.

²⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participants 4A & 4C. *Focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

captured in Figure 8 *were not intuitive*, but a result of focus group discussion, which “persuades people to...be stimulated in their thinking by new insights from others” (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016, p.7). To return to a point made at the beginning of this section, it was important to capture two types of input: what participants thought, and *what they thought other people thought*. The latter denotes perspectives that the participants did not necessarily agree with, but acknowledged to be prevalent. As such they are not the product of intuition – what Stoker *et al.* (2016, p.16) define as “reduced vigilance for countervailing evidence and argument and exaggerated emotional consistency” – but of the reflexivity facilitated by a focus group. Thus the focus group scenario is not a vacuum; it is a variable. What requires investigation is the importance of the focus group *setting* on proliferating narratives; in other words, whether distance from Parliament encourages and legitimates a narrative of distance (and its relevant connotations). Conversely, we will be examining the notion of Parliament representing something more tangible as a result of physical presence. This offers an explanation of the differences between Westminster- and non-Westminster-based parliamentary engagement sessions and their respective focus group settings, and suggests that the differences observed in Figure 8 are not inevitable (i.e. solely a result of demographics, or participant ‘type’) but are shaped by the discussion setting and its associations. It also contributes to an understanding of the effect(s) of the Westminster environment more generally.

4.2 – The abstraction narrative of Parliament

The extent to which Parliament is (or could be) defined as an ‘abstraction’ is highly relevant for two reasons, which relate to parliamentary staff and citizens respectively. The first reason is that articulating Parliament’s role is difficult when its function appears so conciliatory (i.e. so incumbent on managing the views and arguments of others), thereby problematising the formation of a coherent identity (Leston-Bandeira 2016, p.509). The second reason relates to citizen perceptions of Parliament’s intangibility (and, by extension, inaccessibility) being antithetical to relatability, affinity and engagement. This was encapsulated by the observation that “politics, I think, for most people feels like something that’s done to them”.²⁸ Combining these staff and citizen perceptions results in a narrative of *mutually-perceived abstraction*. At a contextual level, what reinforces this narrative is the notion that ‘institutional detachment’ was, traditionally, standard practice. As Kelso observes, “if the public were historically ill-informed

²⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5A. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle. This statement was supported by the other participants in the focus group.

about Parliament, then it was because Parliament, particularly the House of Commons, wanted it that way” (2009, p.337). The Parliamentary Education Service’s current *modus operandi*, daubed across the wall of its Education Centre – *Parliament is yours, Parliament is relevant, and Parliament is evolving* (UK Parliament 2015b) – can resultingly be seen as a direct riposte to this. A narrative of Parliament as a mutually-perceived abstraction represents an antithesis to mutually-constituted dialogue (the definition of engagement as this thesis understands it). Within the fieldwork discussions, references to abstraction typically invoked themes of distance, in both geographical (i.e. ‘non-local’) and intangible terms:

...it’s about striking a balance isn’t it, between sort of being this distant abstract stereotype of an MP, to, the other end being the emotive local candidate...²⁹

This association between distance and abstraction on one hand, and affinity and ‘local-ness’ on the other, was a significant recurring theme. Affinity relates to a form of commonality, not necessarily based on party alignment but on the capacity for personal connectivity (Manning *et al.* 2017; Manning 2015; Manning and Holmes 2013). A difference was often emphasised between perceptions of MPs vaguely (as a group) and of an MP whom one had met or knew enough about to ‘connect’ with:

...if you’ve campaigned for something locally, and you’ve had a response from your MP and, yeah you’ve had that personal relationship where you felt a connection with him, as opposed to just seeing him in the House of Commons every week and being like, you know, “we’ve never seen him in our constituency, fighting for local issues”, because I feel people on a local level are quite passionate about what they see directly around them...³⁰

It makes a difference knowing people on an individual basis doesn’t it, because I think sometimes it’s this concept of ‘us and them’, or ‘the other’, so you’ll see like the group of MPs, it’s like “ah, expenses scandals”, or like you know, “just in it for the power and money...”³¹

The term ‘local’ clearly carries connotations of proximity that transcend geographical location. Proximity is understood variously in studies of engagement; a party’s proximity to ideology, for instance, or to pertinent political issues (De Sio and Franklin 2012; Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Clarke *et al.* 2006). Here – in the case of ‘local’ – we can discern connotations of affinity and empathy; what we may refer to as *personal proximity*. This form of proximity served to differentiate specific MPs from a generalised perception of MPs as a group, and even transcended partisan lines. For example, during a focus group discussion in Marple, the

²⁹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4A. *Focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

³⁰ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4D. *Focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

³¹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5E. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

participants discussed the regular newsletters and Christmas cards that they received from MPs, which they described as ‘all looking the same’ (as part of a broader discussion on MPs, through their communication, appearing routinely unremarkable). They then acknowledged that being a ‘good constituency MP’ was not necessarily a ‘partisan’ judgement, but was instead attributable to visibility and local involvement. This is shown in their discussion of a specific MP:

7B: I knew he’d helped certain people...he’s not my party but he did seem to...

7C: Was that [anon]?

7B: Yeah, he did seem to care about the area [general agreement].

7C: I think he was quite respectful.³²

There is, in this context, a crucial distinction that must be made between citizens “see[ing] politicians as grey, middle-aged and not addressing issues” (Positive response 1, Table 3) and “asking their MPs to interact” (Positive response 2, Table 3). This difference in language – from generalised to possessive – is redolent of Ipsos MORI’s Trust in MPs Poll (2013), which asked respondents for their views on ‘MPs in general’ and ‘their local MP’, the latter gathering markedly more positive results (see Figure 2, and ‘politicians generally’ in Figure 1). It also corresponds with Norton’s observation that citizens typically express a greater positivity towards their local MP than MPs as a group, perceiving “the local MP as a service provider, working on behalf of local people” and the latter with “empty green benches and adversarial conflict” (2013a, p.150). Norton himself highlights the paradox here: the fact that the green benches are often empty *because* of the aforementioned constituency work (2013a, p.150). Coleman diagnoses a similarly paradoxical perception relating to MPs; the expectation that they be “ordinary enough to be representative, while extraordinary enough to be representatives” (2005, p.15). On a broader level, Flinders addresses a ‘demand gap’ between what citizens want and what they can realistically ‘get’ from politics, reflecting that “if politicians are frequently duplicitous (which they frequently are), this may well stem from the public’s own penchant for duplicity” (2012a, p.15). The focus groups (inside and outside Westminster) confirmed a perception of often unrealistically high expectations:

³² Citizen Focus Group Participants 7B & 7C. *Focus group with Author*. 21 March 2018, Marple.

Table 5 – Staff and citizen comments on the ‘demand gap’ within political engagement

Staff	Citizens
<p>Author: ...do you think there is a problem where people expect too much of politics, or the political system, what it can provide, what politicians can actually achieve, what they can encompass as human characteristics?</p> <p>2F: A hundred percent.</p> <p>2B: I think some of the constituents’ letters that we get tend to demonstrate that, and in a sense the disillusion with Parliament is in the same bucket as kind of, some of the more extreme political views that people want a party to take, these are sort of things that are, based on unrealistic expectations on what they can get out of it...</p> <p>2F: And that is why the expenses scandal was so damaging for trust in Parliament. Because people trust their local politician, and as soon as it was being shown that their politician was part of it, then suddenly that trust was completely lost [general agreement].³³</p>	<p>5D: I think, there does seem to be that thing of people pick the bits of other politics from around the world.</p> <p>5B: They want the best bits but they don’t want to pay for it.</p> <p>5D: Yeah. “Oh it would be good if we could have that. Oh I’ve got to pay for it? Ideally not”. And I think they don’t put together in a big picture, how that works.</p> <p>5A: Because you want more funding for the NHS, and there’s like, the whole, like, you’ve got to fund it, you’ve got to do taxes, you’ve got to do x, y and z or take money away from somewhere else, you can’t just give more money to the NHS, you’ve got to support the picture.³⁴</p>
<p>...people have kind of lost sight of the idea of, if they ever had it, that politics means making decisions and making decisions means making mistakes. And I, my attitude towards politics is that, you know, it’s impossible to vote for a party that are going to fulfil all of your ethical demands, or whatever your demands are, you’ve got to make a judgement as to what fits best and what you think is going to produce the best outcomes, or the least worst outcomes. And some people find that very hard to deal with.³⁵</p>	<p>5D: I think there maybe is an expectation that it’s almost like superhuman you know, like well “you’ve been elected to run the country so why aren’t you doing it in the way that each individual thinks, what my ideal country would be, what [anon]’s would be”, we’d all actually be slightly different but all seem to expect that they can get it together, do something that’s great for everybody, not make any mistakes.</p> <p>5B: Infallible.³⁶</p>

³³ Staff Focus Group Participants 2B & 2F. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

³⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participants 5A, 5B & 5D. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

³⁵ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

³⁶ Citizen Focus Group Participants 5B & 5D. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

It was made clear, however, that this problem of expectations was not limited to Parliament; rather, it was relevant to institutions more generally.

...my grandad hates bankers, he was like “ah they took my money, they took my mortgage, then they took my house”, erm and then when, I think when his friend pointed out that he knew a banker, who lived down the road, he said “ah lovely guy, nice guy, best friend in the world”. If people put a face to anything...it will always reflect better on them.³⁷

...people say “oh the NHS is in a terrible state” and you think, “well what was it like the last time you went”, “oh it was great, oh my GP’s marvellous” [laughs].³⁸

Any public servant. Having worked in local government...there’s this attitude that...if you’re a public servant then, you’re a pen-pusher, you’re just a freeloader; you just have an easy time.³⁹

The expectations gap is an abstraction in its own right. Increasing expectations of politics – outstripping what politicians can realistically deliver – entails a wilful abstraction, a disconnection from *personal proximity* as a frame of reference. It can also lead inexorably, in times of crisis, to the branding of MPs as ‘folk devils’ and their (literal) *demonisation* as “members of a new ‘evil’ category” (Flinders 2012b, p.5). What these extracts demonstrate is that perceived distance jeopardises relatability and, by extension, engagement. They also demonstrate a significant interplay between institutions and *representatives of those institutions*: Parliament and MPs, the banking system and bankers, the NHS and GPs. Specifically, the institution was perceived to exert an active effect on its denizens:

5A: And I think Parliament as well seems abstract because it is an abstract place. It’s not, it’s not something that people can relate to, they’re not relating to their MP being in Parliament because they can’t relate to being there, but they can relate to their MP being in the local area, because they’re the local MP but they can’t relate to being in Parliament doing something for them, because it’s not something that’s, I don’t know, it’s not relatable.

5B: Different world.

5A: Yeah, so like the MP goes to this – yeah you’re right – if the MP goes to this different thing that isn’t ‘real’...

5B: It’s very complicated.

5A: When he comes to local areas, “I can be there with him”.⁴⁰

³⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4D. *Focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

³⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5B. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

³⁹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 16 October 2018, Lincoln.

⁴⁰ Citizen Focus Group Participants 5A & 5B. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

The above extract exemplifies the compounding effect of Parliament on the dynamic of political engagement between citizens and their representatives. The perceived distance felt by citizens, which itself undermines political engagement, is attributed in large part to the ‘abstracting’ effect of Parliament. Thus it is not just Parliament *per se* that is viewed in abstract terms; MPs can also be viewed as such, specifically because they are its frequent inhabitants. This point is of especial concern when considering the importance of MPs as “living symbols of a locality” (Crewe 2015, p.104), ‘local’ having the connotations of *personal proximity* that we have discussed. “To be a stranger in your constituency is the greatest sin for all MPs”; Crewe (2015, p.104) notes that this is a commonly-held maxim among MPs. However, as this section illustrates, it is also a sentiment among citizens. Abstraction connotes both distance and pluralised identity, and therefore represents a fundamental hindrance to the prospect of dynamic political engagement.

MPs are symbolic; they represent localities. Legislatures play a similarly symbolic role, “provid[ing] a venue for public deliberation and decision making” but also “symboliz[ing] narratives of nationhood, identity, dignity and whatever other values become “emplaced” in a particular building” (Parkinson 2013, p.440). MPs and Parliament mean different things to different people; symbolic representation is, after all, a “one-to-one” relationship, rather than a self-evident form of meaning (Pitkin 1967, p.98). This thesis has emphasised an understanding of engagement that is incumbent on interplay between institutions and individuals; crucially, the latter encompasses *those who work within the institution itself*. We have established so far (in a manner consistent with existing literature) that citizens speak in different ways about engagement with Parliament and parliamentarians. We will now invert this question, and investigate whether Parliament, across different departments, possesses a consistent understanding of how to engage with citizens. If legislatures are indeed “places where competing narratives are told” (Parkinson 2013, p.440) then it is essential to establish *which* narratives are being told – and, perhaps more importantly, accepted and entrenched – by its staff and officials. Leston-Bandeira highlights the significance of “officials’ own narrative on the purpose of parliamentary public engagement”, since the officials themselves are often responsible for strategising *and* delivering the policy (2016, p.509). Thus from both sides of the citizen-institution dynamic, the ‘reality’ constituted by dominant narratives carries significant practical implications.

4.3 – A ‘holistic institution’? Examining the staff narrative(s) of parliamentary engagement

This section will follow the discussion of the ‘abstraction’ narrative by examining the myriad ways in which ‘engagement’ is understood at a staff level, problematising the notion of a coherent parliamentary narrative. Parliament has possessed an official public engagement strategy since 2006, consistently emphasising the importance of outreach. Before then, “the main focus of public information work was on those who approached Parliament seeking information” (Walker 2011, p.275). The most recent version of the strategy – initiated in 2016 and set to run until 2021 – describes what successful delivery of public engagement would “feel like” for MPs, parliamentary staff, and the public (UK Parliament 2016). The notion that success may ‘look different’ according to MPs, staff and public is not necessarily conducive to a joined-up approach. Problematising this further is the contention that success may ‘look different’ among the staff; between different departments and even between individuals. Rhodes *et al.* identify narratives of the Westminster Model – “amalgam[s] of inheritance, myth, and local tradition” – as being central to understanding its past and present functions (2009, p.221). They comment that “[m]eeting a scholar or practitioner from another Westminster system is like meeting long-lost cousins...it is an extended family of ideas. We recognize the language, the form, and the assumptions” (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009, p.222). This presupposes that language, form and assumptions, while not consistent across legislatures, are at least consistent within them. As this section will illustrate, it is in fact very difficult to claim that Parliament’s language, form and assumptions (even with respect to one responsibility – engagement) are recognisably coherent. This, in turn, reflects upon the accuracy of describing parliamentary engagement in terms of a single narrative.

A narrative denotes “leading principles, widespread ideologies, or socio-cultural perspectives” (Shenhav 2015, p.25). An absence of these carries major implications for Parliament’s identity and, by extension, its ability to engage. The coherence – or even presence – of a ‘Parliamentary identity’ has already been cast into considerable doubt. One means of critique is structural; the lack of a “single institutional voice that speaks for parliament, which is a composite of different actors: political groups and representatives” (Leston-Bandeira 2014, p.8). “Parliament is a ‘they, not an it’” (Petit and Yong 2018, p.24), as mentioned in the introduction to our thesis. This visible link between abstraction, pluralised interests and indistinct identity reinforces the importance of discussing the practical implications (and causes) of an abstraction narrative. Another, more nebulous means of critique relates to Parliament’s attempts to establish legitimacy “through invoking historical and nationalist aspirations of the modern nation-state in tandem”, which

“creates tensions in the functioning of parliament leading to a fractured identity of the institution” (Rai 2010, p.286). As Loewenberg points out, what a legislature claims to represent is highly relevant to practical concerns like nation-building (2011, pp.33-34); this representative function is also relevant to (and reflected in) a legislature’s structure and composition. What is consistent across these two academic perspectives is the importance of identity as a practical parliamentary concern. As Kelso points out,

Parliament is gradually working towards building an institutional identity for itself, consciously or otherwise, the lack of which is unquestionably at the heart of the whole issue of how Parliament approaches the public and engages with it. (2007, p.372)

Parliament’s ongoing objective, from Kelso’s point of view, is to present itself as a ‘holistic institution’; holistic in the sense of a unified and, perhaps even more importantly, *interconnected* approach to engagement. Crewe’s observation that “[s]trangers do not fight together effectively” emphasises the importance of interconnection, of shared goals, against the widely-acknowledged reality that “commitments to abstract principles” are often insufficient for cohesion and motivation (2010, p.321). The research presented here demonstrates that no such interconnection exists. The aforementioned abstraction narrative reinforces this notion, as does the lack of cross-departmental agreement (within Parliament) as to how engagement, or even Parliament, can be defined. From a staff perspective, this lack of agreement posed serious questions for what Parliament could claim its role to be:

It’s a really interesting question then as to what kind of institution is it, if it’s not self-consciously existing as a central thing that does this, but actually it’s pieced together by a load of people who don’t understand it? [Laughs] it’s quite funny.⁴¹

Terms like “pieced together”, and a lack of “centrality”, downplay interconnectedness and problematise the notion of a ‘holistic institution’. Exacerbating this issue was the fact that some staff members described themselves as working for Parliament, some for the House of Commons, and some for a specific department; the participants themselves interpreted this as an exemplar of non-connectedness.⁴² Incoherence was consistently expressed when discussing parliamentary conceptions of engagement, as shown in Table 6:

⁴¹ Staff Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁴² Staff Focus Group Participants 2A, 2D, 2E & 2F. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

Table 6 – Staff perspectives on whether Parliament spoke in a consistent ‘language’ about engagement

Responses to direct questions (from Author)	Discussing reflexively as a group
<p>Author: Do you think that we all sort of talk in the same language about engagement? Do we all actually understand it in the same way? [Collective response negative]⁴³</p>	<p>...it’s all about “what’s the message, how can we get that message consistently out there” ... I think there needs to be a far more practical approach so that Committees ... can be given an easy or go-to guidance about how engagement could help inquiries, and how it could be easier for the individuals who have to do it, rather than make it a kind of a conceptual thing.⁴⁴</p>
<p>2A: No. Author: ...or is it really incumbent upon what service we’re representing? 2E: Yep. For me it still very much feels like five separate, well however many teams there are, that many different organisations, so you know Participation is one, R & I – is that what we are now? – ah CCT [laughs] erm it all feels, you know, the messages come from the top of those teams, and then those teams kind of take that on as their own kind of thing ... it just feels like a bit of a mish-mash.⁴⁵</p>	<p>So I mean it just depends on the department I think. Whether there’s a coherent view across, apart from our supporting and thriving parliamentary democracy [laughs] which I’m sure it all feeds into somehow. But, but whether there’s actually a coherent view of what political engagement the House is trying to promote, I’m not sure that’s necessarily been verbalised or written down somewhere.⁴⁶</p>

Whether in response to a specific question, or discussing the matter reflexively amongst themselves, a great deal of institutional coherence was framed in cross-departmental terms (as Table 6 shows). In other words, variations as to how staff members defined and applied engagement was seen to be demarcated by their respective department(s).

...there’s teams that run the Committee webpages, and then obviously the Committee Twitter, erm pages, and yeah just getting your head around that just as someone starting new, so if you were coming in completely cold as a member of

⁴³ Focus group with Author. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁴⁴ Staff Focus Group Participant 1F. Focus group with Author. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁴⁵ Staff Focus Group Participants 2A & 2E. Focus group with Author. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁴⁶ Staff Focus Group Participant 3A. Focus group with Author. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

the public...yeah, you know, not already confusing enough, just adds another couple of layers...⁴⁷

...so there is PDS, there is the House of Commons side, there is Visit Parliament for example, so they have their own digital channels, and then there's a new election artist and they're doing engagement stuff on Instagram for example, erm there's very much the sense that engagement in these different areas mean different things...⁴⁸

What is apparent is a variance of definitions across the institution of Parliament; any notion of (successful) engagement in this context is therefore relevant specifically (i.e. only) to a single department, or even a single job role. Moreover, the phrase 'safe space' was mentioned frequently during the first staff focus group, implying that the very practice of discussing engagement across departmental lines was a novel one.⁴⁹ Taking into account the varying definitions of engagement and the novelty implied by the 'safe space' of the focus group, we can infer two important points: the lack of a coherent definition of engagement, and the lack of an inter-departmental forum in which to articulate it. These points evidence systemic, structural hindrances to an interconnected 'holistic institution', exacerbated by the sheer number of departments to which engagement is (at least in theory) directly relevant:

...Parliament is an incredibly fragmented place...if you look at the people who are responsible for engagement in some way, you've got...the participation team doing a wide range of very obviously engagement-focused activities but you've also got folk in the digital services who are, you know, both transmitting and inviting people to get involved. You've got the Commons press team, you've got the Lord press team within the Committee and Chambers team, within the Commons you've got...more resourcing per Select Committee in terms of engaging folk...you'd expect the administration to be political 'small p' given the kind of place it's in, that we operate in, and therefore trying to have coherent strategies across the 'p's' will take a lot of alliance-building over time...I think there is some hope that we'll get there, but our structures don't reflect that, our budgeting plan processes don't reflect that, our planning processes don't reflect that.⁵⁰

Kelso posits that a fundamental hindrance to Parliament's 'holistic' model of engagement is "the presence of party and government deep within its structural fabric" (2007, p.372). This point was corroborated by several staff members, who noted a tension between the attitude(s) of Parliament towards engagement and those of MPs. This was either framed in partisan terms – Conservative MPs' concerns about youth engagement campaigns, for example, given a tendency for younger voters to support Labour⁵¹ – or in more procedural terms. For example, a staff

⁴⁷ Staff Focus Group Participant 2C. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁴⁸ Staff Focus Group Participant 2E. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁴⁹ *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁵⁰ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

⁵¹ Staff Focus Group Participant 2D. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

participant observed that “in the early years of Outreach there were Members who were very, very concerned about officers from Parliament going essentially onto their turf”.⁵² The reference to ‘turf’ suggests traditionally-delineated engagement roles; describing parliamentary engagement historically, Norton notes that the institution traditionally had no means “to inform or engage with citizens”, while MPs “were keen to promote themselves [but] devoted little time to...promoting the institution of which they were a member” (2013a, p.147). In the focus groups, meanwhile, it was observed that parliamentary staff were “all tied to a strategy...that’s handed down from on high [laughs] but, like, do any of the MPs ever have to read that strategy?”⁵³ In any case, Parliament’s assertiveness in engagement was seen to raise “big questions...about whether that’s the right role for a parliament”.⁵⁴ We thus discern manifest uncertainty, not only towards the appropriateness of Parliament’s engagement role, but towards what that role even is. This is reinforced by two factors: the basing of engagement efforts on the self-perceived remit of each department, and the lack of a forum (i.e. ‘safe space’) in which to discuss cross-departmental approaches.

Thus, party and government are not the only complexities; incoherence is woven into the very ‘structural fabric’ that Kelso refers to, divided as it is into departments that (should) have a great deal to say to each other about engagement. At present, this dialogue appears to be neither facilitated nor encouraged. What exacerbates this is a professed lack of understanding between departments as to their varying engagement remits:

...I would say quite a lot of staff still don’t fully grasp what my team does and what Outreach and Engagement do. I think the education service – we still get mixed up with the education service – and I suppose the final piece of the puzzle also is members. And, of course, it’s members that make things happen, so we can only do so much...⁵⁵

Shortcomings can therefore be seen to exist not only at the level of dialogue (vis-à-vis engagement), but of basic literacy. Crucially, diagnosing a lack of understanding was not only used in the context of engagement. Staff members – even long-serving ones – also professed ignorance as to the workings of Parliament more generally, diagnosing a generally low understanding of other departments:

2B: ...I’ve been here an incredibly long time and still carry around with me a huge body of ignorance about the rest of what goes on here [general agreement] it’s not just, I think, the public not understanding it but I think a huge proportion of the

⁵² Staff Focus Group Participant 3D. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

⁵³ Staff Focus Group Participant 2C. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁵⁴ Staff Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁵⁵ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

staff don't understand it either. They understand their own area, the one or two I've had brushes with.

2A: I'd really agree with that...you don't really get any training in procedure and you kind of just have to pick it up and you can just learn stuff a year on, like someone can mention something and you're like "oh what is that?" ...I would really agree with that, I think there's tons of stuff in Parliament that still is very opaque to me.⁵⁶

One remark within the above extract merits especial emphasis: "it's not just...the public not understanding it but I think a huge proportion of the staff don't understand it either". Numerous studies suggest "that a majority of citizens are today lacking in even the most basic political information" (Flinders 2016, p.196). Walker, in highlighting "the widespread and fundamental misconception...that Parliament and Government are the same thing", contends that "public engagement has to start with fairly basic education and information" (2011, p.270). A widespread lack of understanding was identified by the Digital Democracy Commission as a fundamental barrier to engagement with Parliament (2015). That a *self-perceived* lack of understanding might prove a hindrance to citizens' desire for engagement was echoed in the non-parliamentary focus groups as well, with one participant remarking: "I like politics, I'm interested in politics, I want to help children in the future, but how can I help when I don't understand it myself?"⁵⁷ In six out of seven Ipsos MORI polls, conducted between 1991 and 2010, less than half of the respondents could correctly name their local MP (2011b). Meanwhile, between 2003 and 2010, when respondents were asked how much they felt they knew about Parliament, the most popular response was 'not very much' (Ipsos MORI 2011a). From an institutional perspective, parliamentary staff observed an 'opacity' among the public with respect to Parliament's actual function(s).⁵⁸ Another official, citing Hansard Audit data, concluded that "there's a long way to go still in terms of people understanding Parliament, the difference between Parliament and Government, the role of Parliament in holding Government to account".⁵⁹ Similarly, the citizen focus groups, when discussing political news reports, noted "a kind of pre-emptive understanding that most of [the media] have, except most people don't have it".⁶⁰

Observing that "there [are] so many other things around Government and Parliament that people don't understand"⁶¹ resonates even more when we consider that *these 'people' include*

⁵⁶ Staff Focus Group Participants 2A & 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁵⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participant 1B. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 27 May 2017, Bedford.

⁵⁸ Staff Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁵⁹ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

⁶⁰ Citizen Focus Group Participant 6A. *Focus group with Author*. 11 May 2017, Westminster.

⁶¹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

parliamentary staff. As shown in the extracts above, staff members professed the same ignorance (*towards Parliament*) as the citizen participants. What is patently absent here is a coherent, holistic parliamentary narrative of engagement, signified by a lack of cross-departmental understanding towards:

1. Parliamentary engagement
2. Other departments' engagement remit(s)
3. Other departments *in general*

When seeking to understand the “private web” of elite political institutions, to understand their approach to policy, Rhodes and Tiernan emphasise the importance of “collect[ing] their stories – the institutional memory” (2015, p.208). This chapter demonstrates a plurality of stories with no master narrative; to borrow Shenhav’s terminology, various *principles* of engagement but no *leading* ones (2015, p.25), undermining any sense of a ‘holistic institution’. This observation – considered alongside the aforementioned abstraction narrative – constitutes an image of Parliament as a mutually-perceived abstraction. Parliament appears mysterious not only to citizens, but to its own staff.

4.4 – The importance of empathy: substantiating parliamentary engagement through counter-narratives

The preceding three sections – discussing narratives of change/decline and abstraction, and the absence of a ‘holistic institution’ model – have all stressed the hindrance that *distance* represents to genuine engagement. These are themes that all of the fieldwork discussions drew attention to; elite interviews and focus groups (inside and outside of Westminster). The change/decline narrative and the abstraction narrative share several overlapping themes, which this section will discuss. What will also be discussed is the existence of counter-narratives; “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews 2004, p.1). The dominant narratives that we have discussed thus far are summarised (and thematically ‘overlapped’) below in Table 7:

Table 7 – Dominant narratives and overlapping themes regarding parliamentary engagement

Dominant narratives	Overlapping themes
<p>Citizen disaffection (decline) narrative</p> <p>Explicit dissatisfaction with institutions</p> <p>Engagement is quantitatively lower (e.g. votes, members)</p>	<p>Irrelevance of Parliament when considering political participation to be changed <i>or</i> diminished</p>
<p>Cultural displacement (change) narrative</p> <p>Seeking more non-institutional participation</p> <p>Engagement has quantitatively changed (focus on ‘issues’)</p>	<p>Collective detachment from institutions and institutional participation (either active or passive)</p>
<p>Abstraction narrative</p> <p>Mutually-perceived mystique of Parliament</p> <p>Parliament’s obscure engagement role</p>	<p>Associations made between institutions and antiquated or obscure forms of politics</p>

Considering the pervasiveness of the abstraction narrative, issue-based interpretations of engagement, and the myriad factors that problematise a ‘holistic institution’ model, it is perhaps unsurprising that Parliament’s developing *modus operandi*, regarding engagement, “was to take Parliament out to the people: the outreach service would communicate with people where they were, about issues that concerned them” (Walker 2011, p.275). Parliament going ‘out to the people’ and connecting to pertinent issues would appear to address the negative perceptions that this chapter has highlighted and discussed; particularly with respect to the narratives collated in Table 7, which denote themes of irrelevance and detachment.⁶² However, several themes brought up by the participants would appear to question the efficacy of such an approach (an approach that implies that Westminster physically exemplifies, or encapsulates, the problem). One participant remarked that they had come to Westminster “for inspiration, and I only had to walk through the door to be inspired, to be quite honest”.⁶³ A staff member spoke of the Palace in similar terms:

...it was my dream to work at Parliament, that’s embarrassing but it was...I just love the building, I just really wanted to work in the building but I didn’t think that was possible...I came here in my last year of university and I made my friend take a

⁶² For a further discussion of this observation, see Section 7.2.

⁶³ Citizen Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2018, Westminster.

picture of me in front of Big Ben, I said “oh look at my future place of work!”...then I saw this job...and yeah just fell in love with the place basically.⁶⁴

Taking into account these citizen and staff viewpoints, it would be detrimental to draw a dichotomy between the physicality of Westminster and the achievement of meaningful engagement. It has been argued in previous studies that “[t]he Palace of Westminster was not designed to foster public engagement” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015); however, the design of the Palace arguably does not *preclude* engagement either. This note of ‘inspiration’ forms a convincing counter-narrative, especially when considered alongside the notion of abstraction:

Author: ...it sounds from what you were saying that there’s a kind of inspirational element to coming to a place like this but there’s also one of...makes it a bit more human, more tangible?

1A: It does, it makes it more real. Makes it feel that actually, “what’s the difference between me and you? Not a lot really”. And I think, well maybe we can do it because it is inspirational.⁶⁵

In this sense, inspiration represents a means of affinity, and an antithesis to distance and non-connection, the very themes that constitute the dominant narrative addressed in the two preceding sections. As such it presents a counter-narrative, a resistance to a dominant narrative of abstraction. Following on from this theme of relation and connectivity, successive Hansard Society Audits show a majority view that Parliament is essential to democracy, even if these figures are not matched by the number of respondents who express satisfaction with how it is run (2016; 2017; 2018). Norris (2011) characterises this distinction as a ‘democratic deficit’ between the Western world’s acceptance of the tenets of democracy, and their satisfaction with the day-to-day running of its institutions. The Hansard findings were largely borne out by the fieldwork data presented by this thesis. Parliament’s role was widely seen as indispensable, juxtaposed against a plethora of reservations about its functionality:

...the building for example is incredibly iconic, symbolic, and people instantly recognise it, and might feel a kind of identification with it. But when you get down to like, the nitty-gritty and the workings of the House, what actually happens there, what’s it for, and what you said before about the difference between Parliament and Government [general agreement] I think it’s quite opaque to a lot of people.⁶⁶

The above observation relates back to the abstraction narrative; the lack of widespread knowledge about Parliament and, on a deeper level, the sense of mystique that was pervasive even across its staff. However it also relates to two counter-narratives: the aforementioned

⁶⁴ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁶⁵ Citizen Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2018, Westminster.

⁶⁶ Staff Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

theme of *inspiration* (both ‘iconic’ and ‘identifiable’, taking the above extract into account), as well as a counter-narrative of *essentiality*. The latter encapsulates a point of broad agreement (as shown below in Table 8), which was the absence of any comparable institution.

Table 8 – Observations on the essentiality of Parliament

Staff	Citizens
...there should be an element of responsibility [for engagement] because I’m not sure who else would do it... ⁶⁷	5A: Yeah because you see one of the great things about democracy and Parliament is that there’s scrutiny, there’s transparency, there’s accountability, but that then makes it cumbersome, and people are like “well...”
I speak as somebody who has a lot of reservations about Parliament myself, but um I can at the same time see that it’s really hard to replace it with anything else... ⁶⁹	5B: “It’s too hard” [laughs] 5A: “...why don’t things just happen?” Well
...my sense really is that a lot of the engagement work isn’t just about getting people to engage with Parliament, it’s about getting them to engage with politics, because again I don’t think there’s anybody else, apart from Parliament, who can really do that from an objective and impartial position... ⁷⁰	it’s because there’s, there’s really good safeguards in place to make sure things just don’t happen that are wrong. So like the things that make democracy or Parliament good are making people maybe... 5B: Think they’re really frustrated. 5A: ...yeah making people frustrated that they’re slow. ⁶⁸

In analogising this (somewhat paradoxical) essentiality, several focus group participants made reference to a well-known observation by Winston Churchill: “it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (1974, p.7566). The quote was used as a shorthand for frustrations which did exist, but did not detract from Parliament’s essential role. Indeed, they were described as *inherent* to Parliament’s essentiality:

⁶⁷ Staff Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

⁶⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participants 5A & 5B. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

⁶⁹ Staff Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁷⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 1B. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

What did Churchill say, erm about erm, democracy is a really bad form of government but it's better than the rest [general agreement, laughs]⁷¹

5E: It's like Winston Churchill said, it's like, erm "democracy is the worst form of government apart from all the other ones" [laughs] because like, you do have yeah, there's a problem...

5B: It's never gonna be perfect.

5E: So I think yeah, education, awareness is really, really important.

5A: Yeah because you see one of the great things about democracy and Parliament is that there's scrutiny, there's transparency, there's accountability, but that then makes it cumbersome...⁷²

Across the citizen/staff distinction was an acceptance (indeed, an advocacy) of Parliament, and of representative democracy, as a form of governance. Scrutiny and transparency – when critiqued – were critiqued in terms of means (application) rather than ends (philosophical underpinnings). This relates back to Norris' theory of 'democratic deficit', in which "*satisfaction with the performance of democracy continues to diverge from public aspirations*" (2011, p.242, emphasis in original). The quoting of Winston Churchill only serves to reinforce this. Approval (in theory) of Parliament and representative democracy took the form of a valence issue within the fieldwork discussions, inasmuch as its desirability as a pursuit was not questioned so much as the effectiveness of its implementation (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, p.55). What we can observe, however, is not just tacit acceptance of representative democracy as a mode of governance. We can also observe a more active theme, namely a counter-narrative of *parliamentary essentiality*. The notion of Parliament as essential, as irreplaceable, resists a dominant narrative of Parliament as obscure, unknown, and unknowable.

Discussions of 'commercial' approaches to engagement presented an additional counter-narrative. Much political science literature acknowledges – or actively takes up – a widely-cited argument that politics has become increasingly marketised and subject to consumer logic, typically invoked as a negative development (Flinders 2016; Jennings and Stoker 2016; Hay 2007; Savigny 2007; Coleman 2005). These accounts point to consumerism as a cause (and/or analogy) for an increasingly cynical, superficial form of politics, fuelled by the demands of the 'electoral marketplace'. These demands, often described as unrealistic or outright contradictory (see Table

⁷¹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 1B. *Focus group with Author*. 14 November 2016, Darlington.

⁷² Citizen Focus Group Participants 5A; 5B & 5E. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

5 and the discussion of the 'demand gap'), were nevertheless seen by many to characterise the modern political landscape:

...people will talk about modern society being a consumer society, and I think that has affected politics, I think people take their politics a lot more as consumers than they used to, and I think that means if people don't think they're getting the service that they deserve, or they should have, they will get very cross.⁷³

As the extract above demonstrates, consumerism was often cited as a descriptive (i.e. neutral) analogy, rather than an indictment *per se*. Moreover, staff members often brought up a growing 'customer' element to political engagement in a *positive* context. Indeed, in terms of illustrating this counter-narrative, they drew attention to their own enthusiasm for a customer-based approach as anomalous to Parliament's broader culture:

1F: ...we find that a bit of a hard sell in the Committee Office, because I think the word 'customer' they just panic and think "we're not a commercial organisation", but it's just basically putting yourself in someone else's shoes.

1E: Yeah it's bizarre, that whole like anti-[customer approach]. I don't find that, a few people don't like this customer...focus drive. I think because people think 'customer' means like, putting on a fake smile...that's not what customer service is about, it's about "what can I do for you?"⁷⁴

The participants in the above extract make clear the conductivity of *customer engagement* to meaningful interaction ('what can I do for you?'), and to empathy ('putting yourself in someone else's shoes'). The staff participants suggest that this concept of 'customers' (along with its associated terms) attracts unease at an institutional level. This is supported by Winetrobe's observation of the myriad concerns (regarding identity and function(s)) that are relevant to Parliament's 'marketing', itself "defined in terms of...relations with the outside world. For Westminster and its staff, certainly, that is a rather novel concept" (2003, p.11). As Winetrobe and the staff participants attest, a term like 'marketing' does not in fact imply a philosophy so much as an expectation of interaction with the 'outside world'. Emphasising meaningful interaction renders *customer engagement* a more appropriate term than *consumer engagement* (the latter being the terminology of critiques), and it is important to differentiate between the two. Critiques of marketised politics describe *consumption*; demand for the sake of demand, a unidirectional relationship. The above discussions of 'customers', however, emphasise *custom*; a trade dynamic, or an interaction. The aforementioned reference to "a kind of identification" when entering the Palace, combined with this discussion of *custom* ("what can I do for you?")

⁷³ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

⁷⁴ Staff Focus Group Participants 1E & 1F. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

both denote empathy, which can be discussed in direct reference to ‘abstraction’. Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy* describes a “polar antithesis” between these two concepts (1963, p.23). The argument is couched primarily in artistic terms; however, Worringer’s reference to abstraction as “the single form set free from space” – space being that “which links things to one another, which imparts to them their relativity” (1963, p.22) – is highly relevant here. Participants in the citizen focus groups discussed abstraction in precisely these terms; as an antithesis to relation and connection. Through discussing *customer engagement*, they also emphasised the link between empathy and relatability:

...tracking down the...political story and telling it to be relatable and relevant, and personal...it’s pretty much what every other marketing gal and guy is doing.⁷⁵

The notion of a customer-based approach being conducive to empathy shows it to resist a dominant narrative (abstraction), as well as widely-held negative connotations to ‘consumer’ and ‘customer’ rhetoric, as the staff members attested. Table 9 collects the counter-narratives we have discussed so far, specifically with reference to the dominant narratives that they resist:

Table 9 – Dominant narratives and prospective counter-narratives

Dominant narratives	Counter-narratives
Citizen disaffection (decline) narrative	Inspiration The Palace as an environment Subsequent tangibility
Cultural displacement (change) narrative	Parliamentary essentiality/uniqueness Recognition of Parliament’s importance Lack of a comparable institution
Abstraction narrative	Customer engagement Conduciveness to empathy Emphasis on custom (i.e. interaction)

The counter-narratives listed in Table 9 do not offer resistance only to the narratives in the adjacent column (just as the dominant narratives are not only relevant to the counter-narratives

⁷⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

that resist them). Instead, they represent a means of resisting the overlapping narrative themes described in Table 7; perceived irrelevance, collective detachment, and connotations of antiquatedness and obscurity. The concept of the 'local' is not included as a counter-narrative, because it does not *resist* a dominant narrative. To an extent it is an *element* of one; the paradoxical citizen perception of 'local MPs/MPs as a group' is, as already discussed, a branch of the expectations gap that constitutes the abstraction narrative (see Section 4.2). In any case, the *inspiration* counter-narrative, with its connotations of *personal proximity*, already encapsulates the positive characteristics of the 'local'.

The narratives discussed thus far emphasise that *Parliament appears inscrutable from a distance*; whether the (perceived) distance be geographical, personal, or both. Considered alongside the *change/decline* visualisations in Figure 8, as well as the fact that the abstraction narrative was a commonality across all types of fieldwork discussion, we can discern that the connotations of this narrative (obscurity, difficulty in connection, mystique) are widely-perceived. However, the *inspiration* counter-narrative – visible among focus groups (both staff and citizen) *within* Parliament – indicates a propensity to speak in terms of *change* rather than *decline* when the perception of distance is only a personal one. By contrast, those taking part in non-parliamentary focus groups (and the preceding engagement sessions) were faced with two types of distance: distance from the Parliament that they were learning about, and a distance in *personal proximity* reinforced by narratives such as *abstraction*. As we have discussed, parliaments are the sites of competing narratives (and counter-narratives); vying claims for the identity of Parliament and what it represents. We can see this process at play here; *change* and *decline* as competing narratives, and the narrative of *abstraction* being resisted by counter-narratives of *inspiration*, among others. The question of identity, and a holistic approach to parliamentary engagement, remains an open one.

Conclusions

Rhodes *et al.*'s aforementioned description of parliamentary narratives – as distant, recognisable cousins (2009, p.222) – is a considerable oversimplification in two ways. Firstly, the assumption that these narratives are in fact recognisable between parliaments or even *within* them. This chapter shows that no such recognisable narrative exists; instead we see myriad stories and understandings of engagement, along with perceptions of abstraction that are pervasive even *within* the institution. Though we refer to abstraction as a narrative, it is a

narrative *defined by* obscurity and variance, therefore it does not constitute a recognisable narrative in the manner described by Rhodes *et al.* Parliament arguably shows an awareness that parliamentary engagement means different things to different people, but this only appears to be the case when addressing citizens (i.e. those *outside* Parliament). What appears unacknowledged, at an institutional level, is that parliamentary engagement also means things to different people *inside* Parliament; specifically, its own staff. This renders the prospect of a coherent, holistic approach to engagement (now a central responsibility of the institution) rather dubious. The second count of oversimplification relates to counter-narratives which, in this context, remain under-researched and exemplify multitude – incoherence, in other words – with respect to parliamentary identity, and its culture of engagement. These counter-narratives – visible *inside* Westminster and outside it – potentialise change and innovation in engagement, despite their being defined primarily by *resisting* narratives. Ironically these narratives are in many cases institutional.

This observation carries significant theoretical and practical implications. In theoretical terms it suggests that engagement – *a consistent and meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)* – entails citizens interacting with a departmental (rather than parliamentary) form of engagement. There is no guarantee, or suggestion, that this form of engagement would (or could) reflect a broader (i.e. inter-departmental) narrative. This represents a simple and fundamental problem: the parliamentary departments that *do* adopt an outward-facing approach to engagement speak for (and apparently listen to) themselves only. By definition, parliamentary departments possess their own narratives based on their own engagement ‘remit’ (if any). This consideration renders the very concept of ‘parliamentary engagement’ problematic at best, openly paradoxical at worst. The common theme expressed through the counter-narratives is that of recognition, of empathy; a sentiment that, according to the dominant narratives we have discussed, is notably lacking with respect to perceptions of Parliament. As we have also discussed, empathy and personal connection serves as an antithesis to distance and irrelevance, the very themes that underpin narratives of change, decline and abstraction. The potential for certain engagement methods to create and encourage this sentiment will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Effective storytelling in communicating and strengthening parliamentary engagement

Madame Bovary, c'est moi.

Gustave Flaubert

Introduction

The preceding chapter discussed the pervasiveness and proliferation of parliamentary engagement narratives, within the institution and amongst the citizenry. This chapter will focus on storytelling as a process by which narratives are alluded to, claimed, and resisted. We will examine storytelling in two principle ways: firstly, fieldwork participants' telling of stories as a means of substantiating and contextualising their self-assessed (dis)engagement. Secondly, we will examine Parliament's use of storytelling as a means of engagement, through a comparison of two recent initiatives: *The Story of Parliament*, and *Your Story, Our History*. The form of storytelling employed by the latter hints at a broader (though still nebulous) parliamentary reassessment of the value of stories, problematising (though not collapsing) a long-established dichotomy between 'stories' and 'information'. This dichotomy will be examined through a Critical Discourse Analysis of recent select committee reports. Instances of storytelling (from both sides of the citizen-institution dynamic) will be examined in accordance with the fractal model of storytelling outlined in the theoretical framework chapter. Utilising this model, we will examine participants' use of storytelling to present and situate themselves (and others) against narratives of parliamentary engagement. We will also use this framework to examine Parliament's attempts to present *itself* to the citizenry (and the citizenry to itself). In addition, the fractal model will provide a means of examining and illustrating problematisations of parliamentary storytelling. In doing so, we can evidence the importance of storytelling as a means by which citizens 'make sense' of the political sphere (and their relation to it), as well as a means by which parliament can effectively relate itself to citizens.

5.1 – Diegesis: representing and telling stories

Our Methodology (see Chapter 3) identified two principle ways by which narratives are communicated, or represented, to others: *diegesis* and *mimesis*, both of which are facilitated (and visible) through storytelling. Abbott (2008, p.237) defines these two processes as follows:

1. Diegesis – representation of a story through telling it
2. Mimesis – representation of a story through imitation

Both diegesis and mimesis were evident within the focus groups and elite interviews, during which the participants told stories about themselves. In this section we will discuss diegesis, through which participants communicated narratives of engagement by telling stories about themselves and others:

Table 10 – Instances of diegesis in citizen/staff focus groups and elite interviews

Citizen	Staff	Elite
<p>...when I flipped from [my] irresponsible 20s into my 30s, and actually started to take a greater interest in history, that was always the subject I wasn't particularly keen on [laughs], but as I got more into it I realised wow, there is, there is a lot than can be learned and a lot that we continue to repeat which isn't so good... now I would say I was very engaged.⁷⁶</p>	<p>...my main reason for disinterest in politics is, when I was younger... my background is a Socialist background but I was living in a Tory place that nothing other than "Tory, Tory, Tory" came up. So people like me with that sort of interest had nowhere to go, other than out of there into London...⁷⁷</p>	<p>...a previous, senior member of staff who was talking at an event that I was at... saying "well you know we've had the expenses scandal, that's done now, we have IPSA, you know, we've resolved it". And whilst that's true on paper, it, it really struck me as something that we understood that he didn't. You know, that is not the way that the public think about it at all.⁷⁸</p>

⁷⁶ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

⁷⁷ Staff Focus Group Participant 1A. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁷⁸ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

<p>...from my experience during the Scottish referendum, 16/17-year-olds...now they'll obviously be 18, 19, 20, they were really engaged, knew what they were talking about, and they've had that sort of education within the school and, you know, the first time they had the chance to vote they voted, and engaged with that.⁷⁹</p>	<p>...my partner is probably more engaged in politics than I am... he'll try and debate absolutely everything... he did spoil his ballot the last election... that's his expression of "I very much engaged with the parties and I don't like any of them". So I guess in that way I think it can be engaged...⁸⁰</p>	<p>...I wrote to my MP when I was 14 years old, I still have that letter... up until I joined Parliament I was the person outside, demo-ing, as well as coming in and lobbying, because I recognised that both worked, so I think I was brought in as... the person who stood outside and shouted and screamed [and] knew how to lobby.⁸¹</p>
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We can discern two distinct processes when examining the extracts in Table 10. The first is participants' descriptions of how their engagement developed, contextualising it within a broader life story (e.g. "a greater interest in history", "living in a Tory place", being "the person outside, demo-ing"). This reflects the notion that "[a]lthough narratives may have a chronological order and contain setting, character, actions and events, their defining characteristic is that they explain actions by the beliefs and preferences of the actors" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, p.20). This is also relevant to a second evident process; that the participants contextualised not only their own views, but what they perceived in society more broadly, with respect to engagement; hence stories of engagement in the Scottish referendum, consciously spoiling a ballot paper, and misunderstanding the expenses scandal. This is consistent with a theory of stories being what "people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others" (Kearney 2002, p.3), but we can also observe the participants 'explaining themselves *and explaining others*'; factors such as activism, understanding, and formal participation are among the participants' various 'claims' to either be (dis)engaged, or to 'socially diagnose' (dis)engagement. This links back to our discussion on efficacy in Section 4.1, and the relevance of statements that refer to the individual *and* an imagined collective. By

⁷⁹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5A. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

⁸⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

⁸¹ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

presenting these claims as stories, the participants are attempting to ‘explain themselves’ (and others), and to explain *what they mean by ‘engagement’*.

The terms employed by the research participants as legitimate indicators of engagement will be analysed quantitatively in the following chapter. However, what was clear at this point was the participants’ awareness of how (and why) storytelling worked; why it was an engaging communicative device. We will discuss the participants’ views on storytelling *per se* later in the chapter (see Section 5.5), but it is noteworthy that the participants also *implicitly* attested to the way that stories engaged the listener:

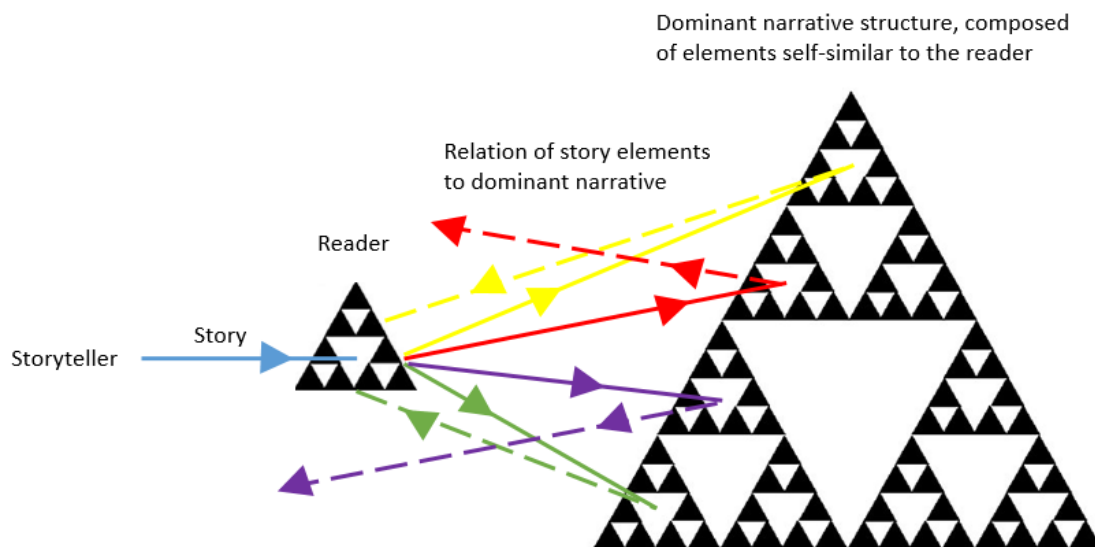
I can remember the first party conference I ever went to and there was a standing ovation, and there was a man who was much older than I was, and he was still sitting, and he said “oh I wouldn’t get up for a standing ovation, I have actually been at a Nuremburg rally”.⁸²

The participant, in arguing against political engagement becoming overly ‘emotional’, told a story about how *they* were told a story. This constitutes a process by which “readers become authors in that they actively recreate the story through reading” (Saward 2006, p.304). What this represents is an explicit and implicit emphasising of stories as innate and intuitive (MacIntyre 2007; Nussbaum 2001; MacIntyre 1977; Barthes 1975; Campbell 1968), but also engaging; explicit in the sense that the participant marked out the story as an effective device, and implicit in that they told a story *about* its effect.

This relates back to a definitive aspect of the narrative process; the narrator’s tendency to draw on life experiences in order to relay an effective story. In drawing upon these life experiences, the storyteller then draws the reader/audience into an ‘experience’ of their own; an experience of being told the story but also, more subjectively, experiencing (i.e. reacting or relating to) the events being communicated to them by the storyteller (Benjamin 2006) as Figure 9 shows (see below). In order to convey it successfully, the storyteller must therefore tell a story that is relatable to the reader, relaying elements that the reader can successfully relate to their own accepted narratives and situated knowledge. This can be understood in fractal terms, relating back to the analogy applied in Chapter 2:

⁸² Citizen Focus Group Participant 1B. *Focus group with Author*. 14 November 2016, Darlington.

Figure 9 – Effective storytelling as an appeal to relatability



A crucial point of emphasis here is that storytelling is a definitively personal dynamic between the narrator and the reader/audience. This is worth emphasising for two reasons: firstly, it shows why participants spoke so often of engagement (itself an inherently personal dynamic) in a narrative mode. Discussions of storytelling as a means of rendering the political process “much more human”,⁸³ for example, were supported by the fact that the citizens themselves so often used it as a medium for discussing and communicating *their own* engagement. Secondly, it reinforces the relevance of studying engagement via storytelling, since the latter constitutes such an intuitive device for ‘making sense’ (van Wessel 2016) of the political sphere.

Within this form of sense-making, however – creating what we have referred to as ‘situated knowledge’ – it is significant that the citizen participants told stories about *politics*, not Parliament. Some stories were told about *parliamentarians*; a visit to a university by a Conservative MP, for example.⁸⁴ However, it is important not to conflate stories of Parliament and parliamentarians: citizens perceive the two differently, and parliamentarians have typically pursued engagement to promote themselves, not their institution (Norton 2013a, pp.147-50). Nor should stories of particular MPs be mistaken for stories of *MPs in general*. Parliament’s ‘effect’ on parliamentarians – discussed in the previous chapter – is often an ‘abstracting’ one, against which MPs only become relatable when physically and/or symbolically distant from it. Similarly, MPs apparently become relatable and normalised once they disassociate themselves (or are perceptibly disassociated) from *MPs in general*; often to their benefit, since citizens typically express more satisfaction and trust toward ‘their’ MP than toward MPs *per se* (Norton

⁸³ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

⁸⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participant 3A. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster.

2013a, p.149). Stories of MPs were limited to those citizens who had met them and thus possessed situated knowledge; Parliament was never perceptibly 'known' in this way. This corresponds with previous studies relating to what citizens *feel* they know about Parliament; most frequently, in the case of Ipsos MORI data between 2003 and 2010, 'not very much' (2011a). Similarly, less than half of the participants in the latest Hansard Society Audit claimed even 'a fair amount' of knowledge about Parliament (2018, p.36).

It is important to reiterate that this form of knowledge is, in the Audit's own words, 'self-assessed' (Hansard Society 2018); not what citizens know, but what they *think* they know about Parliament. The importance of examining the latter relates back to storytelling as an expression of professed or claimed (i.e. situated) knowledge; what Disch refers to as 'situated impartiality', the communication of one's own 'truth' (1993). A low level of self-assessed knowledge across the Ipsos MORI and Hansard Society studies is highly relevant when discussing citizen participants' non-inclusion of Parliament within their own situated knowledge, evidenced through the stories they told. Citizens told stories about voting if they had voted, political parties if they had joined one, and politicians if they had met them. They related, in other words, what they felt they knew. The absence of Parliament in this context reinforces the narratives of intangibility and abstraction that were so pervasive across citizen *and* staff discussions (see previous chapter). Citizen participants related their situated knowledge of the political sphere, within which Parliament was notable by its absence. Staff and elites told stories about Parliament because they possessed *literally* situated knowledge; Parliament was where they worked, therefore Parliament was (part of) what they knew. Across this study there was no placement or acknowledgement of Parliament within citizens' situated knowledge, thereby compounding narratives of disconnection and 'un-knowability' between them.

5.2 – Mimesis: imagined paraphrasing and rhetorical conversation

There are several distinctions and comparisons to be made between instances of diegesis and mimesis within this study. Both techniques are conducive to the communication and elaboration of situated knowledge through narrative and storytelling. However, when discussing their functions, it is significant that the *plot* of the story (the nature, or presence, of an 'arrangement' of events)⁸⁵ was incumbent on how the stories were communicated (i.e. via diegesis/mimesis). Diegesis, unlike mimesis, conveyed *time*; "during the Scottish referendum", for example, or "I

⁸⁵ See Abbott, 2008, p.240.

wrote to my MP when I was 14 years old” (see Table 10). Both examples relate back to the intuitiveness of narrative (and specifically diegesis) as “*the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*” (Abbott 2008, p.3, emphasis in original). Diegesis provided a means of substantiating a claim through contextualising it temporally; within the time period of the referendum, for example, or laying the ‘foundations’ for one’s engagement at the age of 14. Mimesis, by contrast, also provided a means of substantiation, but in a more literal sense; by giving ‘voice’ to a claim or, in other words, simulating its respective narrative. This distinction can also be analogised in terms of tense: the instances of diegesis in Table 10 all employ past-tense narration, a familiar narrative trope (Abbott 2008), in order to contextualise, while mimesis – in simulating a claim *about* the present – took place in the present tense. Bauman (1986, p.65) describes the use of present tense as a means of communicating immediacy and contemporaneousness, from which the ‘impact’ of a story can be derived:

To be sure, the mimetic closeness with which the original dialogue is replayed is attenuated by the quotative devices that frame the direct discourse, but the retention of the tense of the original quoted utterance – a basic feature of direct discourse – enhances the sense of reenactment by transposing the past into the present.

We can see the transposition (i.e. the past into the present) described by Bauman when comparing diegetic instances (Table 10) with mimetic instances (Tables 11 & 12); the invocation of the past and the simulation of the present, respectively. What relates both devices is their utility in the making of a claim, and the types of claim that were being made: in both cases, claims about the present political context. Despite the visible differences between diegesis and mimesis – and the different devices that participants used to indicate them – the narratives that they alluded to overlapped substantially.

Two (interrelated) mimetic techniques were used in order to simulate narratives. It is important to note that the participants in question did not (necessarily) agree with these narratives as ‘arguments’, but identified them as representative of public opinion. We will refer to these two mimetic techniques as ‘imagined paraphrasing’ and ‘rhetorical conversation’. Both describe instances in which participants would adopt a ‘voice’ that was clearly not their own (in the context of the conversation, and their contributions up to that point) but was instead the simulation of a narrative that they saw as pervasive and representative. We will first examine ‘imagined paraphrasing’; this technique was visible across the entire study (within citizen and staff focus groups, and elite interviews), and transcribed within quotation marks in order to show its distinctive hypothetical tone:

Table 11 – Instances of imagined paraphrasing in citizen/staff focus groups and elite interviews

Citizen	Staff	Elite
“...I can’t be bothered now, it’s too confusing, there’s too much to learn” ⁸⁶	“let’s just do the easiest thing and just get a ping on Twitter, and tick the box” ⁸⁷	“Theresa May took three weeks off on holiday” ⁸⁸
“...what is this general election? I don’t understand, is it a joke? Is it the real thing? Is this about Brexit?” ⁸⁹	“...they appear to be for them, they appear to be for themselves, floating off some ruling class thing that I don’t relate to”. ⁹⁰	[on the expenses scandal] “I’m going to abuse you because you’re spending your money unwisely”, now it’s just “I’m going to abuse you because you’re there to be abused really” ⁹¹
“Houses of Lords, they should be, they should go” ⁹²	“what’s the point in voting, what’s the point in being engaged in politics” ⁹³	“...if I deal with the public, I’m gonna have to deal with loads of crazy people”. ⁹⁴

The extracts in Table 11 are typical of the way in which this device resembled a quotation; not of any person in particular, but of a ‘voice’ that, in turn, represented a narrative. The disparaging tone of these extracts exemplifies how citizens and staff alike voiced narratives of abstraction and disinterest; citizens who “can’t be bothered”, perceiving politicians as “floating off some ruling class”. Crucially, as Table 11 also shows, this was mirrored by staff members voicing disinterested narratives *within the institution*, in which doing “the easiest thing” represented an acceptable engagement strategy. Seemingly positive statements sometimes took place in this mode, but in these instances the participant made clear that the positivity of the statement went

⁸⁶ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

⁸⁷ Staff Focus Group Participant 1F. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

⁸⁸ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

⁸⁹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 6A. *Focus group with Author*. 11 May 2017, Westminster.

⁹⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 2B. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁹¹ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

⁹² Citizen Focus Group Participant 3A. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster.

⁹³ Staff Focus Group Participant 2F. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

⁹⁴ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

against the narrative they were attempting to portray. For example, a citizen participant, in an instance of imagined paraphrasing, remarked “oh, that looks kind of interesting, I’ll give that a go” regarding the parliamentary engagement session they attended, despite not knowing about the existence of parliamentary outreach until that point (and implying that this lack of knowledge was widespread).⁹⁵ Another citizen participant, commenting on a non-parliamentary engagement session, mentioned “that feeling of “yes, there’s this pool of funds and I can have a say in that”” in connection with participatory budgeting, which from their perspective would “definitely generate a lot of trust”⁹⁶ ‘Positive’ instances of imagined paraphrasing were, in other words, reflexively idealised; in these examples they were set against narratives of a lack of public knowledge and a lack of trust, respectively. Through imitating concurrent (and sometimes self-reflexively contradicting) voices, the narratives being simulated thereby represent the (primarily negative) *status quo* of disengagement from a citizen *and* institutional standpoint.

Instances of mimesis sometimes manifested in more than one participant ‘co-opting’ the simulation, by conducting a conversation in (i.e. with) the ‘voice’ being invoked and ‘othered’. In these instances, one participant would use ‘imagined paraphrasing’ to invoke a narrative; another participant would then ‘play along’ and thereby prolong this mimetic device (and, in doing so, re-confirm the existence and significance of the narrative being invoked) by imitating the same type of ‘voice’. We will refer to this as ‘rhetorical conversation’, given its turn-taking characteristics and the shared implication that what was being ‘voiced’ was not the participant’s (or participants’) own views:

⁹⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

⁹⁶ Citizen Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 19 June 2018, London.

Table 12 – Rhetorical conversation in citizen (parliamentary and non-parliamentary sessions) and staff focus groups

Citizen (non-parliamentary)	Citizen (parliamentary)	Staff
<p>1A: I hear a lot of people saying “oh I’m not voting, they’re all the same”. They’re not all the same, you know, and for people to get that attitude, I don’t know where they get it from, but, “oh the expenses scandal...”</p> <p>1B: “...they’re all on the gravy train.”⁹⁷</p>	<p>5A: one of the great things about democracy and Parliament is there’s scrutiny, there’s transparency, there’s accountability, but that then makes it cumbersome and people are like “well...”</p> <p>5B: “It’s too hard” [laughs]</p> <p>5A: “...why don’t things just happen?”⁹⁸</p>	<p>3C: ...don’t make the connection or they think it’ll make no difference, you know, “politicians are all the same”.</p> <p>3A: “Doesn’t matter who gets in, in power”⁹⁹</p>

Instances of rhetorical conversation alluded to narratives of disinterest and distaste for contemporary politics, in the same manner as imagined paraphrasing (see Table 11). This is unsurprising, since imagined paraphrasing provided a ‘jumping-off point’ into rhetorical conversation; therefore narratives alluded to by the former technique were reinforced and entrenched by the latter. These narratives of disinterest, rigid parliamentary procedure, and a volatile (or even openly hostile) citizenry are highly significant in their content, when considering concepts like ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ to be “culturally embedded...mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualised codes, stories, analogies or homologies” (Somers, 1999, cited in Fielding 2011, p.224). In this sense narratives, and the stories that communicate them, potentialise self-fulfilling prophecies. “Narrations of apoliticality”, for example, “when framed as dominant or totalising, risk reinforcing existing epistemic and political hierarchies within political theory and analysis” (Dean 2014, p.459). Dean’s warning is

⁹⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participants 3A & 3B. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 16 October 2018, Lincoln.

⁹⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participants 5A & 5B. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

⁹⁹ Staff Focus Group Participants 3A & 3C. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

focused at scholars, but its relevance transcends academia and can also be directed toward the citizenry, since it speaks to the ease with which narratives can become entrenched.

With this in mind, we can see the significance of citizen, staff *and* elite participants choosing to simulate negative engagement narratives. These narratives do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they are entrenched, culturally embedded through repetition (i.e. their continual relation from one individual to another). Shirin Rai emphasises the importance of repetition in legitimating norms and recognisable truths, arguing that “social relations are mediated through performance – understood, imbibed, interpreted, made visible, resisted or, alternatively, taken for granted, as read” (2015, p.1182). ‘Taking as read’ is, from this viewpoint, antithetical to resistance or even reflexivity when faced with dominant narratives. The degree to which these narratives – narratives of disinterest, of detachment – are socially entrenched can be inferred from the fact that, through both diegesis and mimesis, they were marked out as pervasive (even by non-adherents) and, in the context of rhetorical conversation, even re-confirmed by other participants. What is more, these narratives were visible from both sides; from the side of the citizenry (in parliamentary and non-parliamentary engagement sessions), with their narrated disinterest in Parliament, and from the side of Parliament, with its narrated disinterest in meaningful engagement (as a practice *or* an objective). The following section will take a more discursive view of this phenomenon and discuss ways in which certain parliamentary approaches can not only draw attention to narratives of disengagement (and related discourses), but further entrench them.

5.3 – “Things unpublished”: the parliamentary dichotomisation of stories and information

The parliamentary discourse regarding stories exerts a profound effect on how this form of public input is conceptualised and utilised on an institutional level. In this context we understand discourse as “language viewed in a certain way, as a part of the social process (part of social life) which is related to other parts. It is a relational view of language” (Fairclough 2015, p.7). Parliament’s approach to public input (for example, in the context of select committee inquiries and calls for evidence) typically dichotomises information and stories. In this section we address select committees’ typical means of accruing evidence; by issuing formal calls for written evidence, followed by oral evidence sessions. There are notable cases in which alternative means of evidence-gathering are employed, such as informal roundtable discussions (see Table 13 below). Greater use of these techniques has already been recommended via research

commissioned by the Liaison Committee (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.6), while the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy accrued evidence through a wide range of formal and informal channels (2015, pp.77-81). At present, however, these informal channels remain anomalous and non-representative. Research conducted on behalf of the Institute for Government – focusing on select committee evidence – observed the overtly formal gathering of evidence to be a long-standing convention, one that directly influenced the *nature* of the evidence:

...reference to anecdotal material – for example, conversations on committee visits or on social media – [is] discouraged. This convention enables a report and the evidence on which it is based to provide a largely stand-alone, publicly-available resource... However, particularly when inquiries are conducted at speed, it can restrict the evidence base available to committees. (White 2015, p.14)

Moreover, previous select committee reports (and subsequent parliamentary debates) have shown an institutional self-awareness of this dichotomisation (between anecdotal and non-anecdotal), when reflecting on evidence accrued. Lord Dixon-Smith exemplified this when discussing the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee's report on the scientific and medicinal uses of cannabis:

This is an unusual report as a large part of what we have recommended depends on what is essentially anecdotal evidence. We had to spend some time arguing about the nature of evidence and whether anecdotal evidence could be considered to be scientific evidence, and, if it was not, whether it could be considered to be evidence, and if it was not evidence, what was the point of hearing it anyway. (Hansard HL Deb. 03 December 1998)

The 'restriction' cited by White is not only an issue for inquiries with a definitively 'scientific' focus (as in the extract above). Stories are, as we have discussed thus far, an important means by which citizens understand (and engage with) politics *on their own terms*. "Citizens", and the perspectives they bring, "may possess the most compelling stories to tell about policy effects, societal problems that must be solved, and the impacts of political decisions on their everyday lives" (Crow and Jones 2018, p.230). Nevertheless, as evidenced through our discussions with parliamentary staff, the institutional culture towards 'citizen stories' does not currently facilitate harnessing these potential resources:

I think we're not encouraging people with lived experience to give evidence to committees and I think that's where we're missing out. Every Committee should have a 'people's panel' of ordinary people saying what it's like to go to a food bank, et cetera. It doesn't always have to be the charity that's talking on their behalf, you know, I think Members do need to hear from ordinary folk.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

This observation (coupled with the intuitiveness of storytelling to communication; see Chapter 2) means that the dismissal of storytelling (as antithetical to evidence and/or information) is a hindrance to Parliament's purporting to accept – and, more pertinently, utilise – citizen input. The term 'anecdotal', mentioned by White and in the House of Lords debate cited above, often carries connotations of 'non-evidence', particularly in a legal context. Even recent political science scholarship has associated 'anecdote' with "normative arguments and personal stories", and differentiated it from "evidence" and "empirical arguments" more broadly (Eichhorn 2017). However, leaving aside the contentious question of whether *all* stories are subjective (Abbott 2008, p.22), it is important to emphasise that – with regard to engagement and select committee evidence – subjectivity is neither anti-empirical, nor presupposed by anecdote. The term 'anecdote' – derived from the Greek 'anekdota', meaning 'things unpublished' (an apt definition when discussing select committee evidence) – simply describes the relation of a story. The conflation of 'anecdotes' and 'stories' facilitates a dichotomy – an asymmetrical prioritisation – that de-prioritises 'things unpublished' (the sum of most public input, in other words) and, as the observation from White attests, considerably restricts the potential evidence base.

A Critical Discourse Analysis of select committee reports reveals clear tendencies regarding Parliament's conceptualisation of stories as input. Published select committee reports were drawn from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee (HCLG), Health and Social Care Committee (HSC)¹⁰¹, Petitions Committee, and Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) across the 2015-16 and 2016-17 sessions. The committees represented a diverse array of topics and responsibilities, while their published output constituted a sufficient volume of material through which to perform the Critical Discourse Analysis (see Section 3.2 for an explanation of this method; see Appendix 5 for a full list of reports analysed). The reports themselves were examined with respect to the story/information dichotomy. Notably, the term 'story/stories' was often present only within direct quotes, as Table 13 (below) demonstrates. That is to say, it was not the chosen terminology of the authors of the report. The Health and Social Care Committee's Report on Primary Care, for example, mentions the word 'story' once and 'narrative' twice; the word 'story', and one mention of 'narrative', are found within quotes. Likewise, the same committee's Report on Childhood Obesity features the word 'story' once, and the word 'narrative' three

¹⁰¹ Between the 2016-17 and 2017-19 parliamentary sessions the name of the Health Committee was changed to the Health and Social Care Committee. Between the same sessions, the name of the Communities and Local Government Committee was changed to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. All bibliographical references correspond to the name of the Committee at the time of the relevant report's publication.

times, in all instances within quotes. This speaks to the convention that White describes; an apprehensiveness towards stories as evidence. The frequency and context of committees' invocation of 'stories' is shown in Table 13 below:

Table 13 – Number of references to stories in select committee reports (2015-16 & 2016-17 sessions)

HSC	PACAC	HCLG	Petitions
3 references	6 references	9 references	35 references
"We have been perfectly clear that this is not the end of the <u>story</u> ". ¹⁰²	...the journalist on the Daily Mail who covered the <u>story</u> ... ¹⁰³	...mentioned the city's "success <u>story</u> in political leadership"... ¹⁰⁴	...invited some of those who had shared their <u>stories</u> to take part in an informal round table discussion... ¹⁰⁵
...they too "hear many <u>stories</u> of excellent care and staff going way beyond their job to help patients". ¹⁰⁶	The media also have regard to their own commercial interests in pursuing such <u>stories</u> ... ¹⁰⁷	We heard...that there was a "better <u>story</u> to tell"... ¹⁰⁸	We were profoundly moved by the <u>story</u> of Stephen Realf, as told to us by his sister and his parents. We present it here in their own words. ¹⁰⁹
"...data, which tell a very compelling <u>story</u> about how we can reduce variation"... ¹¹⁰	"...to be able to tell us their <u>story</u> as well"... ¹¹¹	Each homeless person has their own <u>story</u> and perspective. ¹¹²	We were keen to give the public the chance to share their <u>stories</u> of workplace dress codes. ¹¹³

¹⁰² Health Committee, 2017, p.10.

¹⁰³ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), 2016a, p.7.

¹⁰⁴ Communities and Local Government Committee, 2016a, p.14.

¹⁰⁵ Petitions Committee, 2016, p.14.

¹⁰⁶ Health Committee, 2016b, p.23.

¹⁰⁷ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), 2017, p.31.

¹⁰⁸ Communities and Local Government Committee, 2017, p.42.

¹⁰⁹ Petitions Committee, 2016, p.7.

¹¹⁰ Health Committee, 2016a, p.33.

¹¹¹ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC), 2016b, p.42.

¹¹² Communities and Local Government Committee, 2016b, p.5.

¹¹³ Petitions Committee and Women and Equalities Committee, 2017, p.4.

When stories *were* mentioned in committee-generated text (i.e. when the respective report's authors *chose* to employ this terminology), the context seldom challenged the story/information dichotomy. PACAC's reports, for example, typically cite 'stories' in the context of the media (thereby externalising or 'othering' it, through an association with outside interests) rather than the public (see Table 13). The term 'narrative', meanwhile, is typically invoked as a shorthand for context (a common practice, as discussed in the theoretical framework chapter) rather than stories. For example, PACAC's Kids Company report notes that "Ms Batmanghelidjh does not recognise this narrative" (2016b, p.19) as a comment on mutually-agreed context (or lack thereof). The term 'anecdote/anecdotal' is mentioned even less frequently than stories; HSC, PACAC and HCLG (across all of their reports) each mention it once during the 2015-16 session, and once again during the 2016-17 session. The Petitions Committee, meanwhile, mentions the term once during the 2016-17 session, and not at all in the preceding session. The context of this terminology is again revealing: PACAC's report on unsafe hospital discharges, for example, observed that "information provided to the Committee about the scale of this problem and the impact it has on patients was largely anecdotal", noting "a paucity of data around the scale of the problem" (2016c, p.8).

The contextualisation exemplified by PACAC serves to reinforce a dichotomised 'story/information' discourse. It can also be seen as a means of controlling contributions, of an institutional 'gatekeeper' privileging one form of input over another (Fairclough 2015, pp.75-77). In this case, we see select committees employing a discourse in which stories are contextualised as less important than (or even antithetical to) information, reinforcing the convention (mentioned by White) of primarily inviting the latter (and, crucially, *those who are more likely to provide it*) as input. This would clearly skew not only a report's base of evidence, but also its audience, and the respective committee's future contributors. Marc Geddes, similarly discussing select committee evidence, found shortcomings in the representativeness of witnesses called forward for oral evidence sessions; he concluded that an absence of "descriptive representation in Parliament...could perpetuate the perception that the House of Commons is a closed institution and does not hear from witnesses with whom the general public identify" (2018, p.299). Who Parliament hears from – *who it chooses to hear from* – determines to a large extent the type of messages that will constitute its evidence base, but this selectivity is itself a type of message. It projects a certain 'image' of Parliament – one that, in 'descriptive representation' terms, does not describe or resemble the wider citizenry – and, in doing so, entrenches perceptions that reflect this.

With this in mind it is important to view select committee reports not in isolation, but as products of (and contributions to) a cross-committee discourse that (dis)advantages certain types of public input and, by extension, *certain types of public*. Meanwhile, the sheer variance between PACAC and committees such as Petitions – in terms of the frequency and context of invoking ‘stories’ (see Table 13) – reinforces a narrative observed in the previous chapter; an ad-hoc, granular approach to parliamentary engagement, undermining the ‘holistic’ model that Kelso conceptualises as a necessary objective (2007). Some staff perspectives, in problematising a ‘holistic’ model, further reinforced this narrative:

...some committees are much more open to...thinking more rigorously and strategically about how to get the inputs, whether it's engagement, whether [it's] analysis...in general I think there's still quite a long way to go...they vary a lot in quality generally. They all vary a lot in terms of who they hear from and how there's any sense that that is...the right range of inputs.”¹¹⁴

The above extract, which reinforces the findings of our Critical Discourse Analysis, undermines Hendriks and Kay's aforementioned description of select committees (see Section 3.2), as “represent[ing] important deliberative spaces...where public input is vital” (2017, pp.2-3). So far we have shown that the value placed in public input is ad-hoc, inconsistent and, in some cases, absent. This, in turn, reinforces our problematisation of Rhodes *et al.*'s characterisation of parliamentary language, mentioned in the preceding chapter (Section 4.3) as recognisable (2009, p.222) and by extension coherent. It is especially significant, moreover, that the extract above refers specifically to select committees, which “have become a permanent, and indeed a pervasive, feature of the Parliamentary landscape” in matters of “pre-legislative scrutiny...and administrative oversight” (Norton 2013b, p.31; see also Judge 2005, p.56). Though questions remain as to its actual effect on government policy, the select committee system is widely-acknowledged to undertake worthy and valuable parliamentary work (Kelso 2018). Select committees are also a crucial component of Parliament's engagement efforts, and in many ways an exceptionally proactive one, for example in “engaging with new social media tools and utilising new digital communication methods” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.2). Indeed, they were frequently brought up – inside and outside the institution – as an aspect of Parliament that was appealing to citizens, and as such represented a ‘success story’ of parliamentary engagement. This is demonstrated by the extracts in Table 14 below:

¹¹⁴ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

Table 14 – Select committees as ‘success stories’ from citizen and staff perspectives

Citizen	Staff
<p>...if you watch a select committee it’s the one time it can restore your faith in...your own parliamentary democracy by watching cross-party people working together to the same end.¹¹⁵</p>	<p>...they don’t have to necessarily react to what the Government’s saying [general agreement]...there are ways through select committees of actually engaging people in things that are deemed to be beyond what the Government is dictating is important.¹¹⁶</p>
<p>5A: you’re looking at politics being confrontational and you don’t want to get involved...what you don’t see behind the scenes is like select committees which is more consensual...</p> <p>5B: Civilised.¹¹⁷</p>	<p>...it’s a good story to tell...they’re probably the most important thing that happens in Parliament anyway, regardless of the fact that, you know, they’re aesthetically and ethically pleasing to the public...select committees are probably the most important way in which Parliament holds Government to account.¹¹⁸</p>

The fact that select committees are widely acknowledged as an unusually proactive and progressive system within Parliament – i.e. one that would be more likely than most to problematise and challenge conventional orthodoxy – lends all the more relevance to its invocations (and implicit conceptualisations) of stories as public input. Quite apart from its contextualisation, Table 13 makes clear that the term ‘story/stories’ was mentioned incredibly seldom; the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee’s report on homelessness, which stresses that “[e]ach homeless person has their own story and perspective”, in fact mentions the term ‘story’ three times, and ‘perspective’ five times, across a 54-page document. Whether or not stories actually informed these reports is not the focus of this study; the focus is whether the stories were *couched* in such terms by Parliament, and what

¹¹⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 14 November 2016, Darlington.

¹¹⁶ Staff Focus Group Participant 1F. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹¹⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5A. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

¹¹⁸ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

this indicates about the story/information dichotomy within parliamentary discourse. Research commissioned by the Liaison Committee repeatedly emphasises the importance of “talk[ing] to multiple publics in multiple ways”, incorporating “publicly initiated inquiries, holding informal evidence sessions, working outside of London and supporting engagement from non-traditional communities” (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, p.6). Stories represent an informal, non-traditional, and unpublished multitude of perspectives and voices, a source that the commissioned report would surely advocate. However, this base of evidence is still largely (and even consciously) overlooked, while a holistic model of engagement within Parliament remains elusive.

Despite the fact that their unusualness indicates the lack of a wider cultural shift within Parliament (or even within select committees more broadly), there are reports that present something of an inversion of this dichotomised orthodoxy; most notably from the Petitions Committee (see Table 13). These reports also emphasise a difference between stories and information, but in order to prioritise the usefulness of stories *over* information. This prioritisation is a sentiment that we can relate back to narrative theory, especially Walter Benjamin’s (2006, p.366) argument that stories derive their value from a ‘non-immediate’ (i.e. subjective and latent) form of power that is distinct from information (which by contrast has a strict half-life in this respect). Exemplars of a prioritisation of stories within Parliament include the Petitions Committee’s reports on *Brain Tumour Research* and *High heels and workplace dress codes*; the latter, in contrast to PACAC’s aforementioned association of anecdote with ‘paucity of data’, positively drew attention to “compelling anecdotal evidence about employers’ treatment of female workers” (2017, p.8). Within the aforementioned Petitions Committee reports, the value of stories was emphasised as a source of evidence and a means of visible impact; even when conflicting with dominant media narratives which, in the case of the *High Heels* inquiry, implied that

“the Government have rejected this petition” but they hadn’t...they rejected making it illegal because it is already illegal, but what they did do is accept all of our recommendations about doing awareness campaigns, contacting employers, and all this other great stuff, which is brilliant but the press sold that as a negative story even though that was a huge plus...¹¹⁹

The immediate impact of stories, in prompting an ‘affective’ response, was also acknowledged by the Committee itself, noting – in their report on *Research into Brain Tumours* – that they “were profoundly moved by the story of Stephen Realf, as told to us by his sister and his parents.

¹¹⁹ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

We present it here in their own words” (see Table 13). It was also made clear that the public stories that this inquiry attracted were instrumental in the subsequent formation of a Government Working Group – successfully engineering change, in other words – specifically *because* they were stories:

...they decided “well let’s see how many people this is affecting, let’s do a web thread”, which is, you know, the best we’ve got on the Parliament website at the moment, and we had sort of 1100 really...powerful stories, like emotionally powerful stories, so that convinced the Committee we really need to look into this, and they got some of those people in to meet them, and it was those face-to-face conversations that kind of got the Members really fired up, “we need to do something about this”, and that’s actually made a change, there’s this working group – which doesn’t sound great, to members of the public – but that’s actually a massive thing, the Government have now set up this group looking at practical steps...¹²⁰

The web thread mentioned by the staff member asked the following question: “Has a brain tumour affected your life in any way?” (UK Parliament 2015a). A direct request for stories, as a means of accruing evidence, represents a significant departure from traditional parliamentary practice. Meanwhile, the Petitions Committee’s acknowledgement not only of the stories themselves, but of their effect, constitutes an entirely new conceptualisation of these communicative forms at a parliamentary level. The report’s claim – of the Committee being ‘extremely moved’ by public stories – and the staff participant’s description of the stories as ‘emotionally powerful’, both speak to *affective impact* as a means by which “stories can be so powerful, working as they do directly on our emotions” (Abbott 2008, p.189). The following observation, from a staff member involved with the Petitions Committee, attests to this ‘emotional power’ when discussing the aforementioned Brain Tumour research report:

...it was really, really well received, and I don’t think anyone can read it without shedding a tear because of all those personal stories... it had a real, a real impact on the way that we wrote it, because it would have been so much easier just to write a standard dry Select Committee report but I don’t think it would have had as much impact.¹²¹

An acknowledgement that a select committee report would not have had the same impact without public stories is highly significant. It implies a reversal of the convention described by White at the beginning of this section; a received wisdom that evidence *benefits* from a ‘filtering out’ of anecdotes, resulting in what the staff member cited above refers to as a ‘standard’ and ‘dry’ model. Here we can see a re-addressing of the traditional asymmetry of the story/information dichotomy (though not of the dichotomy itself) through (1) accepting the

¹²⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹²¹ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

usefulness of stories as a means of evidence, and (2) incorporating these stories with minimal (or no) paraphrasing. This capacity to let citizens tell *their* stories potentialises (but has clearly not brought about) a broader cultural shift within Parliament with respect to stories and engagement. This renders an examination of recent engagement campaigns – ones that actually employ narrative terminology – all the more relevant.

5.4 – Effective storytelling: *Your Story, our History and The Story of Parliament*

Thus far we have primarily discussed the stories that citizens tell about (or to) Parliament; our focus will now turn to the stories that Parliament tells – or attempts to tell – about itself. Studies of the intersection between engagement and storytelling typically focus on voter mobilisation (Coleman 2015; Escobar 2011; Salmon 2010) and protest movements (Fernandes 2017) rather than Parliament’s own engagement efforts. While “strategists have embraced the power of ‘narrative’ to enable their parties to tell stories that help them construct emotional electoral appeals” (Fielding 2011, p.224), it remains an open question as to whether Parliament has effectively applied – or even acknowledged – the valence of this technique for non-partisan purposes. This uncertainty can be attributed at least in part to the notion that *electoral* engagement, as a concept and a pursuit, existed long before *parliamentary* engagement. “Historically”, writes Norton, “there have been no significant means by which either House has sought to inform or engage with citizens. The only official output was *Hansard*, but that reported what Members said” (2013a). Furthermore, these Members – as we have already discussed – traditionally focused on encouraging citizens to engage *with them* (most of all through voting) rather than with Parliament *per se*. *Hansard*’s traditional engagement mandate speaks volumes for traditional conceptions of parliamentary engagement, clearly based around disseminating information (itself relevant to, and redolent of, the story/information distinction discussed in the previous section). Reporting parliamentary activities is, from this perspective, a far cry from encouraging public involvement.

When seeking to tell a story about itself, Parliament is claiming a certain identity; for itself, and for the (supposed) audience. Stories, in this way, reveal as much about the storyteller as the audience to whom they communicate. The audience is a situated one, hypothesised and constructed by the storyteller; in the highly self-conscious words of Michael Warner, “[t]his essay has a public. If you are reading (or hearing) this, you are part of its public. So first let me say: welcome” (2002, p.65). Faced with a representation of themselves, the audience must

accordingly accept and legitimate the story that the teller is communicating to them. Incumbent on the acceptance (and success) of the story being told is what the reader discerns in their 'reflection'. MacIntyre's observation that we, as humans, can only conceptualise means of action through identifying stories in which we 'find ourselves', as an anchoring point of reference (2007, p.16), could not be more relevant to the form of engagement that storytelling potentialises; it is an important affirmation of the reader/audience's centrality and agency. Parliamentary storytelling thus aims not only to represent Parliament to the citizenry, but to represent the citizenry to itself. This is directly relevant to a 'fractal' concept of self-reference, as we will discuss in accordance with Parliament's recent engagement efforts.

In 2016 *The Story of Parliament* was published in booklet and poster form, providing key details about Parliament and its development "from monarchy to democracy" (House of Commons Enquiry Service 2016). In this sense it resembles a story, as it presents a plot (an arrangement of events) in the past tense, which remains a frequently-used narrative device (see Section 2.3). However, it does not constitute *storytelling* as understood within this thesis, which itself rests on a crucial differentiation "between the story as a text and storytelling as a practice" (Fernandes 2017). Storytelling exists in the form of a dynamic process. By contrast, *The Story of Parliament* constitutes the dissemination of *information* rather than the telling of a story; a crucial conceptual and practical distinction. As a distinction, it is an especially relevant one to emphasise, because *The Story of Parliament* is still distributed in booklet form by Parliament's Participation Team – which "focuses on building relations with civil society, promoting effective outreach" (UK Parliament 2018b). Moreover, it is still available to visitors within Portcullis House, an important site of "social interaction and engagement" for citizens and parliamentary staff alike (Hansard Society 2011, p.69). A document of this type, described by its own title as a *Story*, suggests a parliamentary conceptualisation of stories as 'resources', or 'material' (as we observed through our examination of parliamentary discourse). A story, in and of itself, is indeed just a resource. However, *telling* a story is a dynamic and, as such, requires more than past-tense prose.

Focusing now on a different parliamentary engagement initiative, *Your Story, Our History* exemplifies the distinction we have made so far. It is a series of YouTube films commissioned by Parliament, depicting a speaker (or a pair of speakers) discussing a piece of legislation through their own perspective; specifically, the impact of the legislation on their life story. In this way the *Your Story, Our History* campaign contrasts sharply with *The Story of Parliament*, as well as the parliamentary discourse observed in the previous section, since it acknowledges a storyteller and presents *their* story as a focus. Parliament does not frame the 1965 Race Relations Act (one

of the milestones described in *Your Story, Our History*), for example, as its own story. Instead it is framed as the story of Shango Baku, who describes his own personal experiences: uncertainty and persecution, the passage of the Race Relations Act (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b), and the positive change that this Act represented *to him*. By comparison, in *The Story of Parliament* the reduction of the voting age to 18 in 1969 (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b, p.7) is presented as a development within *Parliament's* story, rather than the citizens who experienced its benefits. Shango's story unambiguously presents Shango as both the subject and the storyteller.

Relating back to our fractal analogy (see Figure 9), Shango's is a story of self-similar elements, relatable to those who suffered persecution and later benefited from parliamentary legislation. In addition, there is – to borrow Langellier (1999, p.127) and Rai's (2015, p.1188) terminology – a 'ghostly' audience that is not necessarily 'present' but is, in a sense, anticipated. In the context of Shango's story, the 'ghostly' audience would constitute a reader/audience who may have no *direct* experience of persecution, but instead can relate to (and therefore recognise themselves within) the additional narrative cues. These cues include themes of isolation and uncertainty, or, as Shango's story describes it, a "sea of circumstance" (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b). Ultimately, this particular storytelling dynamic can be summarised as follows:

1. Shango's relation of the story to the viewer (equivalent to a reader/audience)
2. The viewer relating Shango's story to narrative elements familiar to the viewer
3. The viewer relating themselves against these familiar narrative elements

In this way the storyteller's experience becomes the experience of the reader/audience; those who can relate to the story's cues and themes, if not through personal experience (see Section 5.1; see also Young 1996, p.131). The reader/audience is engaged in co-constitutive meaning-making, which is a characteristic of a *storytelling* dynamic, not merely the *presentation* of a story or facilitating access to it. Through this process of co-constitutive meaning-making, the reader/audience establishes what the story means (*to them*). Crucially, *Your Story, Our History* (and not *The Story of Parliament*) conceptualises and communicates a *story* as a means of parliamentary engagement; as a source of appeal that citizens may engage with. *The Story of Parliament*, by contrast, details the ways in which a citizen *could* engage (via the contact details provided), but not why they may *wish* to.

In *Your Story, Our History*, the effects of the Race Relations Act (to take one example) are presented as 'Shango's story'. The same is true of the other storytellers within this campaign,

relating other legislative milestones (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b). In these instances Parliament relinquishes a claim to the story and instead merely facilitates its communication. What we can see in these case studies is a deference to the story of the citizen; an awareness that citizen stories are (or can be) *parliamentary* stories and that, crucially, they are directly conducive to the effective manifestation of engagement that has been discussed within this thesis: relatable, effective, and evident of a holistic participatory culture. Linking back to the previous section (and its discussion of the brain tumour research inquiry and report), we see a key commonality in the treatment of ‘public stories’ that is directly conducive to this effective model of engagement:

- *Your Story, Our History*: “Leyla’s story/Shango’s story/Jannett’s story” (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016b)
- *Brain Tumour Research*: “We were profoundly moved by the story of Stephen Realf, as told to us by his sister and his parents. We present it here in their own words.” (Petitions Committee 2016, p.7)

Both of the above cases indicate a significant (and highly symbolic) progression; they incorporate citizen voices, and present parliamentary stories as *their stories* (and vice versa). Another notable commonality across the examples above relates back to a consistent theme within effective storytelling; that of *possibilities*. In our discussions of the narrative process, specifically with reference to Nussbaum (2001) and Luhmann (1995) – see Section 2.3 – we have shown the reliance of effective storytelling upon the reader/audience’s perception of relatable, feasible possibilities (for themselves). As Section 2.4 discussed, this relatability can be analogised in a fractal sense; the relation and interpretation of stories against a familiar, self-similar background of situated knowledge. Framing her argument in explicitly *affective* terms, Jenkins calls for “a public cultivation of hope...a robust and energetic disposition that can accept disappointments, provide sustenance and nourishment, recognise and promote indeterminacy, but is crucially rooted in practice” (2018, p.204). This directly relates to the significance of providing models for future action, and events (or even ‘characters’) that are relatable to the extent of inspiration. These possibilities, and means of inspiration, are highly significant in challenging and resisting dominant narratives of an irrelevant, antiquated and abstract Parliament (see Chapter 4).

The attribution of ownership is relevant beyond the subject of the story (i.e. its plot, its characters) but also to the narrator of the story. In other words the implication is that ‘Leyla’s story’ is *about* Leyla, but also *belongs to* Leyla as the narrator. As Bauman states, the narrator is “the most privileged position in the storytelling event. He knows how it will turn out” (1986, p.38). The claiming, or allocation, of the role of ‘narrator’ is in effect an *authority claim*. “In the

storytelling profession”, Wendy Welch points out, “ownership is generally used as a synonym for the right to tell a story” (2009, p.2, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, these stories still constitute a concerted effort to *represent Parliament to citizens*; in the case of *Your Story, Our History*, the (re)presentation of a granular identity composed of pluralised points of view, experiences and stories. What connects them is Parliament: its relevance (in enacting legislation), its development (alongside broader societal trends), and its relinquishment of stories (in favour of those who *tell* them). These themes – relevance, development, and (non-)ownership – dovetail with the parliamentary *modus operandi* mentioned in Section 4.2: that *Parliament is yours, Parliament is relevant, and Parliament is evolving* (UK Parliament 2015b). *Your Story, Our History* is therefore notable in its fidelity to storytelling at a conceptual level (compared with examples like *The Story of Parliament*) and to Parliament’s claims of relevance, evolution, and ‘public ownership’; its engagement model, in other words. It represents an innovative attempt to make Parliament meaningful to citizens, by letting citizens decide what it is that parliamentary stories mean to them. The extent to which these stories can be problematised, and even rejected, will form the basis of the last section within this chapter.

5.5 – “Being part of progress”: discussing and problematising parliamentary storytelling

When explicitly discussing what they thought of storytelling as a mode of engagement, citizen and staff participants typically responded positively (though not without problematisation, as we will discuss). These positive responses were mostly couched in terms of relatability and humanisation; the observation that telling stories “makes [politics] more real”, for instance.¹²² When discussing the *Your Story, Our History* campaign described in the previous section, staff members confirmed the usefulness of (*telling*) these stories in facilitating a sense of personal connection to Parliament:

2E: ...they went down so well online, so we’re doing more for the horrifically titled Sexual Offences Act anniversary, er so looking at the LGBT community, and how legislation has affected that community, but again directly people’s individual stories, kind of straight to camera, “this is what it was like before, and now obviously things are better”... I think that’s, that’s the kind of message that legislation is affecting people’s lives but there’s still more to do... using that as the kind of hook, being part of progress...

2C: I think the Suffragettes is really good for that... I’m not a woman [laughs] but I mean coming from an organisation that represented young women I felt like there

¹²² Citizen Focus Group Participant 8B. *Focus group with Author*. 29 March 2018, Sheffield.

was a real personal connection among the membership there... even though it was a hundred years ago... I'm connected to that.¹²³

Another significant theme was that of inspiration, with observations that “if people have seen other people achieve political progress then they think, oh they can do it too.”¹²⁴ This relates back to a central appeal of storytelling, as noted by Nussbaum; that the readers of a story, upon “[s]eeing events as general human possibilities...naturally also see them as possibilities for themselves” (2001, p.241). It also reinforces the value of the *inspiration* counter-narrative (Section 4.4) which addresses and resists negative elements of dominant parliamentary narratives (and public perceptions). Especially relevant (in the context of a study of *parliamentary* storytelling) was the notion that an instance of parliamentary engagement could constitute an effective, inspiring story in itself:

I think it's really important to show how big things can become if you just take a few small steps, like Maria Lester with that petition on the brain tumour research, and how that's, she literally just started a petition, and now that has turned into £45million put into brain tumour research from the government. That's just incredible, and I'm sure when she started that petition she didn't think that anything like that would happen... it gives them a sense of agency, people who think “oh I could never make any change”, showing how other people have in the past, normal everyday people like themselves, I'm sure would encourage them to engage and give it a go.¹²⁵

This represents the most significant divergence from the discourse that was examined in Section 5.3 (relating to the dichotomisation of stories and information), as well as the most significant inducement *for* a divergence, in positing that a discursive change would in fact encourage other citizens to directly involve themselves with the work of Parliament. This again reinforces the importance of conceptualising select committee reports as part of a parliamentary discourse, one that can either entrench dominant narratives or resist and overturn them. However, as we have also maintained, a story is not guaranteed to be inspirational (i.e. a source of perceptible ‘human possibilities’) or even relatable, even when it is told. We can analogise this through the fractal model of effective storytelling, with reference to the problematisation of a parliamentary story. In this instance we will examine the story of female suffrage, which (as noted earlier in this section) was viewed by some staff as a means of fostering personal connection through relatability, but was nevertheless subjected to contestation:

8B: ...historical examples are good, but current news examples are extra effective [general agreement] because you're like “that could be me”, I'm not going to be Pankhurst. But I could be...

¹²³ Staff Focus Group Participants 2C & 2E. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

¹²⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participant 8C. *Focus group with Author*. 29 March 2018, Sheffield.

¹²⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 8A. *Focus group with Author*. 29 March 2018, Sheffield.

8C: Yeah, I'm not going to throw myself in front of the King's horse.¹²⁶

We will relate the above exchange to our fractal analogy of storytelling (see Figure 9) and, in doing so, illustrate the problematisation of a story and its components (as perceived by the reader/audience):

Figure 10 – Problematisation of an instance of storytelling

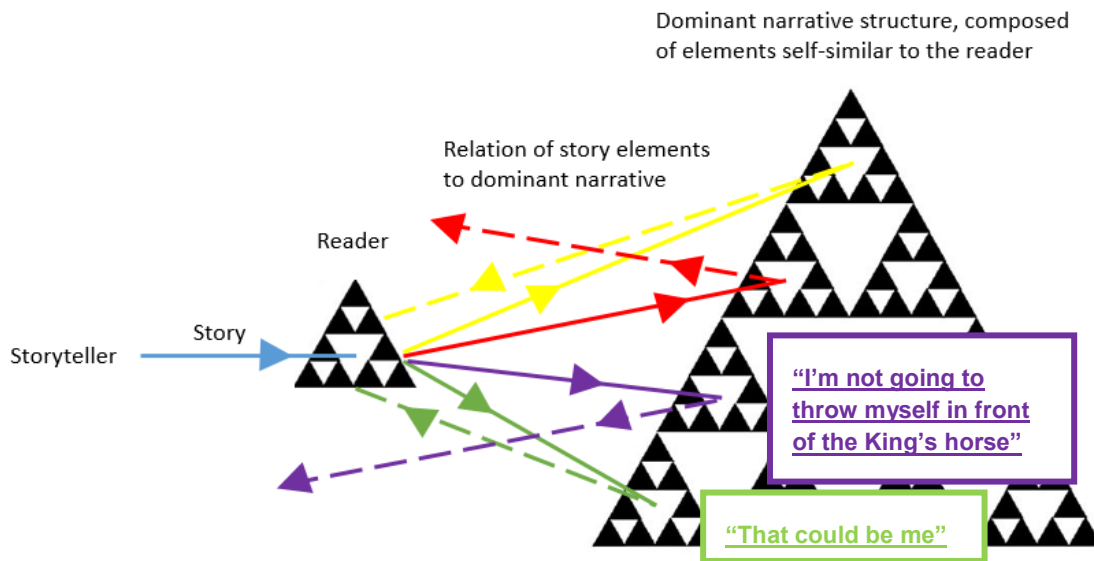


Figure 10 shows how some elements of a story can connect back to the reader/audience, who can determine elements of the story to be relatable (“that could be me”) yet reject others (“I’m not going to...”). In this case, the example of the suffragettes is problematised through a lack of affinity with the ‘characters’ of a story (the Pankhursts and Emily Davidson). The statement that “I’m not going to be Pankhurst”, along with the contextualisation of Emily Davidson’s death, implies non-affinity by doubting the feasibility of these events (or even these ‘characters’) in a contemporary context. The story of the suffragette movement was also problematised from a staff perspective, in terms of its suitability as a *parliamentary* story:

2E: ...I find it interesting that Parliament as a body celebrates that, because at the time and if that happened now, we’d be very, you know, the MPs would be very anti-that, if there were women blowing up houses, throwing bricks through windows, that kind of thing it wouldn’t be celebrated, but because you have that, that space of time, because it was a hundred years ago it’s like “ah yeah, they were all amazing” [laughs] at the time...

¹²⁶ Citizen Focus Group Participants 8B & 8C. *Focus group with Author*. 29 March 2018, Sheffield.

2B: ...I had somebody lecturing me about the importance of feeling proud of all the wonderful parliamentary achievements over the years, and was citing things like abolishing slavery, and it did occur to me “what about all the years when Parliament didn’t abolish slavery? What about all the slavers that actually were here, and were Members themselves?” And I think you, one has to be a little bit careful about the idea that... things change, if laws change with that, as part of that, I don’t think in the end or the middle of the process, then they must have gone through Parliament, does that necessarily mean that Parliament was an engine of progressive change?¹²⁷

Stories were problematised (by citizens and staff alike) on the grounds of whether they were appropriate parliamentary stories, or even (for some purposes) appropriate stories in general. This problematisation of ostensibly *parliamentary* stories was particularly apparent when the story itself was viewed as containing an inducement (to vote, for example):

...voting history does not speak to a lot of average people, so you know if where I come from, I’m from South Wales, the majority of people are like “I know nothing”, for example I went to my old secondary school to have a chat to some of their sixth-formers about voting for the first time, before the last general election, and they were all incredibly intelligent, erm, group of people, all like “oh we know nothing about politics, we could never vote”...if we couch it in “there’s a rich history, therefore it’s a responsibility of yours to contribute to this history” ... it’s massively intimidating... if you’re led by issues of the individual rather than the richness or the heritage of Parliament I’d say that’s far more effective...¹²⁸

Relating back to the discussion of individualised, issue-based forms of political expression that introduced and contextualised this thesis, there now exists a strand of academic literature that, as Manning identifies, diagnoses “a shift, driven by young people, away from duty-based notions of citizenship towards more personalised and self-actualising forms of citizenship” (2017, p.468). Both a shift away from ‘duty’ and towards self-actualisation are supported by the extract above, in terms of what fosters and constitutes effective engagement. This observation reinforces a conception of engagement as an interpretive act (van Wessel 2016), and citizens as agential, capable of “adapting, developing and even rejecting much of their heritage” (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, p.32). It also suggests that stories in which “[h]istories, ambiguities and political struggles are erased in an effort to create warm and relatable portraits of others who are “just like us”” (Fernandes 2017, p.2) are liable to be identified (and ultimately dismissed) as such by the audience. Narrative theory often conceptualises storytelling as the *retelling* of traditional stories, alluding to universal narratives (Campbell 1968), a process captured, incidentally, by Shenhav’s own distinct fractal analogy (2015, pp.60-66), as discussed in Chapter 2. In any case, what we can discern from participant discussions and problematisations is that, when a story is

¹²⁷ Staff Focus Group Participants 2B & 2E. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

¹²⁸ Staff Focus Group Participant 1F. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

perceived as encapsulating outdated values – when it is impossible to relate to – it fails in its purpose to motivate an action or an affective *reaction*.

Questioning narratives of Parliament – and the stories told about it – is consistent with a conceptualisation of storytelling as dynamic and dialogic, and of legislatures as sites in which “claims on public resources are made, scrutinized, prioritized, accepted, repackaged and rejected” (Parkinson 2013, p.440). This reflects the role of parliaments as “a marketplace of ideas and interests, the institutional space where political parties engage in a permanent process of contestation, mediation and compromise” (Alonso, Keane and Merkel 2011, p.7). Parliament and its associated narratives do not exist – and did not originate – in a vacuum. What they represent, and what they mean, is a dialogic process and forms part of citizens’ capacity to ‘make sense’ of the political landscape they perceive around them. These narratives are not imposed, either by Parliament or by citizens; nor are they inevitable. What an institution represents – what it symbolises – fluctuates according to the stories told about it and, by extension, the meanings attributed to it. These meanings are co-constituted, not codified. The problematisation of parliamentary narratives such as female suffrage, and the abolition of slavery – narratives that Parliament has sought to communicate itself through – is not antithetical to engagement. Nor is questioning (or even contesting) Parliament’s relevance within these narratives akin to dismissing its relevance outright. Instead, what this constitutes is a dialogic and reflexive process of meaning-making. Problematisation of narratives is *de facto* engagement, and a logical extension of a political climate in which the question of what Parliament ‘means’ is open and contested. This process was evident when staff, citizens and elites were discussing and problematising (i.e. engaging with) parliamentary narratives, determining what each allusive story meant (or did not mean) *to them*.

Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated citizens’ situated knowledge of the political sphere, within which Parliament is notable by its absence. The narratives of disconnection and disinterest that this absence alludes to are further reinforced through their proliferation as stories; not only among the citizenry, but among parliamentary staff. Compounding this issue is an institutional discourse that has entrenched a (largely-preserved) dichotomisation of stories and information, one that has only recently been seriously problematised. What this chapter has also sought to show, however, is the propensity for (indeed, the inevitability of) change within this narrative context. What restricts change is an asymmetrical institutional discourse that privileges certain

forms of public input (and therefore certain publics) over others; specifically, undervaluing (or dismissing) the telling of stories as a means by which citizens relate situated knowledge. What reinforces this discourse is a failure – among scholars and parliamentarians – to examine and appraise a storytelling campaign (such as *Your Story, Our History*) on its own terms. The story/information dichotomy discussed in this chapter is, if anything, overturned by *Your Story, Our History*, but Parliament's own approach to public stories (and public input) remains granular and non-holistic as a model of engagement.

Storytelling can intuitively communicate the ongoing meaningfulness that underpins the conceptualisation of engagement that this thesis adopts; dialogic, meaningful, and consistent (in the sense of ongoing *and* holistic). Conceptualising engaging storytelling through a fractal, interpretive framework is, in theoretical terms, a reflection of the need to credit citizens with sufficient agency (and common sense) to interact, relate with, and even reject an attempt to engage through stories. This chapter, especially its final section, shows how this interaction and rejection is incumbent on (non-)relatability; what this chapter also shows is that, when successful, storytelling constitutes a form of engagement that is inherently, definitively personal, relying as it does on human connection. This conclusion comes at a crucial time for Parliament, during which its engagement efforts have increased and diversified (Leston-Bandeira 2016, pp.499-500). These engagement efforts, and means of assessing their effect, will form the basis of the following chapter, as well as further discussion of what Parliament – and politics in general – means to citizens.

Chapter 6 – The effects of parliamentary engagement sessions

You better be sure you wanna know what you wanna know.

'Kara' – Brick

Introduction

The two preceding chapters examined and discussed participant views in the immediate aftermath of parliamentary engagement sessions. These views were a by-product of discussion and reflection, facilitating what Stoker *et al.* (2016, p.4), vis-à-vis Kahneman (2012), would refer to as 'slow thinking'; a considered and relatively analytical form of cognition. In this chapter we discuss the engagement sessions, and attendees' preconceptions of them, in greater detail. This involves a greater (though not exclusive) focus on 'fast thinking' responses, provided by the participants before the session (and its associated deliberative exercises). These responses are more intuitive and less reflective than 'slow thinking', with a greater susceptibility to cues and heuristics, and are therefore essential in discussing the two questions that form the basis of this chapter. The first question relates to the influence of the sessions, and the second to the influence of Parliament as a setting. In answering the first question we will draw upon participants' demographic characteristics, and the level of political involvement (and interest) they expressed before and after the session. This question holds relevance for the inclusiveness of parliamentary engagement and the extent to which these events simply attract the 'usual suspects', a prospect potentialised by their (*parliamentary*) engagement-related focus. In answering the second question we compare responses based on whether the respective sessions took place within the Parliamentary Estate or outside it. This is an important distinction, with considerable implications as to the significance (and effectiveness/drawbacks) of Parliament as an engagement setting. It also constitutes – alongside the narratives and stories discussed in the two preceding chapters – a means of evaluating the institution's symbolic meaningfulness in practice.

6.1 – Questioning the ‘usual suspects’: who attends parliamentary engagement sessions?

In Section 4.1, observations of the preponderance of the change/decline narrative prompted discussion over whether a certain *type* of individual was more likely to attend a parliamentary engagement session. Within that chapter it was reiterated that the views discussed were not reducible to the characteristics and intuitions of the participants themselves, but were the result of deliberation and reflexivity. This chapter, by contrast, examines responses that are definitively intuitive, gathered – in the form of questionnaires – before the engagement sessions (and focus groups) began.¹²⁹ Examining the characteristics of session attendees, and their commonalities, holds significance for Parliament’s current engagement attempts and the basis upon which they can claim effectiveness. That is to say, a preponderance of ‘usual suspects’ (i.e. the already-engaged) would undermine Parliament’s pursuit of breadth in public engagement as well as depth; a touchstone of the second five-year parliamentary engagement strategy (Walker 2011, pp.278-279) and reiterated in its most recent version (UK Parliament 2016). More fundamentally, it would problematise any claim of Parliament to be *reaching* disaffected citizens, let alone engaging them. Historically, engagement efforts have been identified as largely speaking (and appealing) to ‘usual suspects’ (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015), a tendency raised several times in the staff focus group sessions.¹³⁰ It is also a concern voiced through studies of citizenship and political education (Flinders 2016) as well as ostensibly new methods and/or channels of engagement which, in reality, run the risk of simply reinforcing existing socio-political inequities (Leston-Bandeira 2012; Kelso 2007).

As discussed in Chapter 3, parliamentary engagement sessions provided a forum for most of the fieldwork conducted within this thesis. The majority of these sessions were organised and facilitated by parliamentary staff; citizens were invited to attend these events, which proceeded along a similar format each time; providing information on Parliament, and describing ways in which citizens could engage with it. Though the format of these sessions – their length, their structure, their overall ‘message’, and the staff members running the session – remained consistent, the location of the sessions varied; one of the key foci of this chapter, therefore, is whether location influenced the session. Specifically, we ask whether being *inside* or *outside* of the Parliamentary Estate in Westminster – and whether the session was organised by Parliament or not – affected attendees’ preconceptions, and perceptions of the engagement session (and

¹²⁹ See Section 3.3 for details of the fieldwork sequence.

¹³⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 1C. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster; Staff Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

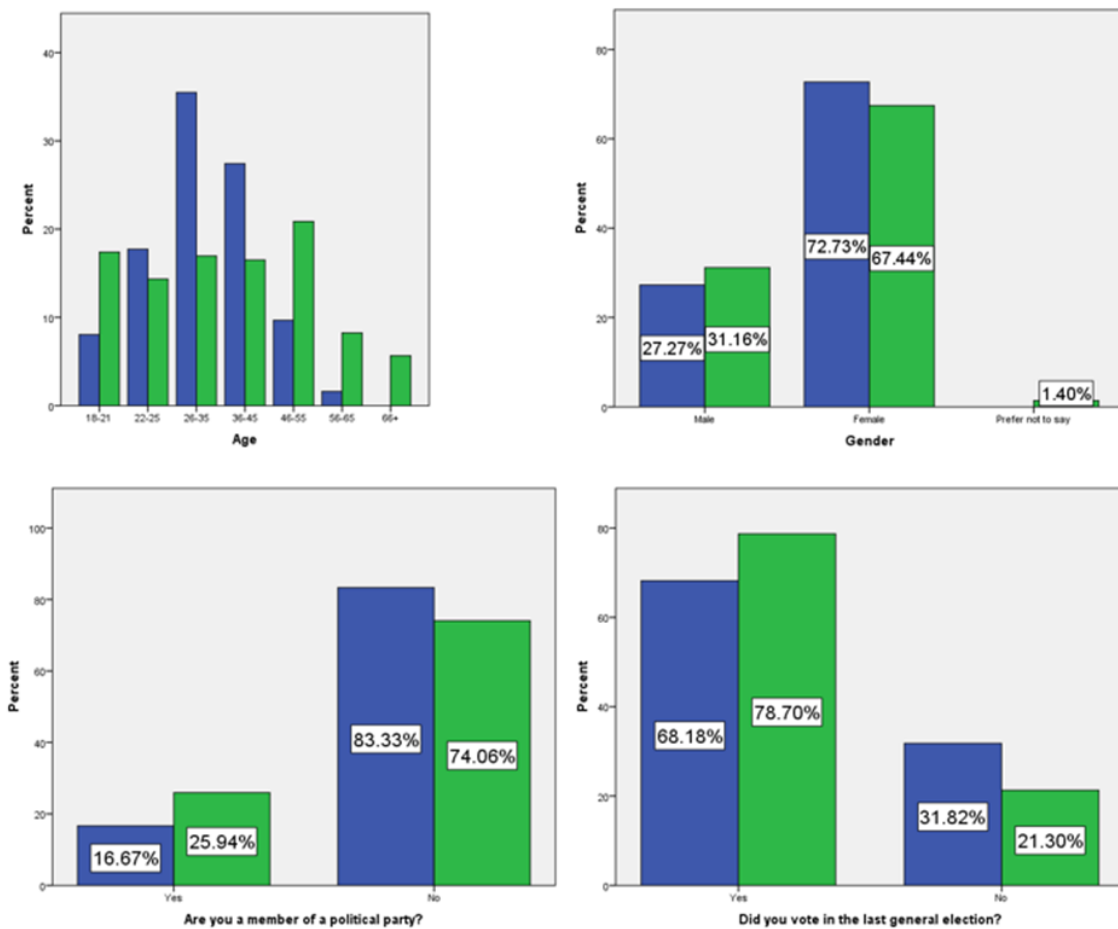
Parliament more broadly). This will be examined on the basis of typical attendees – for Westminster- and non-Westminster-based parliamentary engagement sessions, as well as parliamentary and non-parliamentary sessions¹³¹ – and broader inferences as to the type of socio-political groups these events attracted. We will also examine potential variance in how the attendees ‘experienced’ Parliament (whether in person, or purely discursively).

We will examine this phenomenon of ‘experience’ – with respect to parliamentary engagement – by comparing the views of engagement session attendees; those who attended engagement sessions inside and outside of the Parliamentary Estate. In so doing we presuppose that engagement session attendees – inside *and* outside Westminster – will engage in some form with Parliament’s symbolic meaning (in accordance with the inherent subjectivities discussed throughout this thesis so far). What is in question is whether proximity to Parliament – downplaying a theme of distance, at least in a geographical sense – helps, hinders, or is irrelevant vis-à-vis parliamentary engagement. Our previous discussions regarding the harmfulness or conductivity of certain narratives to the prospect of strengthened parliamentary engagement can thus be observed in practice. These characteristics will form part of our assessment of effectiveness alongside the *attitudes* expressed by participants. In exploring this point – and referring back to previous chapters’ discussions of parliamentary narratives and symbolic ‘presence’ – we can discern something of Parliament’s (literal) relevance to engagement activities, with a view to examining its significance as a part of these sessions. Figure 11 below provides the demographic variables according to the location of the engagement session, in order to determine whether the latter exerted any predetermining influence on the characteristics of typical attendees:

¹³¹ As is the case elsewhere in this thesis, sessions are referred to as ‘parliamentary/non-parliamentary’ in accordance with whether they were organised by Parliament, and ‘Westminster/non-Westminster’ on the basis of their location, i.e. whether they took place within the Parliamentary Estate (see Section 3.2 of the Methodology; see also Appendix 1 for a list of engagement sessions in which questionnaires were distributed).

Figure 11 – Age group, gender, party membership and previous voting behaviour of engagement session attendees, according to session location

- Westminster setting
- Non-Westminster setting



Ostensibly, attendees of the Westminster engagement sessions were drawn from younger age groups; the groups in this location were also less likely to be male, or members of political parties, or to have voted in the most recent general election. Looking across these four graphs as predictors, we see consistency with existing scholarship on political behaviour and a tendency to bear out widely observed political trends. Dalton (2008, pp.180-184) shows age to be positively correlated with partisan alignment. Age is also positively-correlated to voter turnout in the UK (Dalton 2008; 2007; Campbell 2006), demonstrated time and again in general elections.¹³² This is consistent with the trends shown in Figure 11; that the Westminster sessions

¹³² The apparent ‘Youthquake’ of the 2017 General Election – which would serve to problematise this correlation – was categorically dismissed by the British Election Study, who observed no such

tended to attract a younger age group, who were less likely to be party members or to have voted in the last general election. In addition, these sessions – with their greater likelihood of female participants and lower indicators of party membership and voting – also show a consistency with scholarly observations that males tend to be more politically active (Norris 2002; Schlozman, Burns and Verba 1994). Dalton attributes this to “[d]ifferences in political resources, such as education level, income, and employment patterns”, along with the fact that “society traditionally socialized women to be less politically engaged” (2008, p.58).¹³³ The Westminster-based sessions, then, tended to attract a younger, more predominantly female group of attendees, who were less likely to participate in voting or party membership.¹³⁴ All four of these observations would appear to indicate – based on existing engagement literature – a lesser degree (and/or likelihood) of political engagement.

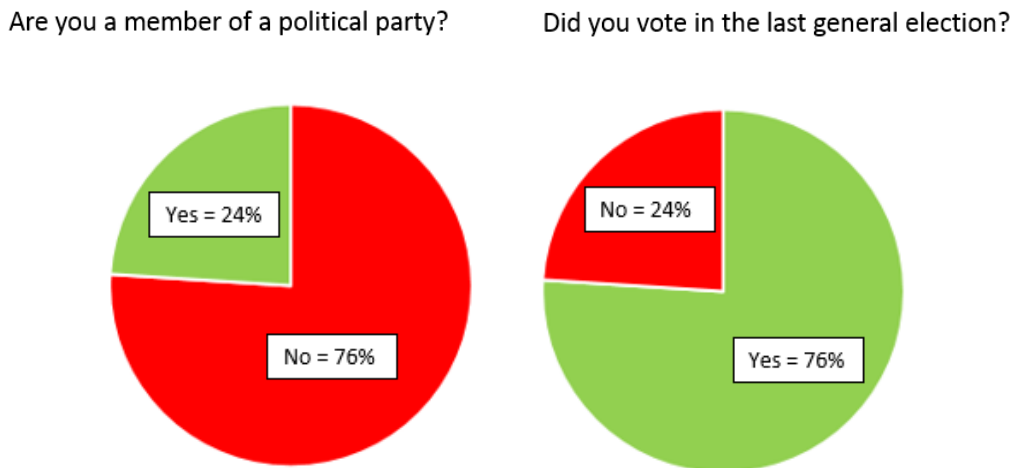
With this in mind, it is essential – before examining the effect (and effectiveness) of the sessions – to determine whether the participants were ‘usual suspects’ or not, according to widely-accepted engagement quantifiers. Electoral participation, party membership, political knowledge and satisfaction formed our basis for examination, given their prominence in engagement literature – often presented, interlinked, as evidence of “citizens...heading for the exits of the national political arena” (Mair 2013, p.43) – and the research participants’ use of them to substantiate claims of being engaged (see Section 5.1). In establishing these quantifiers within this study, all of the participants were asked, in the pre-session questionnaires, whether they had voted in the last general election, and whether they were a member of a political party. The results of these questions would thereby provide an indication (though not an encapsulation) of (dis)engagement among the participants.

‘surge’ in youth turnout. Rather, there was a marginal turnout increase “in the sorts of places with lots of young adults. That does not necessarily mean it was those young adults doing the extra turning out” (Prosser *et al.*, 2018, p.5).

¹³³ The philosophical grounding of this socialisation – an Enlightenment-era dichotomisation between ‘emotion’ and ‘reason’ – also underpins some of the academic ‘compartmentalisations’ discussed in the Literature Review (see Section 1.1).

¹³⁴ Establishing which social groups are more likely to attend certain types of engagement session holds valuable potential for future research, considering that two demographics discussed in this thesis – women and young people – have already been identified by House of Commons Library (2018) research as being ‘disengaged groups’; thus their (greater or lesser) attendance at *Parliamentary* engagement sessions is of considerable interest (see Conclusions at the end of this thesis).

Figure 12 – Indicators of political engagement among engagement session participants¹³⁵



In both cases the dataset indicates an above-average involvement in formal politics, especially with regard to party membership (24%). This figure eclipses recent data on party membership figures as a proportion of the UK electorate; Labour’s reported 540,000-strong party membership (see Section 1.1), the largest single body of party members by some distance, constitutes 1.17% of the UK electorate (46,148,000 as of December 2017, according to ONS (2018a) figures). It should also be reiterated that the membership figures in Section 1.1 represent a substantial increase from the figures noted earlier in the decade by Van Biezen *et al.*, who show that in 2008, party membership as a percentage of the UK electorate stood at 1.21% (2012, p.28), a ‘staggering’ decline from the end of the 1990s (2012, pp.32-33). Meanwhile the widely-cited observation that “[t]he Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) has more members than the three main political parties combined” (Norton 2013a, p.145) remains true.¹³⁶ While recent upturns in party membership figures serve to problematise the extent to which parties represent a ‘site of disengagement’,¹³⁷ they still contrast sharply (and unfavourably) with the fact that almost a quarter of our participants claimed to be a member of a party (see Figure 12). This suggests that, in this respect, the participants represented an anomalously active cohort.

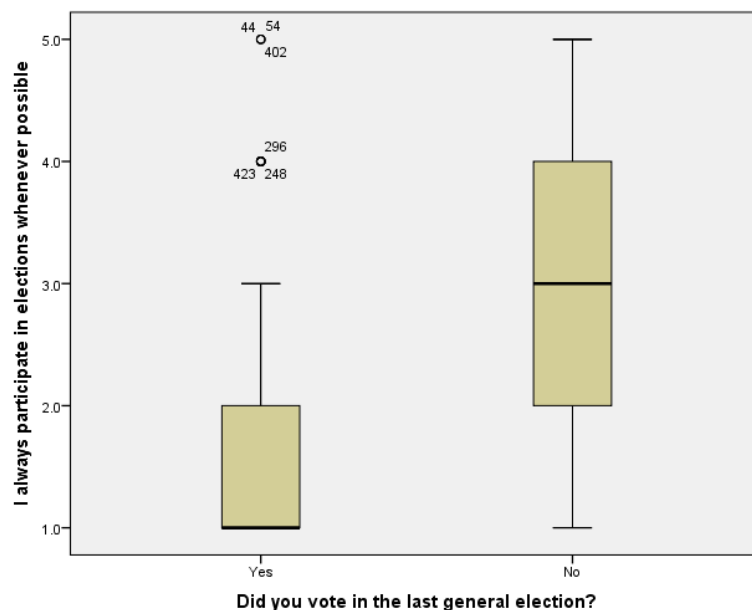
¹³⁵ N=299.

¹³⁶ The RSPB analogy cuts both ways. On one hand, it points to a political landscape in which interest groups – unlike political parties – prove able to cater for, and articulate, a politics of ‘issues’ and moral/ethical standpoints that are highly individualised and as such owe little to traditional social structures (see Manning, 2013 and Holmes, 2010). It also signifies the (un-)popularity of parties and their perceived lack of relevance within the aforementioned political landscape.

¹³⁷ As also noted in Section 1.1, conclusive studies of party membership are rendered difficult by the lack of obligation for parties to publish their own membership data (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen 2018, p. 6).

Figure 12 also appears to indicate an above-average level of political activity, with 76% of participants indicating that they voted in the last general election. Electoral turnout in the UK has not exceeded 76% since 1992, and since 1997 has never risen above 70% (Electoral Commission 2018). In many studies voting has been found to be a habitual practice (Coppock and Green 2016; Gerber, Green and Shachar 2003; Green and Shachar 2000). Past voters “are more likely to participate again in the future, in part because of their characteristics...but also because future electoral campaigns are more likely to target them” (Hassell and Settle 2017, p.535), thus representing an ‘engagement cycle’. This ‘cycle’ goes both ways, since campaigns are also *unlikely* to target habitual non-voters, who will likely remain entrenched in their non-participation. Frequent, ‘reliable’ voters also tend to be older and better-off, and thus a ‘disengagement cycle’ becomes “a vicious spiral of democratic decline [as] the young and the poor become ever more convinced that democratic politics has little to offer them” (Flinders *et al.* 2016, p.7). The voting-specific question can therefore be seen to relate to a characteristic (being a voter) rather than an isolated instance of behaviour (*having voted*). This notion of voting being perceived (by the participants) as a long-term characteristic is supported by analysis of involvement in the last general election and participants’ summations of their long-term electoral behaviour (as Figure 13 illustrates below):

Figure 13 – Comparison of participants’ voting behaviour and self-assessed electoral involvement



Those who had voted recently tended to respond very positively when asked to self-assess their own electoral involvement (mean = 1.51, SD = .821), compared to those who had not (mean = 2.97, SD = 1.492), with a narrower range in the case of the former. This reinforces the significance of recent voting behaviour beyond an isolated instance. However, it is important to reiterate that even habitual voting is, like party membership, an *indicator*; it is not synonymous with engagement. Voting comprises only one of Dalton's modes (or 'clusters') of participation; the others being campaign activity, contacting officials, communal activity, protest, and internet activism (2008, pp.33-34). Moreover, it has been observed that

...people do not use these activities interchangeably, as analysts once assumed...a person who performs one act from a particular cluster is likely to perform other acts from the same cluster but not necessarily activities from another cluster. (Dalton 2008, p.34)

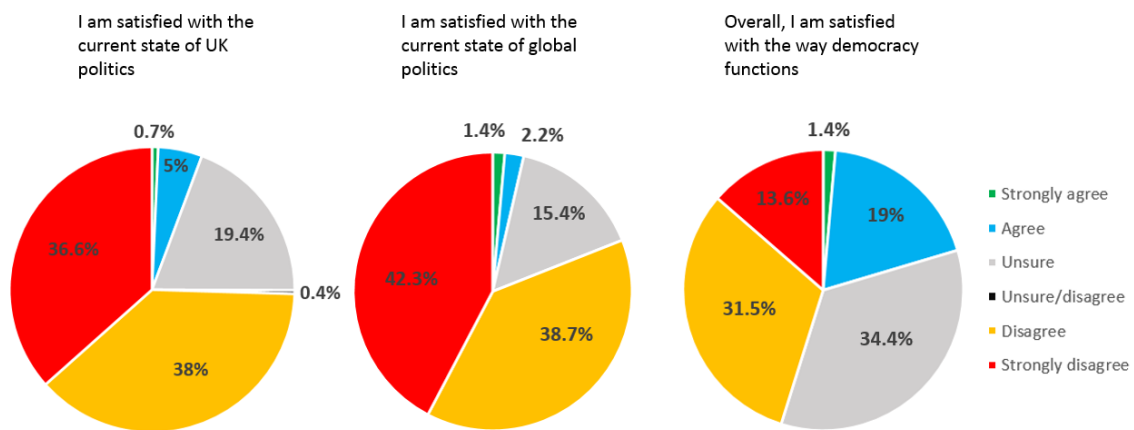
Implying that the research participants were 'usual suspects' through extrapolating their professed behaviour(s) is therefore undermined by the highly granular nature of contemporary engagement. We also observed that participants that *did* engage in non-electoral modes of participation, such as campaign and protest, were frequently apprehensive about couching this activity in political terms (discussed later in this section). Considering this alongside Norris' warning against excessive inference, we can delineate the following: 76% of the research participants were voters (in a characteristic sense), but not necessarily *engaged* (in a 'cross-modal' sense). This is supported by the fact that there was no significant correlation between those who said they had voted recently, and those who professed membership of a political party (.212**).¹³⁸ In behavioural terms, then, the session attendees appear to constitute an anomalously participatory cohort, though what this indicates about their *engagement* is limited. This restriction is all the more apparent when considering the influence of social desirability bias (Campbell 2006); respondents relating voting, in particular, to norms of dutiful citizenship and therefore being more likely to give a misleading answer. Drawing on British Election Study data from 2010, Paul Whiteley found 11.6% of respondents falsely claiming electoral involvement (2014). If applied to the participants in this study, this discrepancy would render their professed voting behaviour broadly equivalent with recent national turnout – 68.8% in 2017 (Electoral Commission 2018) – thereby undermining their conceptualisation as 'usual suspects'.

In terms of political knowledge, 53% of participants agreed (or strongly agreed) that they understood the functions of Parliament and Government. When consulting Hansard Society data on the same topic, we see, most recently, that 49% of participants professed at least a 'fair'

¹³⁸ **Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

knowledge of Parliament, the highest recorded figure being 52% in 2016 (2018, p.36). The research participants therefore display a level of self-assessed parliamentary knowledge that is broadly similar to previous studies. The relationship between knowledge/information and engagement is a consistent theme throughout this thesis; partly in relation to Parliament’s traditional engagement efforts – with ‘informing’ being the main focus – and partly in relation to the dynamic between *informed* and *engaged* citizens. In establishing an additional means of quantifying the latter, three separate questions were included in the questionnaire with a view to measuring political (and democratic) satisfaction.¹³⁹

Figure 14 – Satisfaction with UK politics, global politics and democracy

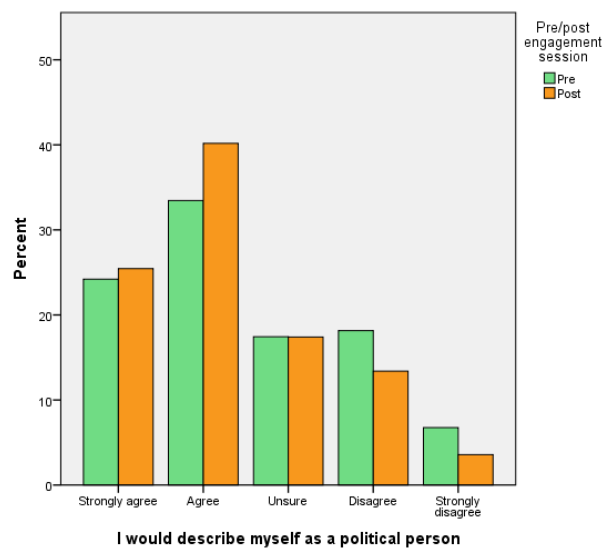


The above results display an overwhelmingly negative response towards global and UK politics, with democracy attracting considerable (though less) negativity. It should be remembered that the same cohort of participants answered each of these three questions; therefore a swing towards increased positivity directly detracts from *those same participants’* expressions of negativity in the first two questions. This proportionality is consistent, moreover, with the notion that citizens’ democratic aspirations (see Section 1.1) typically outweigh their support for political institutions (Norris 2011), an argument reinforced by Eurobarometer (2018a) data on the relative strength of *democratic* support. Far from being an inverse dynamic, it actually appears that democratic support corresponds with the capacity to assess political institutions critically (Welzel and Alvarez 2014; Shin and Qi 2011). We can therefore see our research participants (and the expressions captured in Figure 14) evidencing democratic support and aspirations *through* a critical (as opposed to pessimistic) view of political institutions.

¹³⁹ See Appendix 2 for further details on questionnaire format.

Taking recent political research into account, however, our participants did not indicate themselves to be especially knowledgeable *or* positive towards parliamentary politics. The latter point is supported by comparing Figure 14 (74.6% disagreeing/strongly disagreeing that they were “satisfied with the current state of UK politics”) with Ipsos MORI data indicating 69% of respondents feeling that the current system of governing Britain could either “be improved quite a lot” or required “a great deal of improvement” (2014). Moreover, data relating specifically to Parliament indicates a similar preponderance; most recently, 63% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with how Parliament works (Ipsos MORI 2011c).¹⁴⁰ Nor, as we have discussed, are they much more likely (in an electoral sense) to participate in parliamentary politics. Thus the participant characteristics reflect national ones in most cases, rather than their being anomalously ‘political’ (a term we will investigate much more closely in the next section). This notion is reinforced by the participants themselves, in terms of their own self-perceptions:

Figure 15 – Participants self-describing as ‘political’ in pre- and post-session questionnaires

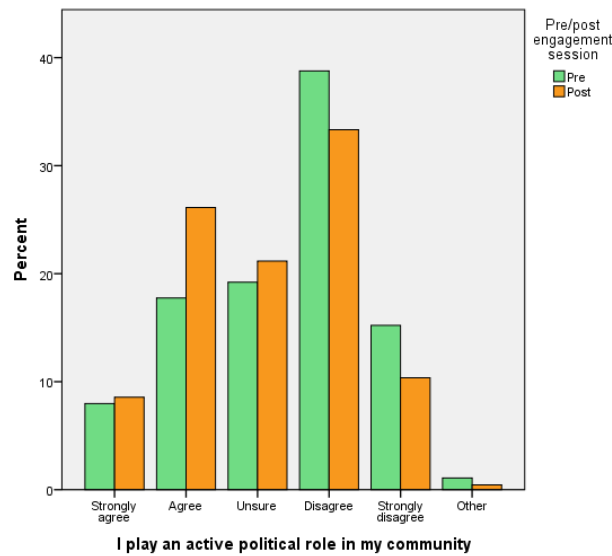


Before the engagement session, and after it, just over half of the participants judged themselves to be ‘political’. Crucially, the question allowed them to define ‘politics’ (or, more specifically, ‘political’) in whatever way made sense to them. Manning, when interviewing citizens who, as activists, could justifiably be considered as highly political, often found their activities to be “couched [by the interviewees themselves] within a moral/ethical order, instead of the political”

¹⁴⁰ In addition, Hansard data broadly reflects the Ipsos MORI findings (and, by extension our own), with respect to the political system *and* Parliament. A recent Hansard Audit found that “three in 10 people (31%) are satisfied with the way our system of governing works, with almost two-thirds (65%) saying that it needs improvement” (2017, p.46). Meanwhile less than one-third of respondents “were satisfied with the way that Parliament works” (2017, p.5).

(2013, p.27). Even engaged citizens can be loath to self-describe as *politically* engaged, because they conceptualise politics in a way that is antithetical to their own activities and priorities (Manning 2013; 2010). This illustrates the malleability of politics as a term, which should be considered when viewing Figure 15 (and Figure 16 below) and their inclusion of pre- and post-session figures:

Figure 16 – Participants self-describing as being politically active within their community



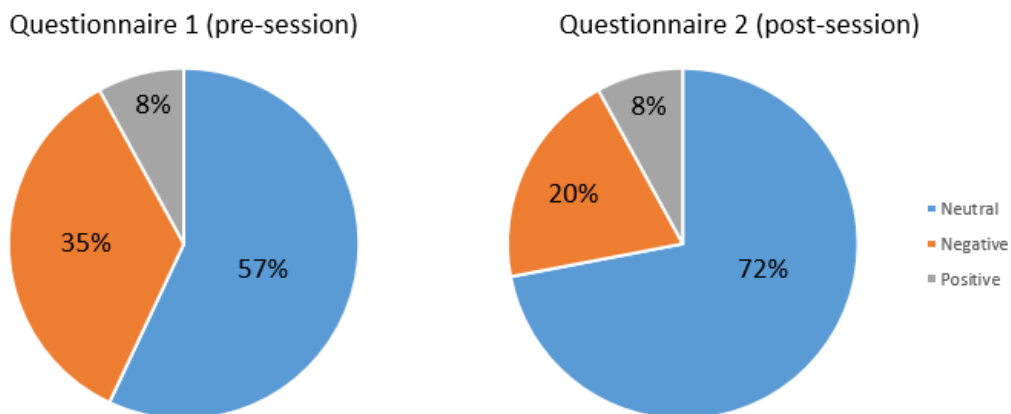
In Figures 15 and 16 we observe a greater tendency to agree to a self-description of political, or politically active, and a lessened tendency to disagree. This leads us to question whether the experience of the engagement session caused participants to expand, change, or otherwise re-define their conception of politics as a term. The findings of this analysis – with respect to politics and Parliament – will be discussed in the following section. However, at this point we can clearly see that citizens often decline to self-describe as ‘political’ even when engaging in activity that is *manifestly* political (party membership, for example), at least according to dominant scholarly categorisations. As well as reinforcing van Wessel’s (2016) encouragement of political scientists to apply inductive, interpretive conceptualisations of ‘politics’ – rather than expecting citizens to fit into pre-determined categories, and accepting or dismissing them as political or apolitical accordingly – it also serves to problematise what we might think of as a ‘usual suspect’ (a term that proves inapplicable to our research participants) or an engaged citizen. This warrants a closer examination of the context in which citizens independently conceptualised, applied, and even changed, their political and parliamentary terminology.

6.2 – Citizens’ conceptualisations of politics and Parliament

Political engagement literature – and its associated narratives, diagnoses, and recommendations – is often strongly incumbent on what citizens (and, of course, the authors themselves) define as ‘politics’ and ‘political’ (Bird 2017; Manning 2013; Loader 2007). This evidences, in its own right, the fallacy of taking any one quantifier – whether relating to formal or informal politics, or both – to be self-evident vis-à-vis engagement. Taking this into account, alongside the conclusions drawn from the previous section, it is important to discuss politics – in inductive terms – from the point of view of the citizen. In collecting interpretations of the term ‘politics’, responses to the questionnaires’ word association exercise (“what words or phrases come to mind when you think about the word ‘politics?’”) provided a broad variety of input. The responses provided by participants are visualised as follows, according to their respective coding (positive, negative, and neutral):

Figure 17 – Word-association responses based on negative/neutral/positive coding

Question: What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the term ‘politics?’



Positive terms constituted a consistently small proportion of responses, whereas neutral responses represented, in both instances, the majority. Following the engagement session, respondents were (even) more likely to write neutral (i.e. descriptive) terms, less likely to write negative terms, and just as (un)likely to write positive terms. It is important to reiterate that Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2 responses were collated from the same cohort of participants. Therefore we observe that greater neutrality (visible in a terminological shift from negative and pejorative toward descriptive terms, as shown below) was directly *derived from* decreased negativity. Moreover, the categorisation of these terms (using NVivo coding) allows

us to also track changes in the *type* of negative, neutral and positive terms that the participants used, as displayed below:

Table 15 – Occurrences of positive, negative and neutral responses across Questionnaire 1 (pre-session) and Questionnaire 2 (post-session)

Code	Sub-code	Pre-session frequency	Post-session frequency
Negative	Deception	17	7
	Corruption	34	5
	Feather-nesting	9	4
	Self-serving	32	8
	Politicking	41	8
	Privileged social background	36	12
	Boring	14	9
	Incomprehensible	32	27
	Other	29	19
Neutral	Parliament	44	117
	Government	39	33
	Democracy	38	21
	Parliamentary/partisan engagement	35	16
	Non-parliamentary engagement	24	9
	Geography	14	1
	Power	42	39
	Process	47	39

	Representation	46	32
	Debate	23	31
	Other	40	16
Positive	Progress	21	13
	Importance	14	13
	Community	4	3
	Interesting	8	6
	Encouraging involvement	6	2

Considering the data in Figure 17 and Table 15 (and the most frequently-matched sub-codes, labelled in green), we can discern that positive responses underwent the least change; both in terms of their proportion, and in the form of terminology used by participants. Negative and neutral responses, by contrast, showed a considerable shift. Negative terms that were frequently-occurring before the session – relating to corruption, selfishness, privilege and politicking – largely fell away after the session, while the frequency of terms relating to incomprehensibility remained constant. Meanwhile, within the neutral code, parliamentary terminology became – overwhelmingly – the most frequently-occurring form of participant input.

The reasons for these shifts merit discussion. Firstly, it is significant that the negative terms that dropped in frequency were related to political behaviour. This may be due to the effect of the engagement session in ‘de-mystifying’ the practice of MPs; as discussed in Section 3.1, the sessions aimed to educate participants about Parliament, the responsibilities of MPs, and the ways in which citizens can interact with both. As we have also noted in previous chapters, perceptions of MPs as a group are typically more negatively-connoted than those toward individual politicians (see Section 4.2). It is therefore possible that the topics covered in the engagement session served to explicate and rationalise the actions of MPs (and, by extension, MPs themselves) to the attendees since, after the sessions, politicians (distinct from *politics*) attracted a greater degree of positivity (or, more accurately, less outright negativity). The reason for the preponderance of parliamentary terms in the post-session questionnaires is likely due to the terminology of the session itself, a notion that is reinforced by further analysis of word

frequency (see Table 16 and Figure 18 below). While Table 15 showed the most frequent *categorisations* in the questionnaires (i.e. terms such as ‘lying’ and ‘deceit’ were grouped under the ‘Deception’ sub-code), Table 16 lists the frequently-occurring *specific terms* used by the participants (i.e. exact matches only, with no grouping under sub-codes). Comparing these specific terms by pre/post-session occurrence, the most commonly-used were as follows:

Table 16 – The most frequently-occurring terms within the word-association exercise in Questionnaires 1 & 2

Question: What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the term ‘politics’?	
Questionnaire 1 (pre-session)	Questionnaire 2 (post-session)
1. Democracy	1. Government
2. Power	2. Debate
3. Government	3. Parliament
4. Debate	4. House
5. People	5. Legislation
6. Parliament	6. Commons
7. Change	7. Democracy
8. MPs	8. Power
9. Boring	9. Lords
10. Corruption	10. Change

Examining Table 15 and 16 in combination – along with Figure 18 below – we can discern not only the changes in terminology that occurred either side of the engagement session, but the extent to which this terminology (within the broader categories outlined in Table 15) varied and diversified. We can examine this tendency alongside the engagement session’s facilitation of ‘slow thinking’ (see Section 3.3), by which participants rely less on cues and heuristics and instead practise “sustained and considered reflection, as a conscious choosing between cognitive alternatives” (Stoker, Hay and Barr 2016, p.5). Questionnaire 1 was filled out before

the engagement session began, and before the participants had been given a chance to interact with each other; as such it collected the most intuitive (i.e. 'fastest') responses. By contrast, Questionnaire 2 was filled out after the engagement session had concluded. There had been the opportunity (within the engagement session) for participants to speak to each other, to work in groups, and to listen to different points of view (though not engage with them to the same degree as was possible in a focus group). The Questionnaire 2 responses were thus facilitated by (and can be understood as by-products of) a 'slower' and more reflexive form of thinking.

The prevalence of 'slow thinking' is also evidenced by the fact that unambiguously negative terms within Table 16 – 'boring' and 'corruption' – disappear from the top ranking after the engagement session. This observation is consistent with 'slow thinking' as a mode in which instinctively negative and pejorative responses are markedly less common. Stoker *et al.* found that, in contexts that facilitated 'fast' and instinctive responses, the most common occurrence was to

[associate] politics with a series of negative factors with strong and unambiguously pejorative connotations...These are not critical or challenging comments from citizens expressing democratic concerns; rather they express a strong sense of alienation from formal politics which, for them, is a land of deception, corruption and feather-nesting populated by self-serving, privileged, mud-slinging and yet (and at the same time) boring politicians. (2016, p.8)

Negative responses within Stoker *et al.*'s study were clustered around corruption, deception, and politicking, similar to the pre-session questionnaire responses within this study. This tendency was substantially reduced, however, in the post-session questionnaires, in which 'democratic concerns' – to borrow Stoker *et al.*'s phrasing – constituted the majority of negative input. It is significant that, of the nine negative sub-codes listed in Table 15, the first five are what we might call 'personified critiques', related to political behaviour (specifically, *the behaviour of politicians*). Questionnaire 2 responses, in support of the observations we drew from Table 15, reflect what Stoker *et al.* also observed as a result of their focus group discussions; "a willingness to give politicians and the processes of politics more leeway" (2016, p.11). There are also important changes to note in terminology as well as tone, particularly when examining parliamentary terms. 'Parliament' was a more frequently-occurring term in the post-session questionnaires, along with related terms such as 'Commons', 'House', 'legislation', and 'Lords'. Significantly, these are descriptive terms; they *constitute* politics in a visible, active sense. The House of Commons and the House of Lords (and their capacity to legislate) are not concepts; they are entities and processes. The same can be said of 'debate'. By comparison, more conceptual terms such as 'democracy', 'power' and 'change' appear less frequently. The

absence of 'people' (coded as 'representation' – see Table 15) is also noteworthy, since it was so often couched in terms of *the* people (i.e. the public), and by extension its relationship with the political sphere. These points indicate a discursive shift away from the conceptual, and towards more procedural and institutional terminology.

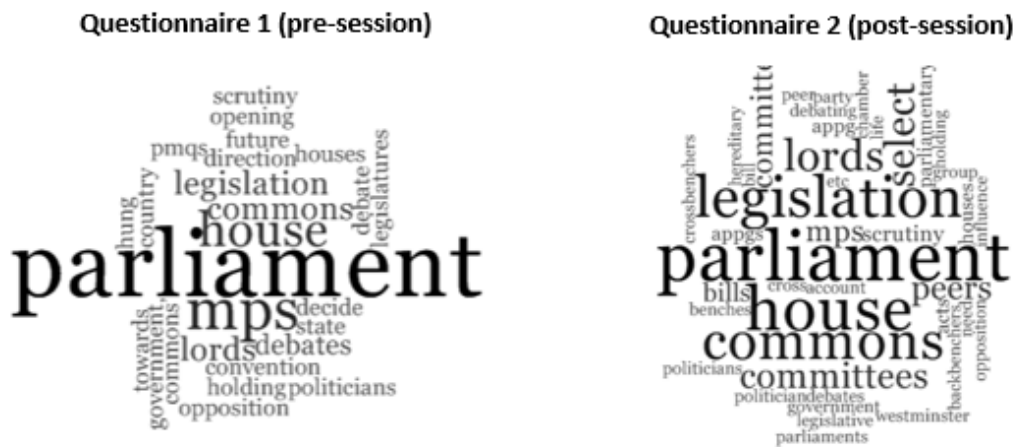
This suggests that Questionnaire 2 responses were indeed influenced by the topics covered in the engagement sessions (and, by extension, their related discourse(s)). For example, the fact that the most frequently-occurring term in the post-session responses was 'Government' is attributable to the content (i.e. objective) of the session itself; in this case, the clarification of the difference between Parliament and Government, and (relatedly) the function of Parliament in scrutinising the work of Government. This can be seen as reflection of (and response to) "the widespread and fundamental misconception...that Parliament and Government are the same thing", and the resulting need for "public engagement...to start with fairly basic education and information" (Walker 2011, p.270), themes also discussed within Section 4.3. Staff members attested that, in terms of educating citizens about Parliament, "telling them that it's not Government...is 99% of the conversation"¹⁴¹ reflecting an institutional perception that "there's a long way to go still in terms of people understanding...the difference between Parliament and Government".¹⁴² Moreover, when asked what they felt they had learned from the engagement session, a prominent theme recollected by citizens was "the division of Government [and] Parliament".¹⁴³ The appearance (or increased prominence) of procedural terms such as 'debate' and 'legislation' in Questionnaire 2 responses also speaks to the influence of engagement session terminology, as does the relative volume and diversity of parliamentary terms:

¹⁴¹ Staff Focus Group Participant 1A. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹⁴² Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

¹⁴³ Citizen Focus Group Participant 6A. *Focus group with Author*. 11 May 2017, Westminster.

Figure 18 – Word cloud illustrations of participant responses (Questionnaires 1 & 2) within the ‘Parliament’ sub-code



Parliamentary terminology in Questionnaire 1 responses encompassed 26 different terms, mentioned 44 times. Questionnaire 2 responses, meanwhile, encompassed 42 different terms, mentioned 117 times. We can thus discern a ‘blossoming’ of parliamentary terminology, in terms of volume (number of mentions) and variance (number of terms). This is a marker of ‘slow’ thinking in its own right, since it signifies a diminished reliance on heuristics, or pre-existing frames of cognitive reference (Kahneman 2012, pp.98-99). For example, Kahneman observes that, when asking about the popularity of the president in six months, “the current standing of the president will readily come to [participants’] mind[s]” (2012, p.99). This ‘fast’ consultation of immediate feelings and current events as ‘cues’ accounts for Questionnaire 1’s references to boringness and to corruption, as well as the relative absence of these in Questionnaire 2 (see Table 16). Examining Tables 15 and 16, we can see that citizens’ parliament-specific responses were – in accordance with ‘slow’ thinking – broadened and diversified by (1) absorbing the discourse of the parliamentary engagement session and (2) making additional (i.e. non-heuristic) connections.

The fact that parliamentary terminology was pervasive at all – even within Questionnaire 1 (i.e. intuitive) responses – is notable, given the discussions in the previous chapter relating to citizens’ situated knowledge of Parliament (specifically, the patent lack of it). There are two points to note here. Firstly, as Stoker *et al.* confirm, ‘fast’ thinking entails a relatively high “use of heuristics and cues” (2016, p.4), of substantial relevance in the context of these engagement sessions. Many of these sessions took place within the Parliamentary Estate and, even when this was not the case, the engagement sessions were premised upon a parliamentary focus; both of these details represent ‘cues’. Secondly, there is a distinction that must be made between

‘knowing Parliament’ (the focus of the two preceding chapters) and knowing *of* Parliament. Coleman, when addressing the UK citizenship test (specifically the incumbency of citizenship upon passing a multiple-choice exam), succinctly captures this distinction:

In making the assimilation of random knowledge a qualification for national membership, citizenship is effectively constituted as an act of memory. To be ‘one of us’ is to enter into an imaginary relationship with an acquired past. The community of shared affinity becomes a community of adopted reminiscences in which official history is severed from experiential biography. (2013, p.77)

Associating Parliament with politics (a common occurrence, as evidenced by Table 16) is not a profession of ‘shared affinity’; that is to say it does not entail, or constitute, the inclusion of Parliament within situated political knowledge. It does not signify, in its own right, an acknowledgement of the relevance of Parliament *to* politics, only an associational connection (made by the participants) between the two. We must therefore recognise the limitations of what is signified by the inclusion of parliamentary terms (as a response to a question about politics), and – in order to further discuss the importance of the associations made in this section – examine the attitudes expressed by the research participants in more comparative detail.

6.3 – What are the effects of parliamentary (and non-parliamentary) engagement sessions?

Thus far we have discussed the effects of engagement sessions, with respect to participants’ conceptions of both politics and Parliament. We will now further examine these effects in consideration of the prospective aims of these engagement sessions. There are several factors that lend additional complexity to this discussion. There are, as we have already observed, a panoply of definitions and quantifiers related to engagement; thus it is difficult to definitively conclude the achievement of objectives (and by extension the ‘success’ or ‘failure’) of any particular event. Another (albeit related) consideration is Parliament’s relationship with this panoply; that is to say, a failure thus far to establish any conclusive institutional definition of engagement (particularly evident from our discussions in Chapter 4), let alone a means of quantifying *effective* engagement. An additional factor is the longitudinal nature of this question; in other words, the contention that participants’ subsequent reflections and discussions about the event (in the ensuing days, weeks and months) could justifiably be described as an effect, and one that lies outside the scope of this thesis.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless we can

¹⁴⁴ The notion that parliamentary and non-parliamentary engagement sessions may have been conceptualised differently by their organisers in precisely these terms – i.e. a ‘one-time-only’

make numerous observations based on differentiating pre- and post-session questionnaire responses, as well as examining participants' responses as to whether *they* felt the session to have had an effect.

An examination of pre- and post-session responses allows us to investigate the attitudinal changes (if any) that the engagement sessions presided over, and examine what may have caused them. A visualisation of these changes is shown in Table 17 below:

Table 17 – Participant responses before and after engagement session¹⁴⁵

Question	Parliamentary sessions ¹⁴⁶				Non-parliamentary sessions			
	Pre/post session	Mean	Difference in mean	Standard Deviation	Pre/post session	Mean	Difference in mean	Standard Deviation
1. This session has helped/will help increase my interest in politics	Pre	2.32	-0.33	.90	Pre	2.00	-0.29	.39
	Post	1.99		.90	Post	1.71		.61
2. I would describe myself as a political person	Pre	2.50	-0.20	1.23	Pre	2.23	-0.02	1.24
	Post	2.30		1.10	Post	2.21		.98
3. Politics has always been important to me	Pre	2.67	-0.19	1.26	Pre	2.57	+0.22	1.28
	Post	2.48		1.23	Post	2.79		1.25
4. Politics is a waste of time	Pre	1.79	-0.13	.94	Pre	1.36	+0.07	.50
	Post	1.66		.80	Post	1.43		.65
5. Friends and family have shaped my political interests	Pre	2.81	-0.08	1.20	Pre	1.93	+0.21	1.00
	Post	2.73		1.15	Post	2.14		.86
6. I play an active political role in my community	Pre	3.35	-0.24	1.17	Pre	2.79	+0.07	1.31
	Post	3.11		1.16	Post	2.86		1.17

event, or part of a broader (and longer) engagement process, is discussed in the following chapter (see Section 7.3).

¹⁴⁵ Likert scale 1-5; 1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree.

¹⁴⁶ Sessions are described within this thesis as 'parliamentary' or 'non-parliamentary' in accordance with the organising body, i.e. whether the respective session was organised by Parliament or not (see Appendix 1 for a list of these sessions).

7. Political parties act on behalf of citizens	Pre	2.83	-0.30	1.01	Pre	2.36	-0.07	.63
	Post	2.53		.95	Post	2.29		.61
8. I do not feel represented	Pre	3.10	-0.13	1.01	Pre	3.07	-0.30	1.00
	Post	2.97		.99	Post	2.77		1.01
9. I always participate in elections whenever possible	Pre	1.85	-0.14	1.18	Pre	1.50	+0.21	.85
	Post	1.71		1.03	Post	1.71		.91
10. I use the internet (e.g. websites/social media) to learn about politics	Pre	2.11	-0.13	1.18	Pre	1.71	+0.15	.83
	Post	1.98		1.07	Post	1.86		.77
11. I understand the functions of Parliament and Government	Pre	2.53	-0.69	1.01	Pre	2.07	+0.14	1.07
	Post	1.84		.74	Post	2.21		.98
12. Parliament is not relevant	Pre	1.97	-0.18	.92	Pre	1.50	+0.07	.52
	Post	1.79		.78	Post	1.57		.51
13. I am satisfied with the current state of UK politics	Pre	4.06	-0.21	.92	Pre	4.57	-0.50	.51
	Post	3.85		.97	Post	4.07		.73
14. I am satisfied with the current state of global politics	Pre	4.18	-0.18	.87	Pre	4.57	-0.28	.51
	Post	4.00		.91	Post	4.29		.61
15. Overall, I am satisfied with the way democracy functions	Pre	3.37	-0.30	.99	Pre	3.43	-0.36	1.02
	Post	3.07		1.01	Post	3.07		1.07

Taking the difference in mean values into account, as well as standard deviation, we see several noteworthy points of contrast between these two types of session. We also see a certain consistency between the figures above and what could be described as the 'session aims'. With the exception of the final three questions, the parliamentary engagement sessions registered a

more positive mean difference (i.e. a greater 'swing' towards 1 (=strongly agree)). Indeed, in the majority of cases, the non-parliamentary participants' questionnaires showed a *more negative* response after the session. In some cases (e.g. Question 4), there is – as Table 17 shows – a notable difference in Standard Deviation, with the post-session SD being higher than before. Since the results in Table 17 are drawn from the same groups of people (i.e. groups that were asked the same question twice), we can infer that the non-parliamentary session experience increased participants' level of uncertainty regarding certain propositions, such as politics being a 'waste of time' (Question 4). Moreover, with cases such as Question 3 ('politics has always been important to me') showing a positive difference in Mean, and therefore a swing towards a negatively-orientated response, and a small (negative) difference in SD, this could indicate a process of refinement ('politics has *not always* been important to me') rather than reversal ('politics has *never* been important to me') of participant attitudes. We can therefore interpret the data drawn from the non-parliamentary sessions as an indication that the sessions *challenged* participant assumptions.

It is also important to note that the non-parliamentary session participants began the session with more positive responses than their parliamentary equivalents; again, with the exception of the last three questions. We can consider this finding with reference to Figure 14 (which addresses participant responses to these same three questions) and theorise that the non-parliamentary participants, through expressing a more positive attitude towards more self-actualising forms of politics (and individual institutions), also expressed a more critical view of politics (and democracy) at a broader, cross-institutional level. In understanding this distinction – and what it may indicate about the non-parliamentary session groups more broadly – we refer to Webb's (2013) discussion of the prevalence of 'dissatisfied democrats' and 'stealth democrats' within the UK citizenry. 'Dissatisfied democrats' – a term originating with Russell Dalton (2004) – is characterised by Webb as a citizen "driven by a passion for the democratic creed that fosters disillusionment with the way current political processes operate" (2013, p.748). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) concept of 'stealth democrats', meanwhile, is described by Webb as citizens who "know that democracy exists, but expect it to be barely visible on a routine basis", and "criticise...the naïveté of popular attitudes towards politics" (2013, p.749). Direct comparison shows "dissatisfied democrats being enthusiasts for all forms of political participation, but stealth democrats being far less keen" (Webb 2013, p.767). This ostensibly suggests that the parliamentary and non-parliamentary sessions attracted a different *type* of attendee. The reflected characteristics of 'stealth democrats' by the parliamentary session attendees is highly relevant when considering the discussion of this term in Section 1.3

(regarding the 'reactive' nature of popular engagement), as well as the questions this raises for future engagement initiatives (see Section 7.4).

There is also an important discussion to be had regarding session aims and outcomes. Considering the responses to Question 11, the parliamentary participants were more likely to respond that they understood the Parliament/Government dynamic better. This can be understood as a reflection of the stated aims of the parliamentary sessions (as well the name given to these events: "How Parliament Works"), and therefore their especial focus. The non-parliamentary engagement sessions did not give such a degree of focus to the workings of Parliament, as attested within the subsequent focus groups:

2A: ...one of the things I don't think this session did, because it probably wasn't within its remit, but I think actually is a point of mystery for lots of people, is how local government interacts with national government, and I found this so much while doing telephone polling, like, actually many people don't know what the difference is between who does what, you know? So if there's like a problem with the bins, whose responsibility is that? And if you want someone to do something local on climate change, who should you talk to? And there are different levels of government, and people don't often know really who to go to. So the MP often receives lots of things that should be directed at a district council or a county council, or...

Author: And as an even larger view than that, maybe even Parliament and Government, perhaps? Do you think there's maybe an analogue for that in terms of what are the responsibilities of both?

2A: Yeah, and even how stuff works within Parliament. Like APPGs and all the different committees, yeah there's just a general lack of understanding, even if you're interested in it. Like, I'm interested in it but still know that my understanding is really basic.¹⁴⁷

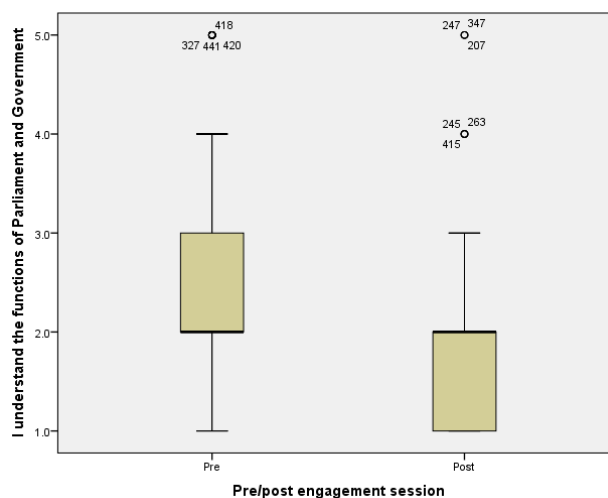
It is important to clarify, in relation to the extract above, an expected level of differentiation between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary engagement sessions, even if their general aims (strengthened parliamentary engagement, and greater understanding of the process) were broadly similar. However, this should not curtail a discussion of factors that are important to both types; visible in an acknowledged improvement in this regard within parliamentary sessions, and a lamentation of its absence in a non-parliamentary context. As with subsequent discussions (see Section 7.3), our observations of mutually-significant factors are an observation of what the *participants themselves* (across the respective session types) perceived as crucial.

Based on a comparison of mean values, the participant responses captured in Table 17 do not appear to have changed substantially after the conclusion of the *parliamentary* engagement

¹⁴⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4A. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 18 October 2018, Cambridge.

sessions. However, it does show an increased tendency towards positive responses – i.e. moving closer to ‘strongly agree’ – in every case. The questions that were negatively-worded (Q4, Q8 & Q12) had their responses re-coded in SPSS so that tendencies toward ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ would all follow the same direction in statistical terms (as above, in Table 17), i.e. lower numbers being consistently associated with more positive responses. The inclusion of these three negatively-worded questions was itself an attempt to reduce response pattern bias, with the rationale “that *reverse-coded items* are like cognitive “speed bumps” that require respondents to engage in more controlled, as opposed to automatic, cognitive processing” (Podsakoff *et al.* 2003, p.884, emphasis in original). Therefore, in the context of Table 17 (Q4, Q8 & Q12), a response of 1.0 would signify a participant *strongly agreeing* that politics *was not a waste of time* (Q4), that they *did feel represented* (Q8) and that *Parliament is relevant* (Q12). In a parliamentary context the most notable (and positive) shift was in what (or how much) the participants claimed to subsequently understand. Understanding the difference between Parliament and Government is – as we have already discussed, with respect to academic literature and participant discussions (see Section 6.2) – a key ‘site’ of political engagement inasmuch as it represents an enduring hindrance. This differentiation thus constitutes a useful quantifier for meeting an objective of the session(s), since a shift in participants’ self-assessed understanding of the distinction would address a key determiner of (and, indeed, a barrier to) engagement.

Figure 19 – Participants’ self-assessed understanding of Parliament and Government, before and after the engagement session



Through consultation of Table 17 and Figure 19 (above) we can observe that one of the key objectives of the parliamentary engagement sessions was achieved. However, Parliament’s responsibility to engage – as argued in preceding chapters – transcends the need to simply inform, and should also include the capacity (and motivation) to connect. As such there are additional indicators of success (or otherwise) with respect to Parliament’s engagement efforts, besides understanding its difference from Government. One of these additional indicators relates to the first statement that the participants were asked to respond to: “This session has helped/will help increase my interest in politics”.¹⁴⁸ The results suggest that the sessions exerted a positive impact in this respect:

Figure 20 – Perceptions on political interest and the influence of the engagement session

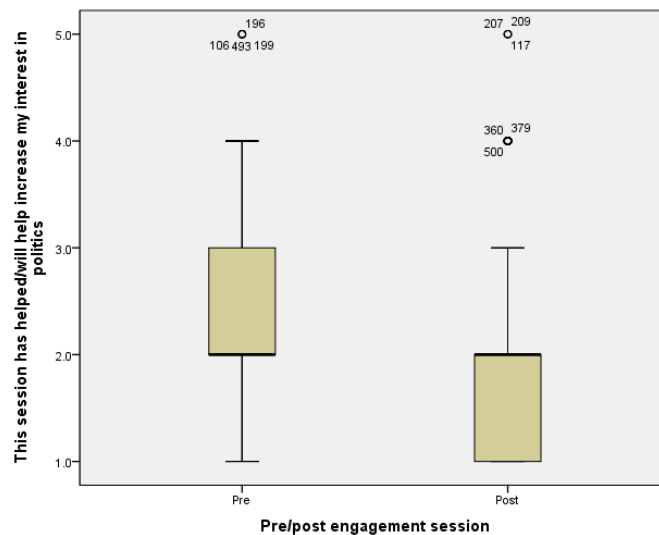


Figure 20 shows that, although the mean values before and after the session were 2.324 and 1.986 respectively (indicating a small positive shift), a greater proportion of participants (with a smaller range) ‘strongly agreed’ (retrospectively) that the session had increased their political interest.

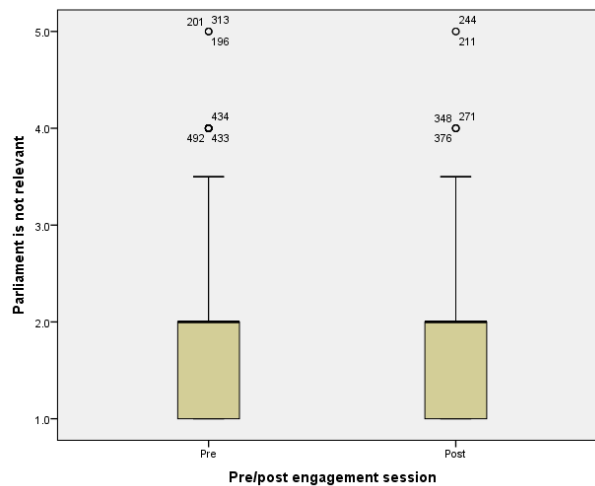
No significant correlation was found between respondents’ views on the usefulness of the event towards their political interest, and their (self-assessed) understanding of the respective roles of Parliament and Government.¹⁴⁹ This indicates the absence of a relationship between an increased interest in politics and an increased understanding of the Parliament/Government dynamic, even when – as Figures 19 and 20 demonstrate – there was positive change in both

¹⁴⁸ The wording being dependent on whether this was a pre-session or post-session questionnaire.

¹⁴⁹ Pearson Correlation: .050 pre-session, and .253** (significant at the 0.01 level) post-session.

respects. In addition there was no significant correlation between participants’ assessments of the engagement session and another key engagement indicator: the perceived relevance of Parliament.¹⁵⁰ The Hansard Society’s 2017 Audit concludes that citizens “clearly value Parliament, with a substantial majority (73%) believing it is essential to democracy” (2017, p.7).¹⁵¹ However, this acknowledgement was not reflected in approval. “Fewer than a third of people were satisfied with the way that Parliament works, and just 29% think that Parliament is doing a good job of representing their interests” (Hansard Society 2017, p.5). An inconsistency between acknowledged relevance and feelings of being represented was also found within this study, as Figures 21 and 22 demonstrate below:

Figure 21 – Citizens’ perceptions of Parliament’s relevance before and after the event



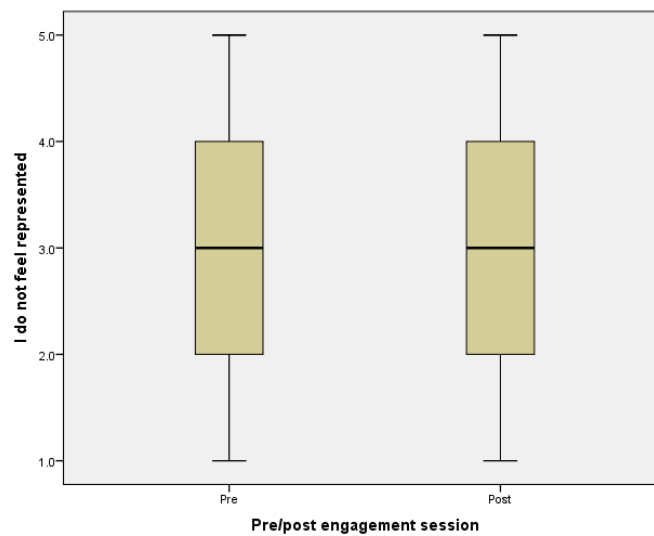
At this point we must reiterate that, as discussed earlier in this section, the responses to the question ‘Parliament is not relevant’ (along with the two other negatively-connoted questions) were re-coded so that means could be calculated across all of the Likert Scale data. In the context of Figure 21, a response of 1.0 signifies a participant strongly agreeing that Parliament is *relevant*, and 5.0 signifies a *strong disagreement*. We can therefore that a high proportion of participants acknowledged Parliament’s relevance even before the session began. This appears to be a perception that was not altered by the experience of the engagement session; the median, interquartile range (IQR) and range remained constant. This observation cuts both ways, however; those who viewed Parliament as irrelevant beforehand, and those who already

¹⁵⁰ Pearson Correlation: .172** pre-session, and .168* (significant at the 0.05 level) post-session.

¹⁵¹ 2017 is the most recent Hansard Audit in which questions of parliamentary relevance and essentiality were discussed. On the topic of citizens’ perceptions of Parliament the 2018 Audit is relatively restricted, focusing mainly on participants’ self-assessed knowledge of Parliament.

acknowledged its relevance, were similarly unlikely to relinquish (or modify) their views across such a short space of time. Figure 20, by contrast, shows the results of a question about *a moment in time* (i.e. the session itself). These longitudinal discussions are also relevant to participants' feelings of representation, which also underwent very little change according to pre- and post-session responses:

Figure 22 – Participants' feelings of (not) being represented



Considering the data presented in Figure 22, the engagement session does not seem to have brought about any discernible change in participants' feelings of being represented. Unlike Figure 21, which recorded minimal change yet a prevalence of strong feelings before and after the session, Figure 22 suggests a degree of ambivalence on the part of the session attendees, before the session (mean = 3.1, SD = 1.012), and after it (mean = 2.97, SD = .986). The mean, median, IQR and range for Figure 22 suggests an absence of strong feelings in general which, moreover, were not subject to change. As with Figure 21 (and unlike Figure 20, in which a noticeable change was recorded), Figure 22 relates to a broad question about the formal political sphere, rather than the engagement event itself. Figures 21 and 22 reinforce the notion that citizens' basic attitudes about Parliament did not change as a result of the engagement session. However, citizens' level of understanding does seem to have been (positively) affected, as well as feelings about the session itself (in connection with influencing political interest). The significance of Figure 22 – and self-expressed feelings of being represented – derives from the fact that the engagement session, as a key focus, outlined ways in which Parliament could (and *did*) represent the session attendees (i.e. as citizens). While this appears to have (potentially)

benefited an understanding of Parliament's representative functions – and its functions in general – it does not seem to have had any effect on participants' feelings of *being* represented. Feelings of being represented (or lack thereof) are highly significant in this context. The perception of *being represented* is central to self-perceptions of efficacy (Parkinson 2009, p.5); therein lies the symbolic and immediate importance of self-recognition, a consistent theme within this thesis. Efficacy, the self-perceived ability to affect change, is “one of the strongest drivers of political engagement” (Fox 2009, p.678) as well as “[t]he most serious attitudinal deficit” in relation to discouraging political engagement figures (Coleman 2005, p.3; see also House of Commons Library 2018). Expressions of negativity – or even ambivalence – toward a question of parliamentary representation are therefore highly significant in relating back to citizens' capacity to *see themselves* within this institution, and vice versa. ‘Feeling represented’ is directly relevant to citizens' ability to see Parliament *within* their life experience and their political conceptualisations. To return to the themes and terminology of the previous chapter, the engagement session appears to have had a beneficial effect on participants' knowledge (i.e. in a more objective sense), but *not their situated knowledge*. The latter observation is especially significant when considering our previous discussions of political crises such as the expenses scandal (see Section 2.4), in which individual revelations and news stories were interpreted according to pre-existing situated knowledge (constructed from dominant narratives). A lack of change in this respect is therefore likely to prove influential to future perceptions.

Situated knowledge, as a term, is essential to considering the findings presented in this section alongside those of the first, especially with respect to self-assessed political knowledge (see Section 6.1). This leads us to question the aims and expectations that Parliament is attaching to a better-informed citizenry. Even upon recognising its own responsibility to engage, there has often been an inherent linearity in Parliament's conceptualisation of educating citizens *in order to* engage them. Parliament's engagement strategy presupposes a positive causal relationship between an informed citizenry and political engagement; either through a greater willingness to engage (Kelso 2007, p.366) or increased faith in the legislature (Cowley and Stuart 2015, p.201). There is in fact no guarantee that deeper knowledge of institutions fosters greater positivity. On the contrary, Curtin and Meijer, discussing EU transparency, point out that public knowledge can exert an adverse effect on satisfaction, given that “[c]itizens may not want to belong to an institution when they hear only about all the mistakes and the affairs that take place” (2006, p.119). This is an argument that is also highly relevant to national parliaments, especially with consideration to Norris' ‘critical citizens’ thesis. Political literacy, as Norris observes, “encourages significantly more critical evaluations of how democratically countries

are being governed” as well as “the endorsement of democratic values”, thereby opening up a fissure between aspirations and satisfaction (2011, p.131).

This observation is highly relevant to our study of parliamentary engagement sessions, and those who felt they had been informed by the experience. Even when the parliamentary engagement session participants *did* profess greater subsequent understanding (when answering the questionnaires), this did not result in any greater connection with Parliament. In addressing this issue, we refer to Leston-Bandeira’s identification of “five steps in the process of public engagement with parliament”: (1) information, (2) understanding, (3) identification, (4) participation, and (5) intervention (2014, pp.418-419). Of particular note here is step 3 – *identification* – by which “citizens not only understand the parliament, but can also see its relevance and are able to link parliamentary activity to their own lives and experiences” (Leston-Bandeira 2014, p.418). This not only relates back to the basic appeal of narratives and storytelling (see Chapter 2); it also suggests that information is ineffectual without the means to *connect* (i.e. relate) to it. In recognising the importance of education and engagement, it is equally important not to conceptualise them as a continuum when they are, in fact, elements within a complex and granular set of indicators. In this vein, a significant change between Parliament’s first (2006-11) and second (2011-16) engagement strategies was to “go beyond simply providing information and taking Parliament out to the people” – i.e. assuming that engagement would inevitably accompany information – and for Parliament to become more open and more ‘self-reflective’ (Walker 2011, p.278). This impetus for ‘parliamentary self-reflection’ reinforces a conceptualisation of information which must be part of a broader effort of *connectivity*. It also provides a basis for the final section of this chapter: examining Parliament as a factor, as a ‘variable’, within the engagement dynamic.

6.4 – The role of Parliament as a variable within parliamentary engagement sessions

Chapter 4 posited that the focus group environment constitutes a ‘variable, rather than a vacuum’. We will now examine the setting of the *engagement sessions* as a factor; whether the views of participants were in some way *affected* by Parliament, according to whether the sessions were:

- Located inside or outside of the Parliamentary Estate
- Organised by Parliament, or by another organisation

In earlier chapters we have discussed what Parliament represents and symbolises, and how this is communicated to citizens; this will now be considered with respect to its actual effect on parliamentary engagement efforts. Parliaments occupy an unusual place in the political sphere inasmuch as they can be defined as political institutions, but also are definitively apolitical (in the sense of being non-partisan). This interplay is very much woven into the varying responsibilities of these institutions:

Parliaments have bicephalous management structures and leadership: on the one hand they are imminently political institutions and therefore representatives play a management and leadership role; on the other, impartiality and continuity need to prevail. (Leston-Bandeira 2014, p.7)

Parliament's obligation to continuity and impartiality conflicts somewhat with generalised understandings of politics, predicated upon constant disagreement and, by extension, transition. In this sense what Parliament represents – to citizens, and to itself – is, nuanced, highly subjective, and often contradictory. An invaluable literature now exists on this topic; on parliaments as symbolic entities (Leston-Bandeira 2016; Loewenberg 2011; Parkinson 2009). The foundational work of Hanna Pitkin (as discussed in Section 1.4) posited symbolic representation as a kind of 'standing-for', the causing of ideas, entities and/or characteristics to be made present (as referents) through a symbol that did not necessarily resemble those referents, but invoked them (1967, pp.92-94). Precisely *what* these referents are is highly subjective; thus "[w]e can never exhaust, never quite capture in words, the totality of what a symbol symbolizes: suggests, evokes, implies" (Pitkin 1967, p.97). What Parliament symbolises will now be examined with a view to its significance (if any) to the objectives of parliamentary engagement sessions.

Research commissioned by the Liaison Committee has at least signified a parliamentary awareness of symbolism and its continued relevance to engagement efforts. The research in question encouraged "an acknowledgement of the role of place, language, dress, etc." in terms of its (in)consistency with engagement-related themes of openness, transparency, and relevance. This tension between parliamentary design and parliamentary engagement is reinforced by scholars such as Parkinson (2013), who point to the necessary modifications made to legislative buildings in recent decades (primarily for security reasons) which are nevertheless antithetical to symbolic portrayals of parliaments as engaging (and *open* to engagement). Similarly, House of Commons Library research has acknowledged that parliamentary engagement efforts must take account of Parliament *per se*; its design and symbolism. The (relatively positive) conclusion of the Library research is that "visiting Parliament may help members of the public feel they have a stake in it" (House of Commons Library 2017, p.21). By

way of substantiation, however, the research cites visitor figures (e.g. the number of citizens and school groups who visited) with no data (qualitative or otherwise) about the visits themselves. This information, in other words, notably overlooks the very ‘experience’ that the research seeks to discuss (House of Commons Library 2017, p.22). In further discussing the influence of the parliamentary environment upon engagement sessions (and, by extension, the influence of its *absence* from non-Westminster-based parliamentary engagement sessions), the following table compares citizens’ expressed attitudes depending on whether the session took place in Parliament or not:

Table 18 – Participant responses before and after the parliamentary engagement sessions, with the location of the session (i.e. inside/outside the Westminster Parliamentary Estate) as a variable

Question	Westminster (Mean)		Non-Westminster (Mean)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
This session has helped/will help increase my interest in politics	Pre	1.90	Pre	2.44
	Post	1.79	Post	2.13
I would describe myself as a political person	Pre	2.18	Pre	2.57
	Post	2.14	Post	2.34
Politics has always been important to me	Pre	2.38	Pre	2.80
	Post	2.36	Post	2.50
Politics is a waste of time	Pre	1.45	Pre	1.89
	Post	1.50	Post	1.70
Friends and family have shaped my political interests	Pre	2.63	Pre	2.86
	Post	2.48	Post	2.85
I play an active political role in my community	Pre	3.40	Pre	3.32
	Post	3.08	Post	3.09
Political parties act on behalf of citizens	Pre	2.42	Pre	2.94
	Post	2.45	Post	2.57

I do not feel represented	Pre	3.03	Pre	3.10
	Post	2.99	Post	2.90
I always participate in elections whenever possible	Pre	1.63	Pre	1.89
	Post	1.57	Post	1.74
I use the internet (e.g. websites/social media) to learn about politics	Pre	1.67	Pre	2.25
	Post	1.66	Post	2.11
I understand the functions of Parliament and Government	Pre	2.58	Pre	2.51
	Post	1.80	Post	1.79
Parliament is not relevant	Pre	1.67	Pre	2.04
	Post	1.60	Post	1.84
I am satisfied with the current state of UK politics	Pre	3.75	Pre	4.19
	Post	3.69	Post	3.94
I am satisfied with the current state of global politics	Pre	3.90	Pre	4.28
	Post	4.05	Post	4.02
Overall, I am satisfied with the way democracy functions	Pre	2.93	Pre	3.49
	Post	2.87	Post	3.17

In 12 of 15 of the questions above, the parliamentary sessions outside Westminster registered the greater mean attitudinal change. The Westminster-based parliamentary sessions registered a greater change in three respects: participants feeling that they played an active role in their community, that friends and family had shaped their political interests, and that they understood the functions of Parliament and Government. A significant theme to note here (and one that is consistent throughout this chapter) is the relative efficacy of attempts to inform, compared to attempts *to engage*; the data presented here, across all types of session, supports this contention. What is clear, however, is that a profession of greater understanding does not encourage, or manifest in, a greater sense of personal efficacy, or a stronger connection to Parliament.

What the results of Table 18 appear to indicate is that sessions based outside (rather than within) Westminster tend to register greater attitudinal changes. However, this must be considered alongside the fact that the Westminster attendees began the session with a greater degree of positivity; precisely the attendees that connoted lower engagement indicators (see Section 6.1). The factoring-in of Parliament (as a location and, by extension, an *experience*) is of considerable importance here, and will be discussed further in the following chapter. Nevertheless it is possible that these attitudes are more attributable to geography than to Parliament *per se*; there are, after all, regional variations in political engagement indicators. The Westminster-based parliamentary engagement sessions must, for example, be considered alongside London's relatively high engagement indicators (especially in terms of satisfaction and efficacy). According to successive Hansard Society Political Engagement Audits, "London stands out as having a much higher share of people feeling influential and wishing to be involved than any other part of Britain" (Hansard Society 2018, p.44). Though the questionnaires did not determine where the participants had travelled to the session *from*, it is reasonable to assume the likelihood of participants living in London was higher in the Westminster-based sessions. On a related note, however, it is important to point out that while regional variations may have exerted influence, the sessions we are discussing did not occur in (i.e. across) London but in the *Parliamentary Estate* in Westminster a crucial distinction, given the symbolic (and subjective) importance of the latter. We must therefore establish the relevance of both to our broader discussions of parliamentary engagement, its objectives, and its effects.

Taking into account these indications of trajectory, geographical considerations, typical attendees, and the narratives and stories discussed in the two preceding chapters, the final chapter will further discuss the relevance of Parliament – and what it represents – as a factor in its own engagement efforts. Considering the aforementioned intention of engagement efforts ('taking Parliament to the people') it has been important to discern which 'people' are experiencing Parliament, and in what way. 'Taking Parliament to the people' is an intention that – considering the non-prevalence of 'usual suspects' within the sessions we observed, and our problematisations of this very terminology – has proved feasible. 'The people' – as this intention would have us conceptualise – are indeed attending engagement sessions. They are not 'usual suspects' and in that sense remain 'unconverted' to parliamentary engagement. What we can conclude from this thesis is therefore relevant directly (and *immediately*) to existing engagement session attendees, and can be applied more broadly to Parliament's engagement efforts. The essential question to discuss, with respect to the 'people' that Parliament already reaches, and those it undoubtedly hopes to reach, relates (crucially) to the effects of

engagement rather than engagement *sessions*: what does Parliament represent with respect to engagement and, by extension, what is being ‘taken to the people’? This question will form the basis of the final chapter of this thesis.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have observed a lack of ‘usual suspects’ within Parliamentary engagement sessions, thereby undermining a perception (or suspicion) of Parliament as speaking only to the already-engaged. Examining this topic is crucial to a conceptualisation (and subsequent discussion) of Parliament’s current and idealised engagement ‘audience’. It also analogises a broader critique of Parliament’s engagement strategy; premised upon (and thereby presupposing) a continuum between information/informing and engagement. This critique is substantiated by our research findings; that participants who considered themselves more interested in politics, upon the conclusion of the engagement session, expressed no real change in their broader feelings toward Parliament. Nor was there a significant relationship between those who considered themselves increasingly interested and those who claimed a greater subsequent understanding of the Parliament/Government dynamic. This is not a critique of the effectiveness of information (and/or education), either in its own right or *within* a broader attempt to engage. Rather, it is an argument for re-conceptualising information as a *component part* of engagement rather than a causal factor. These factors, we would contend, complement (rather than pre-empt) one another. This is reinforced by our discussion of the importance of *identification*; that is to say, the provision of information but also, crucially, a facilitation of personal connection to that information.

The discussion of the themes raised by Table 17, and our analysis of focus group discussions, shows there is a value to *informing* citizens about Parliament (acknowledged positively in its presence, and negatively in its absence). This point serves to validate and reinforce the observations made in the two preceding chapters; the importance of understanding citizens’ *situated* political knowledge (and the place of Parliament within this), as well as the efficacy of storytelling as a means of addressing – i.e. speaking to, and encouraging – this form of knowledge. We would therefore encourage institutional attention not only to what citizens know about Parliament, but *how* they know Parliament; what citizens (and also staff) feel about this institution. Participants’ decreased use of heuristics, and decreased terminological negativity, both show that the engagement sessions had an *effect*. This topic will form the basis of our concluding chapter. What we have shown thus far is that engagement is (and should be)

far more than an exercise of information retention, to recall Coleman's critique. We have, throughout this thesis, argued the limitations of information as a guarantor of – or linear precursor to – strengthened engagement, an argument that is highly pertinent to future parliamentary engagement campaigns and strategies.

Chapter 7 – Symbolic representation and corporate identity

Paul Schrader says a great thing about the end of a movie: ‘A good movie begins as you’re walking out of the theatre’.

Ethan Hawke

I felt too that for all its vitality, magazine science fiction was limited by its ‘what if?’ approach, and that the genre was ripe for change, if not outright takeover. I was more interested in a ‘what now?’ approach.

J.G. Ballard – *Miracles of Life*

Introduction

The following chapter examines Parliament’s importance as a site of symbolic representation – a key factor, we argue, in discussing the elusiveness of a holistic model of engagement – with reference to recent debates surrounding Restoration and Renewal (a programme of extensive repairs and renovations for the Palace of Westminster), and Parliament’s varying conceptualisations (both internal and external) as a physical presence and a discursive construction. We discuss this symbolic role in terms of its importance to the experience of parliamentary engagement; specifically, its influence in shaping or reinforcing participants’ prospective and retrospective assessments. In further investigating the influence of these parliamentary engagement sessions – in their current incarnation – the notion of a session as part of a ‘narrative’ (i.e. a broader engagement ‘arc’) will be examined. This will take place alongside a comparison with non-parliamentary engagement sessions,¹⁵² in order to demonstrate commonalities in citizens’ markers of influence. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of ways in which parliamentary engagement can be rendered more holistic, more conducive to citizens’ desires for engagement and, by extension, more responsive to them. This – we argue – can be achieved through a greater acknowledgement of hitherto overlooked

¹⁵² As in previous chapters, the term ‘parliamentary’/‘non-parliamentary’ relates to whether Parliament was the organiser of the session or not. The term ‘Westminster’/‘non-Westminster’ relates to whether the session took place within the Parliamentary Estate or outside it.

concepts such as *corporate identity*, and a session format that facilitates parliamentary engagement beyond the event itself, thereby encouraging an ongoing dynamic.

7.1 – Parliament as a symbolic ‘presence’

In Chapter 4 we discussed a greater tendency for engagement session participants (and staff) within Westminster to employ a narrative of *change*, rather than *decline*, when discussing engagement (see Section 4.1). The preceding chapter, meanwhile, showed that the participants of engagement sessions based within the Parliamentary Estate were more likely to begin the session with a greater attitudinal positivity, even though the demographic makeup of these groups suggested lower indicators of engagement. The role of Parliament as a setting is therefore an essential basis for further discussion, as it is clearly not a neutral venue in this context. Nor does this absence of neutrality presuppose a fixed, or even consistent, effect on visitors and inhabitants; Parliament, as Rhodes *et al.* acknowledge, is a ‘fluid’ entity, “a ‘theatre of action’ involving a wide variety of actors (not just the elected representatives) who interact around political issues” (2009, p.188). It is therefore important to draw attention to the significance of these interactions and the atmosphere they create, and discuss this conceptualisation of Parliament as a ‘theatre of action’ (with respect to its theatrical, performative and symbolic characteristics) and its influence in shaping participant attitudes. This will then allow us to determine the relevance of Parliament’s symbolic representation within parliamentary engagement sessions.

Addressing this topic comes at a crucial time for Parliament; not only in terms of broader participation and engagement trends, but also in an immediate practical sense. There has been a great deal of high-profile discussion surrounding the Restoration and Renewal programme; the multi-billion-pound renovation of the Palace of Westminster. This renovation of the 150-year-old Palace has been delayed (and, indeed, ignored) by successive governments, reinforcing the urgency of repairs in order to safeguard the future of the institution (at least in its existing form). The urgency of the situation also stems from the typically ad-hoc nature of maintenance efforts up to the present day, the outdated electrical systems and appliances throughout the Palace, and the consequent risk of fire and other catastrophic damage. The Restoration and Renewal Project also aims to address questions of accessibility and visitor access; for example it

is not possible, at present, to go through St Stephen's Hall¹⁵³ in a wheelchair. These questions constitute an invaluable forum for discussing Parliament in a physical *and* symbolic sense, and the relationship between the two; for example, whether the location and physical appearance of Parliament are essential to what 'Parliament' represents, and whether those referents should be preserved or consciously changed.

Restoration and Renewal is a rare case of parliamentary officials *and* citizens engaging in detailed discussions about Parliament as a physical and symbolic entity (and the interplay between these two forms of 'presence'). Newspaper articles on Restoration and Renewal made frequent reference to Parliament's physical structure and symbolism (Perkins 2018), an intersection that the renovation programme is uniquely well-placed to facilitate. For example, the last high-profile, nationwide public discussion of Parliament – the 2009 expenses scandal – addressed questions of (symbolic) representation but not of Parliament's physical make-up. Restoration and Renewal therefore effectively contextualises the discussions in this chapter, which speak to precisely this interplay between Parliament as a physical and symbolic entity. In doing so it also showcases the immediate relevance of these discussions, at a time when staff and citizens alike are willing and able to engage with them. The prominence of Restoration and Renewal as a public and parliamentary topic was also reflected in its inclusion within our fieldwork discussions; in this context our research participants spoke about the programme itself, and about staff and citizens' perceptions *of* the programme. Restoration and Renewal therefore constitutes an ideal jumping-off point for the theoretical and empirical discussions within this chapter, given its familiarity to the research participants as a means of amalgamating questions of symbolism and physicality. It is also valuable in demonstrating – as we will discuss – how difficult it is to 'define' Parliament.

Early in 2018, MPs voted to leave the Palace during the proposed renovations (BBC 2018); the discussions leading up to this vote were often exclusively pragmatic, but also acknowledged a responsibility towards the building's symbolic role. A report from the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster noted that the building "has witnessed enormous political change" and, as such, "has become a part of the fabric of our democracy" (2016, p.6). It is crucial to reiterate that this comment was directed specifically towards the *Palace of Westminster* and its centrality to democracy, not Parliament *per se*. The notion that "the building itself has come to be

¹⁵³ A key site of parliamentary history, standing on the site of the eponymous Chapel (originally the King's private chapel in the Palace, destroyed in the Great Fire of 1834) which first appears in historical records in 1184.

regarded by many as a symbol of British democracy” (Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster 2016, p.13) was also raised during parliamentary debate:

...this building is not just a matter of stone, porphyry, marble and stained glass. It is not just a structure; it is a home, a statement and a place of democracy. It stands for something in this nation and beyond, far more than mere bricks and mortar. This is the place where democracy lives. It is so easy to say that we could move elsewhere and that it would still be a Parliament, but it would not be the Palace of Westminster. It would not be the building that has survived fire and bombing – it has survived the most horrendous impacts and we have somehow come through – and it is crucial that that footprint be retained and we maintain our presence in this building. (Hansard HC Deb. 31 January 2018)

The above statement, made by Labour MP Stephen Pound during a Commons Chamber debate on restoration, explicitly draws attention to the Palace’s function as a site of symbolic representation when stating that it *stands for* “far more than mere bricks and mortar”. Symbolic representation describes precisely this process; ‘standing for’ subjective concepts as national heritage and identity (Leston-Bandeira 2016; Pitkin 1967) and, in this case, UK democracy. In this way the symbolic representation of legislatures exercises an immediate practical function (Loewenberg 2011, pp.33-34).

The fact that Pound’s statement (as with the Joint Committee report) relates specifically to the Palace reflects Norton’s observation that “Parliament is still seen solely in terms of the Palace of Westminster” (2013b, p.216), to an often metonymic degree. To take one (admittedly extreme) example, the Gunpowder Plot is often described as a plot to blow up *Parliament*, rather than the Palace; Parliament’s own website describes the event as such (UK Parliament 2018a). Our observation here is that ‘Parliament’ is a conceptual entity; a discursive construct, the significance of which “depends on the “schemata of interpretation” or frames that social groups construct and which we are often unaware of” (Lombardo and Meier 2017, p.2). Pound’s viewpoint, in the extract above (“we could move elsewhere and...it would still be a Parliament”), corresponds with this notion. The significance of the Palace stems from the narratives and meanings inherent in the design of a building, which then shape the institution itself and, by extension, external (and *internal*) perceptions toward it. This dynamic can be described as follows:

Spatial characteristics...function as a set of symbols around which narratives and meanings have accumulated, through historical and cultural accretion and sedimentation, to the extent that they exert a forceful but largely intangible influence that is reinforced by the fact that they have been firmly and persistently anchored to the ‘building-as-symbol’. (Flinders *et al.* 2018, pp.150-151)

The effect of the latter as a setting therefore holds enormous influence in shaping constructions of 'Parliament' by *citizens and staff alike*. It is perhaps unsurprising, through this perspective, that an 'abstraction' narrative perpetuated when considering it contextually; both in terms of the imposing (and often explicitly adversarial) design of the building (Flinders *et al.* 2018), and in terms of institutional practice. For example, it was only recently – following a recommendation in a report published by the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons (2004) – that parliamentary visitors were no longer referred to as 'Strangers'. As Lombardo and Meier (2017) contest, discursive phenomena are just as relevant to discussions of symbolic representation as physical objects. This point is highly pertinent to another key theme within the Restoration and Renewal debates; the centrality of London (as a location) to what Parliament and the Palace represent. Pound's aforementioned argument implies that maintaining *a* Parliament could be a constant, regardless of location, though a relocation would place the symbolic representation of the Palace (*the* Parliament, in other words) in jeopardy.

This co-constitutive dynamic between location and parliamentary representation was also reflected in the fieldwork discussions, exemplified by this institutional perspective:

...at the end of the day Parliament must be somewhere. And London is the capital of the UK...we all elect our representatives and then those representatives travel from far and wide to come together to take difficult decisions, and...basically hold the Government of the day to account et cetera. There's a kind of romantic authenticity about that – if you can have a romantic authenticity – and we don't really make enough of that, because we're a bit embarrassed about it in various ways...conflicts about London...the rest of the UK, the devolved nations, the North and all the rest of it. But I think at heart we should celebrate that more, a bit more, the idea of everybody coming together as they've been doing for centuries, that's rather brilliant.¹⁵⁴

The incumbency of symbolic value on history is a common theme across the Joint Committee report ("witness[ing] enormous political change"), Pound's argument (on the Palace surviving fire and bombing) and the extract above ("as they've been doing for centuries"). This supports the notion of Parliament's significance being largely discursive and symbolically-entrenched through tradition (encompassing embedded narratives and heritage), without which the location of Parliament in London would be arbitrary and incidental. This is captured in the above extract, in which the relevance of London – as a place in which scattered politicians assembled *repeatedly* – is substantiated though being presented as a *ritual*; "action wrapped in a web of symbolism" (Kertzer 1988, p. 9, cited in Rai 2010, p.288), embedded through repetition (Rai

¹⁵⁴ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

2010). From these myriad institutional viewpoints, what Parliament *was* is inextricable from, and instrumental to, what Parliament *is*.

The importance of tradition in this context is encapsulated by the Palace’s deliberate replication of it. Norton points out that “Westminster Hall aside, the Palace of Westminster is a relatively new building”, featuring a “mock-Gothic façade [which] is suggestive of Parliament’s long history” (2013b, pp.215-216). That is to say, this particular building *suggests* a history that it does not *span*. Another study notes that parliamentary renovations successively ask: “Which heritage should it follow and which boundaries should it produce anew” (Puwar 2010, pp.298-299). In the previous chapter of this thesis (see Section 6.2) we problematised the efficacy of “an imaginary relationship with an acquired past” (Coleman 2013, p.77) in emphasising the crucial distinction between engagement and a form of knowledge reducible to memory retention. While the importance of an *ongoing* (rather than *retrospective*, heritage-centric) engagement dynamic to engagement sessions will be discussed later in this chapter, here we can also apply this problematisation to a discussion of parliamentary symbolism. The tension between history and functionality, and conveying Parliament as “entrenched in the nation’s history, yet remain[ing] relevant through fulfilling important representative functions” (Norton 2013b, p.216), is reflected in the example of Big Ben (as the Elizabeth Tower, the clock tower of the Palace of Westminster, is often colloquially called). The fieldwork discussions, when discussing the Restoration and Renewal project, drew attention to a discrepancy between internal and external perspectives toward Big Ben and other institutional priorities:

Table 19 – Staff and citizen discussions of ‘Big Ben’

Staff perspective	Citizen perspective
<p>If R&R ever happens, ever gets going. Big Ben and the ‘bongs’ is just showing how difficult it is to do even quite simple things [laughs]. You couldn’t make it up, could you? Somebody earlier said “it makes W1A look positively serious” [laughs]¹⁵⁵</p>	<p>It’s quite interesting...how exorcised Members, certain Members are getting about the ‘bongs’ stopping...all my staff are getting is “why are they talking about the ‘bongs’ when they should be sorting out Brexit” and so actually I think there is still that disconnect, that we’re still elitist...¹⁵⁶</p>

¹⁵⁵ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

¹⁵⁶ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

The staff and citizen perspectives shown in Table 19 both demonstrate a level of citizen *and* institutional disapproval regarding the renovation of Big Ben. The distinction is this: staff disapproval stems from the handling of the renovation, whereas citizen disapproval stems more fundamentally from the (mis)allocation of institutional attention to it. The former is illustrated through the reference to *W1A*. As Fielding's (2011; 2014) research shows, the invocation of fictions contributes a great deal to understandings of political reality. Through this perspective the *choice* of fiction that is being referenced is highly significant; in this case, the satirical 'mockumentary' *W1A* (which thereby carries connotations of chaos, disorganisation and incompetence). Meanwhile, from a citizen perspective, Big Ben (or, specifically, institutional discussions *about* Big Ben) represents a *disconnection* between Parliament and the 'public interest' (i.e. discussions of tangible pertinence to citizens). Big Ben also appears to symbolise *heritage* which – from a citizen viewpoint – is drawing attention away from current and prospective discussions (e.g. Brexit) that are clearly signified as having greater importance. This interplay between the parliamentary *heritage* that the Palace is often seen to 'speak for', and citizens' priorities (typically emphasising what are seen to be present and future concerns) is a key consideration throughout this chapter.

Thus, if what Parliament represents is subjective and often nebulous, we must also acknowledge that Parliament *itself* – as a physical entity – can be just as difficult to define. Though Parliament is in some sense a physical institution, it would be reductive to conceptualise it in the same manner as Pitkin's analogies for symbolic representation; the US flag, for example, which corresponds with information (e.g. 50 stars corresponding with 50 states) and "symbolizes (suggests, evokes, arouses feelings appropriate to) the honor and majesty of the United States" (1967, p.98). The reason, put simply, is that while we might all define a 'flag' (and especially a *specific* flag) the same way, definitions of a 'Parliament' (or *a* parliament) are myriad, with little or nothing in common. In this case it is useful to refer back to Saward's theory of the representative claim, in which "[a] maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A)" (2006, p.302). Leston-Bandeira provides a useful example in applying this framework to

the Arts in Parliament programme in the summer of 2012, which was developed to coincide with the Olympics in London...One representative claim may be the Houses of Parliament (M) utilising its own space to share contemporary art (S) as evocative of perceptions of democracy (O), to the public (A). (2016, p.512)

It is also possible, however, to conceptualise Parliament as the *subject*, rather than the *maker*, of the representative claim. For example, drawing on the aforementioned statement by Stephen Pound, we can – in the context of Restoration and Renewal – observe a politician (M) describing

the Palace or, specifically, its structure and location (S) as definitively central to the UK Parliament (O) and its associations of democracy and nationhood (R) to the Commons Chamber (A).¹⁵⁷ Thus the concept of “a specific application in the contribution that legislatures make to nation building” (Loewenberg 2011, pp.33-34) is reinforced. This also validates the especial consideration we must give to symbolic representation when discussing engagement sessions that occurred in the Parliamentary Estate, which remain dominated – in symbolic, iconic terms – by the Palace. This holds a great deal of significance to the questions of engagement and corporate identity that we will discuss later in this chapter.

7.2 – Parliamentary ‘accessibility’: the influence of symbolic representation on engagement sessions

It is important to consider the significance of symbolic representation to parliamentary engagement, not least because so many engagement sessions occurred *within* the Parliamentary Estate (typically in select committee meeting rooms). Research commissioned by the Commons Liaison Committee describes the way in which the basic setup of these rooms can shape and influence parliamentary engagement efforts:

The standard select committee room layout is something of an extreme option in terms of how a process of engagement might take place. You have the committee at one end of the room and the witnesses very much at the other; it assumes a fairly high level of personal confidence, it is a very formal environment, the parliamentary dress code is formal...The ‘rules of the game’ are steeped in a parliamentary culture that tends to be slightly remote, somewhat intimidating and slightly masculine. And yet it is possible to imagine a quite different way of engaging with individuals...The advantage of holding some evidence sessions and events beyond the Palace of Westminster is that it immediately creates new options in terms of seating, interaction and dialogue. (Flinders, Marsh and Cotter 2015, pp.69-70)

The significance of the above extract is twofold. Firstly, it demonstrates how a venue’s practical considerations and details exert influence over the type of dialogue and interaction that takes place within it. Secondly, it shows that the symbolism of Parliament is also highly relevant to the parliamentary sessions that took place outside Westminster, which – by dint of where they are (not) located – take on a new significance in terms of engagement opportunities. Elements such

¹⁵⁷ The physically present audience should be considered alongside a ‘potential’ audience who, while not in attendance at the moment of representation (via claim-making), could be expected to see/hear it remotely, or hear about it from others. This ‘potential’ audience can be thought of as being part of a ‘target’ audience, and thus considered – and to an extent anticipated – by the maker of the claim, in accordance with the concept of ‘ghostly audiences’ (see Section 1.4; see also Section 5.4 for a discussion of the ‘ghostly audience’ in connection with *Your Story, Our History*).

as dress code project representations of Parliament – by individuals who, in running the sessions, ‘speak for’ and thereby *represent* Parliament – to a situated audience who acknowledge and legitimise this representation. This consideration is just as significant to engagement sessions outside Westminster, given the lack of any other visual or symbolic cues. The Palace is replete with these cues; in “grilles, galleries, rooms, vents, statues, paintings, walls, halls, curtains, stairwells, seats, rods and feet...points from which to tell the sedimented, layered and contested stories of occupation, performance and ritual” (Puwar 2010, p.299). Outside of Westminster, the session organisers – through visual cues such as dress code, and even through discourse (Lombardo and Meier 2017) – are the only means by which Parliament is represented. In examining this theme of symbolic representation, NVivo analysis was utilised in establishing whether Parliament as a ‘place’ was acknowledged within the engagement sessions and, if so, what effect this exerted. Relevant terms included ‘building’ and ‘palace’, as well as ‘place’ and ‘symbolic’. The first two refer to physical descriptions or representations of Parliament, whereas the other two terms indicate whether participants acknowledged (and if so, what they drew from) their situated-ness within the Parliamentary Estate. Scholars such as Parkinson (2013; 2009) have discussed this type of intersection between the built environment (encompassing physically-emplaced objects such as buildings and palaces) and the symbolic representation(s) of legislatures. In further substantiating and examining these theoretical discussions, extracts from observations relating Parliament and ‘place’ are provided in Table 20:

Table 20 – Discussions of ‘place’ in connection with Parliament

Citizen focus groups (non-Westminster)	Citizen focus groups (Westminster)	Staff focus groups	Elite interviews
<p>And I think Parliament as well seems abstract because it is an abstract place. It's not, it's not something that people can relate to, they're not relating to their MP being in Parliament because they can't relate to being there.¹⁵⁸</p>	<p>So you actually try to make it look personal... otherwise it just seems this...big building with... lots of history and old people.¹⁵⁹</p> <p>...just sitting here and just watching people take part and being in this building is an inspirational process in itself.¹⁶⁰</p>	<p>...I just really wanted to work in the building...¹⁶¹</p> <p>...the building for example is incredibly iconic, symbolic...¹⁶²</p> <p>Parliament's probably the best place, body to do that.¹⁶³</p> <p>...the very place that's going to change or not change the thing that you care about.¹⁶⁴</p>	<p>...the Palace of Westminster belongs to the public...¹⁶⁵</p> <p>...we need to think about how the public understand what's going on in this place.¹⁶⁶</p> <p>I just think that's just the nature of this place, the silos.¹⁶⁷</p> <p>Parliament is an incredibly fragmented place...¹⁶⁸</p>

Table 20 comprises multiple bases for comparison; for example, whether the session took place in Westminster or outside it. Sessions held outside of Westminster (which, far from being neutral locations, exerted a symbolic influence in their own right) provide an invaluable insight into the ‘experience’ of Parliament from a physical distance. These sessions, unlike those within Westminster, were typically conducted with pre-existing groups (who had *requested* a visit from a member of the Parliamentary Participation Team); for example, colleagues, students of

¹⁵⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5A. *Focus group with Author*. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

¹⁵⁹ Citizen Focus Group Participant 2C. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster.

¹⁶⁰ Citizen Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2018, Westminster.

¹⁶¹ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶² Staff Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶³ Staff Focus Group Participant 1D. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶⁴ Staff Focus Group Participant 3C. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶⁵ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶⁶ Staff Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶⁷ Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

¹⁶⁸ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

politics, and interest groups. The location of the session was therefore appropriate to the group rather than to Parliament; often their place of work or study. As Table 20 shows, these discussions made minimal reference to Parliament as a 'place' (one, in fact, the substance of which reinforces the *abstraction* narrative (see Section 4.2)). Only the discussions within Parliament (encompassing the Westminster-based engagement sessions, staff focus groups and elite interviews) included the words 'building' and 'palace'. The connotations that were attached to 'the building' differed substantially and reflected the disjuncture inherent in Table 19; specifically, a variance in the acknowledgement of symbolic importance (and the degree to which this merited the allocation of resources and attention). This suggests that presence at a Westminster-located parliamentary engagement session contributes greatly to a 'concrete' conceptualisation of Parliament, and a discursive engagement with it in these terms. The citizen comment regarding Parliament as a 'big building' with 'lots of history' demonstrates exactly that: an *engagement* with this conceptualisation (i.e. a willingness to frame it as such), though not necessarily in a laudatory fashion.

The discussions referenced in Table 20 took place after the engagement sessions, and were a chance for participants to conceptualise and provide, through 'slow' thinking (see Section 3.3), considered and reflective opinions on politics and Parliament. The fact that – even in this context – there was a notably diminished propensity to talk of Parliament in terms of 'place' outside Westminster suggests that parliamentary engagement sessions did not facilitate any greater sense of connection with the physical institution (as concluded in Chapter 6). Thus, they do not appear to address (i.e. resist *or* entrench) the narratives of *distance* and *local-ness* that were identified and discussed in Chapter 4. This observation is significant in providing a potential explanation (or at least a reinforcing factor) as to why satisfaction with the UK Parliament, on a nationwide basis, tends to be higher when in closer proximity to Westminster (Hansard Society 2017, p.27). It is also significant in the present context of parliamentary engagement initiatives which, as we will discuss later in the chapter, remain heavily reliant upon symbolic cues that focus on the Palace and other physical objects (thereby presupposing that citizens can – or should – connect with Parliament *on that basis*). Despite this expectation, Table 20 suggests – as demonstrated by the findings of the previous chapter, when discussing participant attitudes – the effectiveness of the sessions was, to a significant degree, shaped by citizen preconceptions (underpinned by symbolic representation) that the sessions themselves did little to change or address.

In the previous chapter we subjected the notion of 'experience' – as conceptualised in Parliament's own engagement reports (House of Commons Library 2017) – to considerable

critique, pointing out that tour and visitor figures (not to mention gift shop sales!) make only a limited contribution to understanding visitors' *experience* of the place they have come to see (see Section 6.4). This clarification is highly relevant to the discussions within this chapter on Parliament and 'place'. The conceptualisation of Parliament as a physical place is clearly accepted and discussed by citizens (and especially staff) *within* Parliament. It is also allowed for (and, indeed, idealised) in Parliament's own conceptualisation of engagement, when this involves coming to the Palace. The distinction comes when examining a newer, more proactively public-facing strand of parliamentary engagement, as noted by Walker when describing Parliament's second five-year engagement strategy (2011-2016):

The mood is that efforts must now go beyond simply providing information and taking Parliament out to the people. There seems to be a recognition that Parliament has to now look into itself, to open up its own processes. (2011, p.278)

The very notion of 'taking Parliament out to the people' implies a lack of any fixed location and, by extension, a lack of dependence upon it. The distinction of this rationale from Westminster-centric parliamentary engagement (which clearly stresses the importance of physical experience) is demonstrated as follows:

1. Westminster-centric parliamentary engagement ('opening up its own processes')
2. Non-Westminster-centric parliamentary engagement ('taking Parliament out to the people')

The question here is whether these two objectives are *complementary* or *conflicting*. The importance of this question is derived from the notion that if (successful) parliamentary engagement is – as Kelso (2007) attests – dependent to some degree on a holistic engagement model, this would naturally entail 'opening up' *and* 'taking Parliament to the people'. However, parliamentary representation (inside and outside of Westminster) remains dominated by symbols and metonyms that focus upon the Palace. For example, in early 2018 Parliament rebranded its logo, changing the wording from 'The Houses of Parliament' to 'UK Parliament' to "highlight the role of the institution in the UK's constitution, and distinguish it from the building it occupies" (Design Week 2018). However, notwithstanding substantial media criticism about the extent of the change – an example headline being 'Spot the difference: MPs spend £50,000 on parliament logo redesign' (The Times 2018) – the portcullis logo remains in place. The paradox here is that 'taking Parliament out to the people' appears to employ the same discourse and symbolism as if the engagement were incumbent upon *visiting* Parliament (or, more specifically, the Palace). This should be considered alongside the fact that – as Tables 19 and 20 suggest – citizens outside of the immediate area of the institution are far less likely to engage

with Parliament as a building and instead view it (via discursive construction) as a conceptual entity.

This discussion leads us to the following contention, one that remains hitherto overlooked at an institutional level: that even if an engagement session is taking place outside Westminster, the attendees of the session are still *experiencing* Parliament (via representations of it). Linking back to Saward's (2010) *maker (M), subject (S), object (O), referent (R), and audience (A)* framework, discussed in the previous section, we will address an extract from an elite interview which demonstrates a representation of Parliament in the context of engagement:

From an engagement perspective, absolutely one of our ambitions in the team is to basically say "Parliament is everywhere"...just physically getting out there more...and thinking who we can partner with in a slightly more tangible, bricks and mortar way. [Asking] 'Where can you have a presence around the UK?'¹⁶⁹

This institutional perspective – very much adherent to the aforementioned principle of 'taking Parliament out to the people' – describes an act of representative claim-making. The 'engagement team' (M) is attempting to represent Parliament (S) as active in a wide range of areas (O) and therefore, more conceptually, as *present and tangible* (R) to citizens (A). As discussed in Section 4.2, perceptions of distance, and narratives of abstraction, are central to our understanding of (dis)engagement, therefore a symbolic representation of Parliament as *present* is highly significant.

'Taking out' or 'opening up' Parliament both depend upon a reflection of citizens' own conceptualisations of Parliament which (depending largely on their proximity to it) differ in their level of discursive and/or physical coherence. Thus questions of accessibility and 'opening up', which thus far focus only on visits to Parliament (House of Commons Library 2017, pp.21-23), must also take account of questions of efficacy and self-reflection, in line with our theoretical framework (and its fractal emphasis on 'mirroring' an audience; see Section 2.4). As Parkinson argues, it is essential

that the demos can see itself – or, in an age where the expression of multiplicity and distinctiveness matters, that the various members of the demos can see themselves – not merely depicted in public space, but to have their narratives symbolised in public space. My suggestion is that this may help create or reinforce the sense of efficacy needed to motivate political participation. (2009, p.5)

This observation speaks to several key themes; firstly, the concept of self-recognition within narrative, which provided an area of especial focus within Chapter 5. Secondly, it emphasises the significance of perceived connectivity to the efficacy that underpins political and

¹⁶⁹ Staff Elite Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author*. 16 August 2017, Westminster.

parliamentary engagement (and the desire for it). Thus, it is essential to conceptualise an experience of Parliament as an *ongoing* experience (beyond a visit to the institution, or an engagement session), just as it is essential to conceptualise engagement (more broadly) as a dynamic in two senses: being a relationship, and being ongoing (van Wessel 2016). Part of the basis for determining engagement session effectiveness, therefore, is the extent to which participants can conceptualise *Parliament's* story as *their* story. As demonstrated in Chapter 6 (regarding the question of 'usual suspects'), conclusions drawn about session participants are applicable outside this particular cohort, since in most respects they resemble the typical politico-social attitudes that previous political engagement studies have captured.

The notion of parliamentary engagement as an experience reinforces the importance of symbolic representation, as discussed in the previous section; it emphasises the *ongoing* nature of representation as an interaction, rather than conceptualising Parliament solely as a physical entity (and not a discursive construct). This, in turn, validates a theory of engagement as an ongoing dynamic (i.e. beyond the reach of a single engagement session), a continual point of reference throughout this thesis. It is therefore highly significant (in terms of effective engagement and representation) for citizens to be able to see their own understandings, standpoints and perceptions reflected (and contextually broadened) in what they perceive to constitute 'Parliament', in accordance with our fractal analogy (see Section 2.4 & 5.5). The following section will discuss the concept of 'meaningful continuity' that this section has elaborated; a perception of co-constituted meaningfulness (based on a representation of Parliament to which citizens can *subjectively and consistently* relate) that exists in the form of a dynamic relationship, rather than a single event or instance. We will also discuss the extent to which 'meaningful continuity' was facilitated by parliamentary engagement sessions, compared with their non-parliamentary equivalent.

7.3 – 'What if?' and 'what now?' The narrative of the engagement session experience

A model of engagement that is ongoing and consistent – or, at least, more consistent than 'every five years' – is an express desire on both sides of the citizen-institution dynamic, perceptible in public expectations (Leston-Bandeira and Walker 2018, p.310) and institutional policy (Leston-Bandeira 2016, p.510), albeit amidst concerns – raised within the parliamentary staff focus

groups – as to whether “that message [was] getting through”.¹⁷⁰ This will form our basis for further discussing the perceived influence of the engagement sessions *in an ongoing sense*, rather than identifying them as isolated events. We will therefore discuss engagement sessions in terms of their capacity to facilitate, contribute to, and encourage citizen perceptions of a broader engagement narrative. The basis for examining the sessions in this way – as events *within* a broader, continuous engagement narrative – was reinforced by the participants themselves (both staff and citizens), many of whom couched the effects of engagement sessions in *prospective* terms rather than immediate. In other words, the significance of a session was often judged, and discussed, in terms of how it might affect the respective participant’s future engagement (or the tangibility of this prospect). This desire among citizens to associate Parliament’s *ongoing story* with their own (and vice versa) was, from the perspective of parliamentary staff, prioritised over the notion of relating to history and heritage. Several examples of this mode of thought are provided in Table 21:

¹⁷⁰ Staff Focus Group Participant 2A. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

Table 21 – Citizen and staff perspectives on effective engagement and ongoing involvement

Citizen perspectives (non-parliamentary)	Citizen perspectives (parliamentary)	Staff perspective
<p>This [session] is a good way... to get people to speak about very tangible outcomes...it can be a vehicle to get people engaged...to reignite, almost, the democratic spirit...¹⁷¹</p>	<p>...it was only because there was a, there was BSL access...and hopefully that's going to grow and we're going to develop that relationship.¹⁷²</p>	<p>...if you're user-led, so if you're led by issues of the individual rather than the richness or the heritage of Parliament I'd say that's far more effective.¹⁷³</p>
<p>It was very pragmatic and practically focused and did a good job of...de-mystifying things, but also it was really equipping as well, in terms of...it would be really helpful if you did x, y, z beforehand, and then if you're in <i>this</i> situation then it's helpful if you do <i>this</i>.¹⁷⁴</p>	<p>...it's definitely given me a bit more to think about in terms of how we're going to do it because I hadn't even considered involving the House of Lords before now. You know, there's 800 people, some of them will be interested in the issue.¹⁷⁵</p>	<p>...all a petition can really lead to is a debate...if you could get on board with a political party or engage directly with your MP there's a far more direct link into that political system.¹⁷⁶</p>
<p>P2: I suppose it gave me hope...when I think about my MP I think "ugh, where do you start?"</p> <p>P3: ...and that gave us some clues as to where to start.¹⁷⁷</p>	<p>Really useful. But also spurred a lot of other questions, so I feel like maybe I can go away now with the sources that [anon]'s given us, and do some more individual research.¹⁷⁸</p>	<p>[Regarding <i>Your Story, Our History</i>] legislation is affecting people's lives but there's still more to do, so kind of using that as the kind of hook, being part of progress I guess.¹⁷⁹</p>

¹⁷¹ Citizen Interview Participant 2. *Interview with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 19 June 2018, London.

¹⁷² Citizen Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author*. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster.

¹⁷³ Staff Focus Group Participant 1F. *Focus group with Author*. 26 April 2017, Westminster.

¹⁷⁴ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4B. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 18 October 2018, Cambridge.

¹⁷⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 4A. *Focus group with Author*. 03 May 2017, York University.

¹⁷⁶ Staff Focus Group Participant 3B. *Focus group with Author*. 17 May 2017, Westminster.

¹⁷⁷ Citizen Focus Group Participants 3B & 3C. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 16 October 2018, Lincoln.

¹⁷⁸ Citizen Focus Group Participant 8A. *Focus group with Author*. 29 March 2018, Sheffield.

¹⁷⁹ Staff Focus Group Participant 2E. *Focus group with Author*. 05 May 2017, Westminster.

Considering Table 21 in combination with Table 17 (participant responses before and after engagement sessions; Section 6.3), we can gather a characterisation of influential engagement sessions (from the point of view of the participants). This influence appears to be based on the facilitation of new avenues for engagement, new ideas, and even new questions. Based on our discussion of the responses in Table 17 we also suggested previously that the non-parliamentary sessions *challenged* their attendees to a greater extent. What links all of these determiners is their conductivity to an *ongoing* process of engagement. This emphasis – identified across all contexts as a key measure of efficacy – was facilitated to a far greater extent by the non-parliamentary sessions; engagement sessions organised not by parliament, but by independent groups and charities (see Section 3.1). The latter type of session was notable in stressing the importance of ‘next steps’. The question ‘what do we do next’ – a discursive representation of ongoing engagement – encapsulated the typical end point of the non-parliamentary sessions. Indeed, within some of the non-parliamentary sessions, information was distributed on the participants’ local MP, as well as the MP’s voting history, so as to identify areas of congruence between the MP and the audience, as well as avenues for further participation and action.

Some of the non-parliamentary sessions also set aside time for the attendees to share contact details, and to provide these to the organiser so that a subsequent network could be built. This proved highly conducive to an objective of the attendees; to “meet with like-minded people who are interested in trying to make something like this happen in London...trying to find ways of finding something that one feels passionately about, to take forward.”¹⁸⁰ The attendees of the Westminster parliamentary engagement sessions (the non-Westminster sessions being, as discussed, organised around pre-existing groups (i.e. networks) were obviously not prohibited from sharing contact details, but this was not a formal, scheduled element of the parliamentary session. Moreover, there was no such sharing of contact details between the parliamentary engagement session attendees and the organiser, which corresponds with an impression of their being ‘one-time-only’ events. Though these non-parliamentary sessions were no different in pretext to the parliamentary engagement sessions that took place *outside* Westminster (in that their audiences were pre-existing groups with common points of interest), their execution encouraged a greater facilitation of *ongoing* engagement, and association between the participant and organisation. By contrast, the parliamentary sessions – after the provision of information to the participants – asked for suggestions as to what *they* would do next,

¹⁸⁰ Citizen focus group participant 2A. *Focus group with Author (non-parliamentary)*. 19 June 2018, London.

discursively representing Parliament as a potential avenue for involvement rather than a co-agent.

This explicit (re)presentation of the non-parliamentary sessions was often framed as an ongoing process, a process that the session aimed to facilitate. In some non-parliamentary contexts the event was *literally* part of a series, the rationale for which – as described below by one of their organisers – greatly emphasised an ongoing dynamic:

...our work is as much about the leadership journey as it is about...insights and information that you get out of people or even the end result of whether you've changed a policy or a plan...what makes it work is that over a period of time, you're gaining from a relationship and you're also giving as well...the equitability of that relationship is quite important...their own aspirations and interests and whether you can broker things that will help them...you're sort of walking the same path as them for quite a considerable period of time.¹⁸¹

The difference between the questions posed at the end of the non-parliamentary sessions, and at the end of their parliamentary equivalent ('what do *we* do next?' and 'what *could you* do next?' respectively) may appear slight but it is highly significant in discursive terms, as analogised by the quote from J.G. Ballard that began this chapter. The second question is considerably more hypothetical and does not imply any form of collective endeavour. The former represents an invitation into a collaborative effort – into a dynamic – whereas the latter shifts the onus onto the citizen.

It is important to note that some of the subsequent activities that were within the remit of the non-parliamentary sessions – effective lobbying of an MP, for instance – would be outside of the parliamentary remit. As Winetrobe observes, parliaments “are forums where strong, very public, and often adversarial political debates take place, reflecting the party competition of the wider political system, yet they themselves are, in essence, neutral institutions” (2003, p.1). Leston-Bandeira acknowledges parliaments to be “the most political institution, and yet they have to be portrayed in a non-political fashion in order to respect all political allegiances” (2014, p.421). This paradoxical identity (see also Section 1.2) restricts the subsequent activities that can be facilitated (or even endorsed) through parliamentary engagement sessions. Parliament, in other words, must steer clear of advocating political action, even though this political action is openly discussed as *part* of the engagement sessions (voting and lobbying, for example; though only in terms of their existence as processes, rather than ‘recommendations’ for utilising them). As discussed in Section 4.3, the paradox of Parliament’s (a)political identity has stimulated a great deal of uncertainty as to what the institution’s engagement remit is (and by extension, the

¹⁸¹ Citizen Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 23 February 2018, York.

distributed remits of parliamentary bodies), as well as veritable ‘turf wars’ between MPs and Parliament as to who has a *right* to that remit. This, we emphasise, problematises the prospect of Parliament adopting a ‘long-term’ approach to engagement (beyond the scope of the session), because the recommendation of political action perceptibly lies outside of the parliamentary remit.

However, it remains highly significant that (hypothetical and/or actual) significance was quantified by participants in the same way, across the different contexts demonstrated in Table 21. This is especially notable given the ostensible differences between participant groups *within* each context; for example, the non-parliamentary citizen perspectives (leftmost column, Table 21). The Cambridge and Lincoln groups indicated wholly different demographics: 71.4% of the Lincoln group were in the 66+ age group, just under half of whom (42.9%) said that they were members of political parties, and all confirmed they had voted in the previous general election. The Cambridge group, meanwhile, were all in the 18-21 age group, and none of them professed to be party members (though, as with the Lincoln group, all confirmed they had recently voted). Both groups were exposed to the same engagement session format, and both concluded at the beginning of the focus group discussion (i.e. the end of the engagement session) that its significance was demonstrated by (i.e. *incumbent upon*) the communication of *next steps*. As with our discussion of ‘understanding Parliament and Government’ in Section 6.3, we are observing what the *participants* (across different types of session) perceived as important. We can clarify, therefore, that our observations do not constitute a recommendation for Parliament to re-design engagement sessions to be more ‘political’ (even if this were a feasible option), let alone more partisan. It simply shows that an awareness of the ‘long-term’ – in the basic design of an engagement session – appears likely to yield positive feedback.

This invitation (by the non-parliamentary sessions) into a dynamic is highly significant, since it constitutes (to borrow the terminology of the Narrative Policy Framework) a ‘moral’, i.e. a policy solution (McBeth, Jones and Shanahan 2014, p.228). In other words, a form of future action is proposed by the non-parliamentary sessions, into which the participants can direct their subsequent energies and enthusiasms. This addition means that the session is conceptualised – by organiser and participant – as part of a *series* of events, within which the engagement session is only a constituent part. Crucially, though, the discourse of ‘what do *we* do next?’ implies the involvement (or at least an *offered* involvement) of the organiser, further conceptualising the series of events as a *relationship*. Linking back to theories of narrative – which as we have discussed is often conceptualised in terms of interlinked events (1975; see also Abbott 2008, p.13) – Langellier (drawing on William Labov’s theories of personal narrative) refers to this

concept of ‘what next?’ as “a coda (‘that’s it, I’ve finished and am bridging back to our present situation’)” (1999, p.126). The ‘coda’ serves to further reinforce the importance of practicability; of taking the lessons learned from the engagement session and demonstrating ways in which they can be made useful (thus ‘bridging back to our present situation’). Conceptualising the engagement sessions (and the manner of their conclusion) in terms of ‘morals’ and ‘codas’ allows us to discuss their prospective effectiveness with a view to future applications of what the participants claimed to have learned.

The notion of a ‘moral’, or ‘coda’, is also invaluable in discerning the efficacy of other initiatives under discussion, such as *Your Story, Our History* (see Section 5.4), in which parliamentary legislation constitutes the ‘moral’ (referred to, via a staff perspective in Table 21, as ‘being part of progress’). Parliamentary legislation can be conceptualised as a ‘moral’ because it presents a solution (in representing a turning-point in the lives of the storytellers). The crucial point here is that parliamentary legislation is indeed presented as a turning-point and not a resolution in itself. Hence the observation within *Your Story, Our History*, which (in the words of the ‘publisher’ – the Education and Engagement Service – rather than the citizen storyteller) states that “there’s still much more to be done” (UK Parliament Education and Engagement Service 2016a). In signposting a specific channel of subsequent engagement – participation in the legislative process – this initiative proves pertinent to recent (and highly relevant) engagement efforts. These include ‘Public Reading Stage’ pilots, which allow citizens to read (and directly comment on) bills which have not yet become laws. A key example is the Children and Families Bill in 2013 which (between Second Reading and Committee Stage) could be discussed by citizens via a web forum (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson 2017). These precedents, in the context of our discussions on *ongoing* engagement, are significant in emphasising efficacy and the tangibility of change. In narrative terms this relates back to the need for a reader/audience to “[see] events as general human possibilities”, and apply (i.e. *make relevant*) these possibilities to themselves (Nussbaum 2001, p.241). Non-parliamentary sessions appear well-placed to harness this form of appeal, from which institutional lessons (with respect to parliamentary engagement) could be usefully drawn.

It is clear that – notwithstanding a broadly shared principle of improved and/or strengthened engagement – the sessions spoke to the differing aims of their respective organisers. To state that a non-parliamentary organisation possesses an agenda that is distinct from Parliament is uncontroversial, especially when factoring in our theoretical framework (which draws upon Saward’s (2010) principle of co-constitutive claim-making, and the associated importance of the ‘intentions of the maker’). It is therefore impossible to extricate the (vested) interests of the

organisation from the format and representative claim-making evident within the sessions that they organise. It is also important, however, not to overstate the differences between these sessions, especially when discussing who (or what) the audience was encouraged to engage *with*. Both types of session emphasised Parliament and *Parliamentarians* as an area of focus; APPGs and Select Committees in the case of the former (a consistent theme across the parliamentary and non-parliamentary sessions), while also speaking to the importance of the latter in their representative capacity. In addition, the ‘intentions of the maker’ are not only relevant as a caveat to discussions of session format (and aims). They are also relevant to congruence; that is to say, the extent to which the sessions reflected the aims of the organisation and (with consideration to the fractal analogy discussed within the theoretical framework) the audience.

With this in mind it is telling that citizens’ perspectives on the influence of the session (whether parliamentary or non-parliamentary) were so often couched in consistent terms; particularly with reference to *ongoing* usefulness. In parliamentary sessions, citizens who *did* acknowledge the effect(s) or influence of the session often did so by referring to future *personal* endeavours (‘some more individual research’) rather than the session itself. What is also significant is a clear degree of institutional awareness of *ongoing engagement* as an invaluable *modus operandi*. The staff perspectives within Table 21 demonstrate this awareness, through their prioritisation of direct links with citizens based on pertinent issues. Initiatives such as *Your Story, Our History* display a similar awareness, though – as discussed in Chapter 5 – this approach is far from holistic. As Table 21 also shows, *a capacity for facilitating ongoing engagement* is a useful basis for institutional discussions on existing engagement efforts (petitions, for example), and for critiquing more ‘isolated’ modes. Thus, engagement subsequent to the session is made demonstrably relevant to the experience of the session itself; to relate back to the quote that begins this chapter, the effectiveness of the session is apparent upon its conclusion. This awareness serves to problematise an assumption – prevalent through the design of the parliamentary sessions we have discussed – of engagement being (1) achievable *within* the scope of a session, and (2) being focused upon parliamentary history and heritage rather than a meaningful, ongoing dynamic *with* the institution (to relate back to our own definition of engagement). The final section will further problematise this assumption through a discussion of corporate identity and its relevance to symbolic representation.

7.4 – ‘Corporate symbolic representation’ and inclusive engagement

The principle of ongoing engagement that the previous section discussed – a principle acknowledged as significant by citizens and (at least theoretically) at an institutional level – incorporates by definition a notable degree of inclusivity. As a principle of engagement it reinforces the importance of citizens being able to recognise themselves within an initiative in order to relate to it. However, what it also draws attention to, from its current lack of implementation in parliamentary engagement policy, is a narrative of an institution with no coherent approach to engagement. At this point we return to Kelso’s observation “that Parliament does not function as a ‘unified’ institution, and largely lacks any kind of corporate identity, and therefore also lacks the means to approach political disengagement in a holistic fashion” (2007, pp.365-366). Similarly, David Beetham cites a conversation with a former Labour MP in which Parliament was described as “simply a building, in which a multitude of activities is carried on, but without any corporate identity” (2011, p.125). The term *corporate identity* is an intriguing one in this context, especially considering the institutional unease toward terminology that connoted a ‘consumer’ or ‘marketing’ rationale within parliamentary engagement (see Section 4.4). In the same section we also advanced the notion that *customer engagement* was a useful institutional conceptualisation of engagement; one that emphasised mutuality, interaction, and the potential for empathy (the latter resisting an *abstraction* narrative). In this section we will discuss the term in greater detail, since it represents an ideal point of interplay between many of the concepts discussed within this chapter (and others). It is also, as we will discuss, highly relevant to the symbolic representation that remains crucial to citizens’ conceptualisations of Parliament (as well as our own).

Corporate identity is a difficult term to define, even within its own relevant literature. Melewar and Jenkins attribute this difficulty to the status of the term as a *construct*; that is, acknowledged to be largely conceptual and subjective (2002). They do, however, cite Olins’ definition of corporate identity: “the explicit management of all the ways in which the organization presents itself through experiences and perceptions to all its audiences” (1995, cited in Melewar and Jenkins 2002, p.77). This definition of corporate identity is thus highly relevant to symbolic representation; both are fundamentally based upon (re)presentation through experience and perception, or through subjectivity in other words. In addition, as Melewar and Jenkins attest, architecture and location are key components within the construct of corporate identity, albeit components that are overlooked by much of the relevant literature (2002, p.82). Both of these elements of ‘physicality’ were frequently referenced in the debates surrounding Restoration and Renewal, and informed our earlier discussion of this topic with reference to symbolic

representation (see Section 7.1). With this in mind, we propose that Parliament’s corporate identity (or lack thereof) provides an invaluable site of interplay between three concepts which have proved influential to the discussions within this thesis, in the following ways:

1. Symbolic representation
 - a. The notion of (re)presentation through subjective experience of the audience
 - b. The mutual conceptualisation of symbolic representation and corporate identity as *constructs*
2. The *customer engagement* counter-narrative
 - a. Consideration of an audience and the facilitation of empathy
 - b. Institutional *consumer engagement* counter-narrative
3. Narratives
 - a. Co-constitutive meaning-making (i.e. importance of the *customer* interaction)
 - b. Coherence and ‘leading principles’

Winetrobe, in a rare case of discussing Parliament in explicitly ‘marketing’ terms, observes that one of “the defining characteristics of an effective Parliament” is “an underlying vision and purpose” (2003, p.1). An ‘underlying vision’ overlaps somewhat with the conceptualisation of narrative that we discussed in Section 4.3; as denoting “leading principles” (Shenhav 2015, p.25). Nevertheless Winetrobe relates this to concepts of marketing and corporate identity in order to emphasise the importance of thinking not only of *functions*, but *identity* and ‘*customers*’ (2003, p.2). Our previous discussions of parliamentary narratives noted a take-up, among some parliamentary staff, of a more ‘consumer-driven’ ethos with respect to Parliament’s function(s) – precisely because of a perceived need to conceptualise ‘customers’ and empathise with them (see Section 4.4). However this was most aptly described as a counter-narrative against a broader (opposing) institutional narrative.

A lack of corporate identity is not *intrinsic* to a legislature; the Scottish Parliament, for example, possesses corporate identity guidelines that, despite referring specifically to formatting details, indicate broader representative principles: that “[e]veryone should have the same opportunity to engage”, and for corporate identity “to reflect the values of the Scottish Parliament in the balance between authority and openness” (The Scottish Parliament 2017, pp.5-6). The Welsh Assembly also exemplifies a link between corporate identity and the legislature’s responsibility to engage; in this context, to “deliver advertising, publicity, campaigns or other engagement methods that target the public bilingually” (National Assembly for Wales Assembly Commission 2013, p.18). In the case of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly – both comparatively young institutions – there is an evident understanding and appreciation of the value of corporate

identity to accessibility and engagement, as well as the way in which this corporate identity constitutes a form of representative claim-making (with a significant emphasis on unity and accessibility). Institutional opposition towards notions of the UK Parliament as a ‘commercial’ body – discussed in Section 4.4, and reflected in the lack of any comparable corporate identity documentation – does not appear to be anywhere near as prevalent within the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. Considering the relative age of these legislatures it is possible that this distinction is attributable to a comparative absence of (or perhaps ‘freedom from’) heritage and tradition, concepts that – as we have discussed in physical and discursive terms – are continually recreated and entrenched within Westminster.

From this viewpoint, Parliament’s history and heritage – within which an institutional opposition to corporate identity and consumer logic is embedded and reinforced – evidently problematises a coherent approach to engagement. The Scottish Parliament, by contrast, “has no historical baggage, and, up till now, it has not operated in such historic or famous locations as to deflect from the image of a modern institution” (Winetrobe 2003, p.7). The ‘image’ of Parliament was a consistent point of reference during the parliamentary staff discussions, and was even framed in terms of corporate identity inasmuch as this ‘image’ was at least partially constructed by citizens:

I think Parliament has to work with others...because its branding is a barrier. So we have to partner up with people, and that’s what we’re doing. For Parliament Week we’re partnering with people, so they’re the interface, not this place.¹⁸²

This notion of ‘people’ (citizens’) being ‘the interface’ is highly significant here. It relates back to Olins’ conceptualisation of corporate identity as ‘presentation through experience’; an image constructed through what “we tell each other”, to recall Langellier’s (1999, p.125) definition of stories (Section 2.3). The ‘interface’ here – between corporate identity, storytelling, and symbolic representation – gives some insight into the potential for a (thus far elusive) holistic model of engagement, based upon the image of Parliament as a construct and the centrality of the citizen experience to what ‘defines’ Parliament. We can refer to this term as ‘corporate symbolic representation’ in order to emphasise the importance of corporate identity, but in a way that avoids its potentially ‘loaded’ status (at least *within* the institution). Underlining its conceptual crossover with symbolic representation refers back to precisely the counterargument raised in Section 4.4 with respect to ‘consumer engagement’; that such a model of engagement is, first and foremost, a recognition of the importance of empathy and co-constitutive meaning-making.

¹⁸² Staff Elite Interview Participant 3. *Interview with Author*. 17 August 2017, Westminster.

The potential for holism is further reinforced by the relevance of ‘people as the interface’ – as a rationale – to our discussion of initiatives such as *Your Story, Our History* (see Section 5.4). Through these initiatives, citizens were (re)presented as a storytelling interface. The characteristics that marked these initiatives out, in terms of their prospects for success, closely mirror those of Parliament Week and its approach to collaboration, as exemplified in the interview extract above; that is to say, *the presentation of an interface with which to (re)present Parliament*. The *need* for holism in this respect is affirmed by the observation that *Your Story, Our History* – to take one example – is, thus far exclusively internet-based, with no indication that this will change in the immediate future. It therefore entails a need for complementary offline initiatives. Discernible changes within the online landscape – manifesting in an increased ‘horizontalisation’ and (at least in part) an amelioration of suggestions of a ‘digital divide’ (Office for National Statistics 2018b) – still leaves us with the observation that the population of UK internet users is far from a mirror-image of the population more broadly. Moreover, the release of the aforementioned initiatives through YouTube, and the use of Twitter in publicising them, necessitates a reiteration of the particular relationship (and potential limitations thereof) between social media and parliamentary engagement:

Social media is designed for one-to-one or one-to-few social interactions, or for one-to-many information broadcast. Since parliaments are accountable to such a large number of citizens, it is not technologically easy for parliaments to cultivate ‘listening’ relationships with such large numbers of people. (Leston-Bandeira and Bender 2013, p.293)

What increases the likelihood for the continuation of an ad-hoc approach to engagement, as well as the above observation on social media engagement, is the existence of an anti-consumerist sentiment within the institution (see Section 4.4) as well as an issue that may be even more entrenched. This issue concerns the basic desire for engagement *on both sides of the citizen-institution dynamic*. The realistic scope for this desire is highly contentious, especially since Parliament’s (self-identified) responsibility to engage is a comparatively recent phenomenon, compared to that of individual politicians.

Politicians vary considerably in the degree to which citizen interaction is valued (or sought),¹⁸³ especially in situations that do not relate directly to political utility. As discussed previously, the history of engagement with politicians is ad-hoc and inconsistent, and seldom concerned with engaging citizens *with Parliament* (at least, until fairly recently). Though this thesis has focused

¹⁸³ Philip Norton, writing on correspondence between citizens and MPs, notes the following: “One MP who sat in the 1950s told his son-in-law when he too was elected to parliament that MPs should not bother answering letters: ‘it only encourages them’, he said, ‘and it is not fair on those who don’t write’.” (Norton, 2002, p.8).

upon parliamentary representation, it is essential to acknowledge the importance “of representatives” in “humanis[ing] governance, representing it to people, and people to it, in humane and accessible terms” (Coleman 2005, p.12). However, this ‘humanisation’ is not a task that can (or should) *only* be enacted by representatives, especially since part of the value of the effective engagement we have discussed is in providing a ‘face’ (or ‘faces’) that can be effectively connected with. Nevertheless these effective instances are thus far granular and anomalous (thereby reinforcing the value of a discussion of corporate identity), resisting but also illustrating a broader story/information dichotomy (see Section 5.3) that problematises claims of a widespread institutional desire for citizen stories. Moreover, narrative-specific theories such as the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) have, in previous studies, also demonstrated a continuing conceptualisation of narratives as a means of political (i.e. partisan) utility rather than modes of guiding and improving policy (O’Byrne, Dunlop and Radaelli 2014). Non-parliamentary engagement testimonies further reinforced a perceived institutional apprehension toward any mode of engagement that afforded greater responsibility to citizens, especially in the capacity of decision-making:

P1: I think we’ve got a great population in general...who genuinely want to see a better world, and have ideas about what kind of world they want to see, and they’re willing to put their time into it...it’s just yeah, the mechanisms and the power, the structure of power and the entrenched nature of it.

Author: ...meeting them halfway and harnessing enthusiasms.

P1: Yeah, and being serious about giving serious power away. I mean, these public authorities...who’ve got an appetite for doing things in new ways...want to co-produce services or provisions with communities, but when I think about...who holds the actual power in the country, I still think there’s probably huge resistance to giving real power away to people.¹⁸⁴

Kelso’s observations on the Commons’ active desire for an ill-informed citizenry (see Section 4.2) further problematise any claims of Parliament to have always pursued citizen input. Nor is this problem of desire specific to the institutional side of the engagement dynamic; citizens’ expectations – from a staff *and* citizen viewpoint – are often unrealistic at best, openly contradictory at worst. The ‘greater return with no greater commitment’ mentality that this implies is reminiscent of scholarly accounts of the ‘expectations gap’ (Flinders 2012a), as well as the notion that what citizens are prepared to commit to the political sphere – i.e. their conceptualisation of it – is ad-hoc and often highly restricted (Fox 2012; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In a manner akin to the ‘stealth democrats’ thesis (see Sections 1.3 and 6.3),

¹⁸⁴ Citizen Elite Interview Participant 1. *Interview with Author*. 23 February 2018, York.

citizens themselves noted a lack of commitment (without visible return, at least) among the citizenry, in some cases drawing specifically on demographic research they had seen:

...But the research kind of bared out in each of these generations that basically we have got more selfish...more demands placed on your time as well, so if you're engaging in something, and I guess that would be directly relatable to being politically engaged...that is a demand on your time, to be interested, to do something about it and to be informed. That's not just going to happen, like you said, with no effort.¹⁸⁵

However, in linking back to the importance of *identification* (discussed and emphasised in Section 6.3), we should reiterate the value (and potential for engagement) that is to be gained from effective communication, and proactive encouragement to engage with Parliament's attempts to inform. From our discussion of the Petitions Committee's report on brain tumour research we have seen that, on an individual level, politicians (as individuals) are highly responsive to citizen stories. This reflects Hendriks and Lees-Marshment's proposition that political elites do in fact value *authentic* interactions with citizens; interaction that is informal and (to some extent) spontaneous, through which "leaders are better able to connect with everyday people and hear 'real world' stories" (2018, p.13). Citizens also appear to value a similar degree of authentic dialogue; of stories that make information engaging, comprehensible and (perhaps most importantly) relatable. The desire of citizens, institutions, and politicians, for greater engagement (with no limits or caveats) should not be overstated, lest an 'expectations gap' be allowed to coagulate further. However, we should also not take *disinterest*, *disengagement*, or *apathy* to be a given, in a quantitative or quantitative sense. What this chapter has shown is that *ongoing engagement* clearly holds an appeal, for citizens and for institutional staff. Our theory of 'corporate symbolic representation' has potentialised a holistic means of conceptualising (and potentially practising) parliamentary symbolic representation (and its immediate, practical significance) with constant reference to the citizenry, through whom 'Parliament' is defined and forever (re)constructed.

Conclusions

"...we work in a historic Parliament on a world heritage site and therefore there is a strong sense of an obligation to posterity, to maintain buildings and objects"; this observation from a parliamentary official, captured in research by Leston-Bandeira (2016, p.509) reflects many of the complexities identified within this chapter (and the thesis more broadly). Parliament's

¹⁸⁵ Citizen Focus Group Participant 5D. Focus group with Author. 09 May 2017, Newcastle.

responsibility to its own history has, from the viewpoint of staff and citizen alike, encouraged a model of engagement that encourages connectivity with an institutional past, rather than a meaningful stake in its future (or even its present). In conceptualising a more forward-facing, 'long-term' orientated *modus operandi* – one that prioritises the feasibility of an *ongoing dynamic* of parliamentary engagement – a number of lessons can be learned from outside organisations (and legislatures). Outside organisations include non-parliamentary bodies that broadly share an objective to widen and deepen political engagement; bodies that conceptualise engagement as a series of meaningful events (of which the engagement session itself constitutes only a component part, albeit a significant and influential one). In addition, devolved legislatures are valuable case studies in being largely, and in some sense deliberately, free of the historical symbolisations that characterise the UK Parliament, and adopting a holistic model of engagement that fully embraces the value of a coherent, consistent corporate identity.

An obligation to posterity, therefore, should not encapsulate Parliament's attempts to engage, or to define itself as an institution. The perspectives we have discussed on Restoration and Renewal, and *ongoing engagement*, attest to this. Parliamentary relevance – and, by extension, its perceived efficacy and legitimacy – depends upon a *continued* relevance and capacity for identification that complements historical significance rather than depending on it. Citizens are observably reticent about committing more energy to an engagement system in which efficacy is difficult to determine. However, the engagement sessions we have studied (both parliamentary and non-parliamentary) have displayed an enthusiasm for an explicitly mutual dynamic; one in which Parliament tells citizens' stories as its own, and vice versa. Citizens can, in this way, be more effectively engaged by, and with, an institution in which they can see themselves and their experiences; reflected, contextualised, and situated. Engagement is, as conceptualised throughout this thesis, an ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s); this chapter has examined practicable ways in which meaningful, ongoing dialogue can be facilitated and rendered desirable. In doing so, the relevance of narratives has been shown to transcend the efficacy of storytelling in strengthening engagement; instead, engagement can also be conceptualised *as* a narrative, providing an invaluable basis for a holistic institutional approach that is informed by symbolic representation (as theoretically and practicably influential) and the ongoing necessity of co-constructing a consistent (corporate) identity.

Conclusions

A fiction can scarcely exist, however surreal and minimal, that does not involve some construction business... Our human world speaks to us, most massively, in its buildings.

John Updike

Research findings

Through mixed-methods research, innovative quantitative and qualitative analysis, and an original theoretical framework, we find that there currently exists no single, coherent and consistent culture of engagement across Parliament. We also find there to be a frequent lack of understanding across different parliamentary departments as to their particular engagement remit (and even basic functions). Citizens' definitions of 'Parliament' and 'politics' were similarly complex and subjective, validating this thesis' avoidance of 'compartmentalising' definitions and instead allowing participants to frame them. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of select committee reports – reinforced by findings from the focus group discussions and elite interviews – we find that there remains a parliamentary dichotomisation of 'stories' and 'information'. Building on this point, we conclude that certain types of public input (and, by extension, certain *publics*) are prioritised over others in an engagement context. Institutional (and citizen) apprehensions regarding 'usual suspects' are thus well-founded in this respect. What this also indicates is a lack of acknowledgement across Parliament as to the value of stories (and storytelling) to engagement; as a legitimate means by which citizens can communicate meaningful topics to Parliament, and as a means by which Parliament can engage citizens. Within the institution, where this acknowledgement *is* evident, it remains anomalous. Moreover, as shown through our comparison of two contemporaneous initiatives (*Your Story, Our History* and *The Story of Parliament*), the application of stories for the purposes of parliamentary engagement is both ad-hoc and inconsistent, in terms of recognising the need to *tell* (rather than simply *present*) a story.

Within this study of parliamentary engagement, incorporating narrative as a theoretical, methodological and analytical component was essential for four reasons. The first relates to the ubiquity of storytelling as a means by which perspectives (both internal and external) on parliamentary and political engagement (and, for that matter, any meaningful topic) are communicated, described and substantiated. The second relates to the proliferation of

narratives and stories as an area of study (and, in some cases, as theoretical frameworks) across many academic disciplines, including (in a thus far restricted sense) political science. The third is that, despite the inconsistencies in application discussed throughout this thesis, the fact remains that stories now form part of the means by which Parliament attempts to represent itself and to engage citizens. Finally, narrative is an essential means by which the significance and influence of individual engagement sessions (to citizens) can be understood; that is, as part of an ongoing process. This leads us to a simple conclusion: that *narrative is engagement, and engagement is a narrative*. What this thesis demonstrates is that storytelling 'humanises' Parliament; as a process it renders Parliament corporeal, relatable, and 'local'. Storytelling is a means of addressing the abstraction narrative that is pervasive inside and outside Parliament, and which (as an antithesis to empathy) renders a deeper, wider form of engagement difficult to envisage. Storytelling is a means of encouraging situated knowledge, directly influencing basic conceptualisations of Parliament (and, by extension, the way in which future information is processed and interpreted). Parliamentary engagement initiatives must therefore be made relatable, because *Parliament* must be made relatable.

These observations constitute a critique of Parliament's existing engagement strategy; specifically, the presupposition of a continuum (or causal link) between information and engagement. To an extent this presupposition reinforces the institutional dichotomisation (i.e. asymmetrical prioritisation) of 'stories' and 'information' which was particularly evident in the findings of our Critical Discourse Analysis. In our examination of parliamentary engagement sessions, we found no link between participants deeming themselves to be better-informed about Parliament and subsequently expressing greater positivity (or even interest) towards it. What we can discern here is a 'gap' in engagement that could be addressed through storytelling, as a means of *complementing* the need to inform (which must also remain a central objective). Storytelling and information both speak to particular forms of 'knowing', both of which are essential to effective engagement. These observations are particularly significant after having problematised the presence of 'usual suspects' in the context of parliamentary engagement sessions; that is to say, the question of whether engagement session attendees (i.e. our research participants) are anomalously engaged, informed, and/or interested in Parliament. Through analysis of the demographic elements of our questionnaires, and of participant discussions, we find that engagement session attendees do not appear as anomalously engaged as might be assumed. As well as problematising institutional claims of 'taking parliament to the people', this means that the conclusions drawn from our research are applicable and relevant beyond what may ostensibly seem a narrow cohort of 'already-engaged' citizens.

The significance of these points on engagement and storytelling derives from the inextricable link between parliamentary engagement and parliamentary legitimacy and, in turn, between parliamentary legitimacy and representative democracy. A study of this kind is essential in understanding perceptions of representative democracy within the UK, and Parliament's place within it. It is also essential in understanding citizens' democratic aspirations, and the extent to which these are perceived to have been realised through political institutions (such as elections, parties, and legislatures). The research questions established in our Introduction are highly relevant and timely, within a political and democratic context that leaves the future role of formal institutions uncertain, in the UK and on a worldwide scale. Debates surrounding the UK's withdrawal from the EU, and the effort to renovate and restore the Palace of Westminster, adds to this uncertainty alongside a broader global debate about the health of democratic legitimacy. As this thesis has shown, even the *present* role of these political institutions – their nature, their functions, their responsibilities – is a source of uncertainty, even within the institutions themselves. Even the citizens who *do* engage with Parliament remain uncertain as to what this institution is and what it does; meanwhile the staff members who *do* prioritise engagement with citizens remain uncertain as to the nature of their own institution, and what 'success' in their own efforts would realistically constitute. To reiterate an earlier observation, Parliament appears mysterious not only to citizens, but to its own staff.

Contributions to academic literature

This thesis has demonstrated, and applied, original and innovative methods of studying parliamentary engagement from citizen and institutional perspectives; in theoretical, methodological and analytical terms. We have designed an innovative fractal analogy that illustrates the significance of storytelling within parliamentary engagement; as a means of contextualising and (in so doing) appealing to a reader/audience. As we have shown, fractals analogise the capacity of storytelling to reflect the reader/audience within a self-similar narrative background of situated knowledge. Our analogy also represents a critique of existing fractal analogies of narrative within social science (and their conceptualisations of both narrative and fractals). Our theoretical framework shows how and *why* certain stories (within the context of parliamentary engagement campaigns) are effective, when considering an intended audience. It shows the self-referentiality of meaning, as well as the way in which narratives and situated knowledge are constituted by individual, relatable stories. We have also discussed the prevalence of certain narratives as exemplars of how Parliament is perceived and

conceptualised; by citizens, and by its own staff. This thesis has also demonstrated the techniques by which these narratives are communicated; diegesis, and mimesis (encompassing 'imagined paraphrasing' and 'rhetorical conversation'), both of which can be understood as storytelling devices. This demonstrates the usefulness of narrative as a component of a theoretical framework, and of studying narratives within political science which, as a discipline, still adopts a rather narrow conceptualisation of narratives as merely contextual (rather than efficacious) devices.

In methodological terms we have shown the conduciveness of sequencing fieldwork activities in order to facilitate 'fast' and 'slow' modes of thinking, the latter being a mode through which the aforementioned narrative techniques are employed (as a reflection of more considered, nuanced responses). Building upon previous academic studies which have utilised the 'fast/slow' framework, this thesis has demonstrated the value of a two-part questionnaire process, through which prospective and retrospective attitudes can be directly compared. Within the questionnaire data (and specifically our inclusion of a word-association exercise), we have also closely examined *positive* and *neutral* responses; more closely than previous studies which primarily focused on *negative* responses. Wherever possible our methodology also aimed to gather institutional viewpoints; perspectives of parliamentary staff and officials, to compare and contrast with (and otherwise enrich) the data gained from citizens. This was achieved through the inclusion of staff focus groups and elite interviews within our fieldwork, as well as the consultation and analysis of select committee reports. This objective was entirely consistent with the definition of engagement that this thesis established: an *ongoing, meaningful dialogue between institution and individual(s)*. It also demonstrates the value of a study that allows research participants to set their own definitions; to decide what concepts such as 'politics', 'engagement' and 'Parliament' mean *to them*. In addition, the range of research techniques that this PhD applied allowed us to gather a rich and varied dataset for subsequent analysis.

This analysis drew upon qualitative and quantitative methods in order to measure *and* understand the perceptions and attitudes that were gathered throughout the fieldwork process. The use of qualitative analysis – and, by extension, an avoidance of a solely quantitative study – was essential in adhering to a key objective of the thesis; that is, to refrain from discussing 'quantifiers' of engagement (e.g. voter turnout, party membership figures) as if their meaning were self-evident. Thus, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis was consistent with this thesis' conceptualisation of these 'quantifiers' as expressive acts, the significance of which must be (and can only be) understood *in context*. Our use of qualitative analysis – such as narrative analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis – provided considerable insight into

institutional discourses, as well as the ways in which citizens *and* staff expressed and substantiated their perspectives. The inclusion of quantitative analysis, on the other hand, was necessary in consideration of the size of the dataset (the questionnaires in particular) and in order to provide some means of generalisability; for example, the question of ‘usual suspects’ and the resulting need to examine the research participants at a ‘demographic’ level. These two analytical standpoints complemented each other effectively; for example, when measuring participant attitudes (through Likert scale questions) and *whether* they changed, and then – through focus groups and subsequent qualitative analysis – seeking to understand *why* these attitudes did or did not change. The theoretical, methodological and analytical framework thereby provided a valuable means for examining internal and external attitudes towards Parliament, and contributing to an understanding of parliamentary engagement initiatives, in terms of their influence *and* influences.

Recommendations for Parliament

Our research findings lead us to recommend that greater attention be given to a cross-departmental ‘narrative’ of engagement. Parliamentary engagement as a practice, and as a culture, currently appears specific to (and varied amongst) individual departments that possess some form of engagement remit. The need for holistic change in this respect is made more pertinent by the fact that the parliamentary narratives we have identified and addressed through this thesis are exclusively negative. Addressing parliamentary engagement sessions specifically, we conclude – through quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as comparisons with *non-parliamentary* sessions – that perceived effectiveness is influenced to a large extent by the ‘moral’, or ‘coda’ that these efforts conceptualise. In other words, parliamentary engagement sessions currently reflect an institutional conceptualisation of the session itself as a single (isolated) event, in contrast with their non-parliamentary equivalent (who address their own sessions as part of a process). As we have discussed, the significance of the latter derives from its emphasis on a forward-facing model of engagement; on tangible future *possibilities*. This model is consistent with the interrelated nature of the theories of representation, engagement, and narrative that we have discussed, all of which are underpinned by co-constitutive meaning-making and the importance of self-recognition (as a means to relatability). We have shown, moreover, that participants in non-parliamentary engagement sessions saw the relevant organisation as *part of* their future engagement activities. We propose that parliamentary engagement sessions (in drawing lessons from their non-parliamentary

equivalent) give a similar degree of consideration to the 'longer view'; that is to say, in proposing viable future actions which, though not necessarily political or partisan, encourage a conceptualisation of the engagement session as part of a broader process of engagement.

These observations, as well as the 'safe space' discussions in Section 4.3, necessitate a broader degree of dialogue *across* Parliament in terms of engagement culture and strategy. Our discussion of 'corporate symbolic representation' is highly conducive to this requirement, encompassing as it does a consideration of *audience* and an appeal to empathy. A theoretical amalgamation of corporate identity and symbolic representation recognises the central importance of physicality (architecture and location) to both concepts. Through our comparative analysis of parliamentary engagement initiatives which draw upon narrative techniques – *Your Story*, *Our History* and *The Story of Parliament* especially – we conclude that the former displays a substantially greater fidelity to storytelling at a conceptual level, providing an effective model for future initiatives. In addition, we have shown it to *potentialise* effectiveness to a greater extent, based on its representation of Parliament and the audience that it conceptualises (and thereby presupposes). Having already demonstrated a propensity to utilise storytelling as an attempt to connect citizens to Parliament, it is important for the institution to better understand *why* these devices work. Through our fieldwork discussions we have also found a continued dichotomisation of *stories* and *information*, and an acknowledgement amongst (some) parliamentary staff as to the value of citizen stories within select committee evidence. We accordingly recommend the encouragement of a more holistic, institutional acknowledgement of this material, as a means of supplementing the informational resources that Parliament can (and does) draw upon.

Future research

Prospective study could focus more specifically upon storytelling as an engagement technique, and in more comparative detail. This study could, potentially, take the form of an impact paper or report; its value would stem from the observation (made within this thesis) that storytelling represents a significant element of parliamentary engagement, and one that could be more extensively utilised. A study of this type could compare several different forms of engagement initiative, some being based on narrative devices while others are not. Future research could also examine different types of narrative and their relative effectiveness within parliamentary engagement. This could be achieved through greater engagement with theories such as the Narrative Policy Framework, which provide a means of empirical deliberative analysis through

narrative. As this thesis has shown, the effects of a particular narrative are highly contextualised and dependent on the respective audience. No single narrative (communicated through storytelling) can be effective across all contexts, and no single narrative can be 'universally' related to by a reader/audience, who instead relate individual elements to their existing situated knowledge (as demonstrated through our fractal analogy). We have thus shown the capacity of a reader/audience for problematising a story, even one to which they primarily relate. This could provide an additional basis for comparison within an in-depth study of parliamentary storytelling. The existing literature on political (i.e. partisan) storytelling which, as discussed in the Introduction, has traditionally provided the context for discussing connections between engagement and stories – Escobar's (2011) study of the 'Obama phenomenon', for example – could be effectively drawn (and built) upon as a theoretical foundation.

Drawing upon our examination of the story/information dichotomy, and the demographic makeup of engagement sessions, future research could further investigate 'usual suspects'; in terms of (1) 'typical' engagement session attendees, and (2) select committee witness equality, and the sources through which these bodies gather 'public input'. Research in this area holds enormous potential for understanding the dynamic between Parliament and citizen(s). In its examination of this dynamic (and its conceptualisation of engagement *as* a dynamic), the conclusions and research findings presented by this thesis are applicable beyond the UK Parliament, and could be employed as a theoretical framework for broader studies of citizen-institution interactions (as well as studies of more informal political practice). In expanding the scope of this thesis, valuable comparative research could, for example, be conducted on the Welsh Assembly and/or the Scottish Parliament which, as legislatures, differ considerably from Westminster in terms of their physical symbolism and institutional cultures of engagement. These particular parliamentary engagement cultures, as well as citizens' engagement with them, offers insights into the citizenry's democratic aspirations and political satisfaction; as such, it is a topic that merits greater scholarly attention. On a similarly comparative basis, non-parliamentary engagement sessions would be a valuable area of research in their own right; a larger number of these sessions as case studies could provide an invaluable foundation for future investigations. Additional research projects, of the type we have discussed, would make a considerable (and lasting) contribution to the study of parliamentary and political engagement, public participation, and representative democracy.

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Appendices

1. Engagement sessions in which questionnaires were distributed

Below is a list of dates and locations for parliamentary and non-parliamentary engagement sessions (organised by Parliament and by different organisations, respectively) in which questionnaires were handed out to attendees.

Parliamentary engagement sessions (organised by Parliament)

1. 14 November 2016, Darlington
2. 27 February 2017, Finsbury Park
3. 10 March 2017, London
4. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster
5. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster
6. 03 May 2017, York
7. 09 May 2017, Newcastle
8. 11 May 2017, Westminster
9. 05 July 2017, Middlesbrough
10. 06 July 2017, Grimsby
11. 12 July 2017, Leeds
12. 02 October 2017, Stockton
13. 03 October 2017, Stockton
14. 13 November 2017, North Tyneside
15. 16 November 2017, Sheffield
16. 17 November 2017, Birkenhead
17. 20 November 2017, Manchester
18. 21 November 2017, Middlesbrough
19. 21 March 2018, Marple
20. 29 March 2018, Sheffield
21. 17 May 2018, Westminster

Non-parliamentary engagement sessions

1. 21 October 2017, Nottingham (organised by Leaders Unlocked)
2. 16 October 2018, Lincoln (organised by Hope for the Future)
3. 18 October 2018, Cambridge (organised by Hope for the Future)

2. Questionnaire format

Political interest survey (pre-session)

Please take a look at the questionnaire below. It has been designed to get a sense of your political interest before the political engagement session begins. You will be asked to fill out a similar questionnaire after the session.

Please circle the appropriate answer to the following questions.

Age	18-21	22-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+
Gender	Male		Female		Trans-gender	Prefer not to say	
Are you a member of a political party?	Yes				No		
Did you vote in the last general election?	Yes				No		

What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the word 'politics'?

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Please circle the appropriate numbers:	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. This session will help increase my interest in politics	1	2	3	4	5
2. I would describe myself as a political person	1	2	3	4	5
3. Politics has always been important to me	1	2	3	4	5
4. Politics is a waste of time	1	2	3	4	5
5. Friends and family have shaped my political interests	1	2	3	4	5
6. I play an active political role in my community	1	2	3	4	5
7. Political parties act on behalf of citizens	1	2	3	4	5
8. I do not feel represented	1	2	3	4	5
9. I always participate in elections whenever possible	1	2	3	4	5
10. I use the internet (e.g. websites/social media) to learn about politics	1	2	3	4	5
11. I understand the functions of Parliament and Government	1	2	3	4	5
12. Parliament is not relevant	1	2	3	4	5
13. I am satisfied with the current state of UK politics	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am satisfied with the current state of global politics	1	2	3	4	5
15. Overall, I am satisfied with the way democracy functions	1	2	3	4	5

Political interest survey (post-session)

Please take a look at the questionnaire below. It has been designed to get a sense of your political interest after the political engagement session. Some of the questions will be similar to the ones you answered earlier; **it is important to answer both sets of questions.**

What words or phrases come to mind when you think about the word 'politics'?

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? Please circle the appropriate numbers:	Strongly agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. This session has helped to increase my interest in politics	1	2	3	4	5
2. I would describe myself as a political person	1	2	3	4	5
3. Politics has always been important to me	1	2	3	4	5
4. Politics is a waste of time	1	2	3	4	5
5. Friends and family have shaped my political interests	1	2	3	4	5
6. I play an active political role in my community	1	2	3	4	5
7. Political parties act on behalf of citizens	1	2	3	4	5
8. I do not feel represented	1	2	3	4	5
9. I always participate in elections whenever possible	1	2	3	4	5
10. I use the internet (e.g. websites/social media) to learn about politics	1	2	3	4	5
11. I understand the functions of Parliament and Government	1	2	3	4	5
12. Parliament is not relevant	1	2	3	4	5
13. I am satisfied with the current state of UK politics	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am satisfied with the current state of global politics	1	2	3	4	5
15. Overall, I am satisfied with the way democracy functions	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for your involvement in this research session; your time and effort are greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, then please feel free to ask the lead researcher (Alex Prior, University of Leeds). Any subsequent questions can be sent via email to ptamp@leeds.ac.uk.

3. Focus group and elite interview details

Citizen focus groups (parliamentary; i.e. held after sessions organised by Parliament)

1. 14 November 2016, Darlington (6 participants)
2. 27 April 2017 (AM), Westminster (3 participants)
3. 27 April 2017 (PM), Westminster (2 participants)
4. 03 May 2017, York University (4 participants)
5. 09 May 2017, Newcastle (5 participants)
6. 11 May 2017, Westminster (5 participants)
7. 21 March 2018, Marple (3 participants)
8. 29 March 2018, Sheffield (3 participants)

Citizen focus groups (non-parliamentary; i.e. held after sessions organised by non-parliamentary organisations)

1. 27 May 2017, Bedford (2 participants), organised by Access Bedford¹⁸⁶
2. 19 June 2018, London (2 participants), organised by PB Partners/DemSoc/Involve
3. 16 October 2018, Lincoln (4 participants)
4. 18 October 2018, Cambridge (4 participants)

Staff focus groups

1. 26 April 2017, Westminster (6 participants)
2. 05 May 2017, Westminster (6 participants)
3. 17 May 2017, Westminster (5 participants)

Elite interviews

1. 17 May 2017, Westminster (parliamentary official)
2. 16 August 2017, Westminster (parliamentary official)
3. 17 August 2017, Westminster (parliamentary official)
4. 23 February 2018, York (director of public participation charity)

Citizen interviews

1. 17 May 2018, Westminster
2. 19 June 2018, London

These two discussions were run as 'citizen interviews' rather than focus groups (see Section 3.2).

¹⁸⁶ The session is not listed in Appendix 1 as no questionnaires were handed out before the focus group. This is also applicable to the session listed below (19 June 2018, London).

4. Focus group and elite interview format

The focus groups and elite interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format (as discussed in Section 3.2); as such the themes that we aimed to discuss (along with most of the questions) remained consistent. However, the structure of the discussions was highly reflexive, and facilitated digressions and the citation of personal experiences. Nevertheless, a general indication of the discussions is provided below. This should be taken as indicative of the focus groups and elite interviews since, wherever possible, the format and questions remained constant in order to maximise the scope for cross-comparison of participant input.

Introduction

- Feedback on engagement session (in citizen focus groups only)
- Staff introductions (in staff focus groups only); name, role and department

Main discussion

- Discerning whether participants self-identified as 'engaged'
- Gathering different definitions and conceptualisations of engagement
- Discussing participants' personal experiences of engagement (whether (and how) their self-perceived engagement had changed over time)
- Establishing the current 'state' of UK engagement through the perspective(s) of the participants

Concluding points

- Returning to any significant points raised during the discussion
- Prospective means of change/improvement, and how realistic these prospects appeared to the participants

5. Select Committee Reports

Communities and Local Government Committee

2015-16 session

- 1st Report – Devolution: the next five years and beyond (HC 369, Published 03 February 2016)
- 2nd Report – Housing associations and the Right to Buy (HC 370, Published 10 February 2016)
- 3rd Report – Department for Communities and Local Government’s consultation on national planning policy (HC 703, Published 01 April 2016)

2016-17 session

- 1st Report – 100 per cent retention of business rates: issues for consideration (HC 241, Published 14 June 2016)
- 2nd Report – Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for the post of Chair of the Homes and Communities Agency (HC 41, Published 17 June 2016)
- 3rd Report – Homelessness (HC 40, Published 18 August 2016)
- 4th Report – Government interventions: the use of Commissioners in Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (HC 42, Published 19 August 2016)
- 5th Report – The draft Homelessness Reduction Bill (HC 635, Published 14 October 2016)
- 6th Report – Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for the post of Local Government Ombudsman (HC 737, Published 04 November 2016)
- 7th Report – Public parks (HC 45, Published 11 February 2017)
- 8th Report – Adult social care: a pre-Budget report (HC 47, Published 04 March 2017)
- 9th Report – Adult social care (HC 1103, Published 31 March 2017)
- Executive Summary – Adult social care (Published 31 March 2017)
- 10th Report – Capacity in the homebuilding industry (HC 46, Published 29 April 2017)
- 11th Report – 2015-17 Parliament: Legacy Report (HC 1146, Published 02 May 2017)
- 1st Joint Report of the Communities and Local Government and Work and Pensions Committees – Future of supported housing (HC 867, Published 01 May 2017)

Health Committee

2015-16 session

- 1st Report – Childhood obesity – brave and bold action (HC 465, Published 30 November 2015)
- 2nd Report – Appointment of the Chair of the Care Quality Commission (HC 641, Published 04 December 2015)
- 3rd Report – Appointment of the Chair of the Food Standards Agency (HC 663, Published 08 January 2016)
- 4th Report – Primary care (HC 408, Published 21 April 2016)

2016-17 session

- 1st Report – Impact of the Spending Review on health and social care (HC 139, Published 19 July 2016)
- 2nd Report – Public health post-2013 (HC 140, Published 01 September 2016)
- 3rd Report – Winter pressure in accident and emergency departments (HC 277, Published 03 November 2016)
- 4th Report – Suicide prevention: interim report (HC 300, Published 19 December 2016)
- 5th Report – Appointment of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (HC 810, Published 19 January 2017)
- 6th Report – Suicide prevention (HC 1087, Published 16 March 2017)
- 7th Report – Childhood obesity: follow-up (HC 928, Published 27 March 2017)
- 8th Report – Brexit and health and social care – people & process (HC 640, Published 28 April 2017)
- 1st Joint Report of the Education and Health Committees of Session 2016-17 – Children and young people’s mental health – the role of education (HC 849, Published 02 May 2017)

Petitions Committee

2015-16 session

- 1st Report – Funding for research into brain tumours (HC 554, Published 14 March 2016)

2016-17 session

- 1st Report – High heels and workplace dress codes (HC 291, Published 25 January 2017)

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

2016-16 session

- 1st Report – Follow-up to PHSO Report: Dying without dignity (HC 432, Published 29 October 2015)
- 2nd Report – Appointment of the UK's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (HC 658, Published 14 January 2016)
- 3rd Report – The 2015 charity fundraising controversy: lessons for trustees, the Charity Commission, and regulators (HC 431, Published 25 January 2016)
- 4th Report – The collapse of Kids Company: lessons for charity trustees, professional firms, the Charity Commission, and Whitehall (HC 433, Published 01 February 2016)
- 5th Report – The Future of the Union, part one: English Votes for English laws (HC 523, Published 11 February 2016)
- 6th Report – Follow up to PHSO Report of an investigation into a complaint about HS2 Ltd (HC 793, Published 23 March 2016)
- 7th Report – Appointment of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (HC 869, Published 14 April 2016)
- 8th Report – The Strathclyde Review: Statutory Instruments and the power of the House of Lords (HC 752, Published 12 May 2016)
- 9th Report – Democracy Denied: Appointment of the UK's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2015-16 (HC 962, Published 16 May 2016)

2016-17

- 1st Report – PHSO review: Quality of NHS complaints investigations (HC 94, Published 02 June 2016)
- 2nd Report – Appointment of the Chief Investigator of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch (HC 96, Published 09 June 2016)
- 3rd Report – Better Public Appointments?: The Grimstone Review on Public Appointments (HC 495, Published 07 July 2016)
- 4th Report – Appointment of the First Civil Service Commissioner (HC 655, Published 08 September 2016)
- 5th Report – Follow-up to PHSO report on unsafe discharge from hospital (HC 97, Published 28 September 2016)

- 6th Report – The Future of the Union, part two: Inter-institutional relations in the UK (HC 839, Published 08 December 2016)
- 7th Report – Will the NHS never learn? Follow-up to PHSO report 'Learning from Mistakes' on the NHS in England (HC 743, Published 31 January 2017)
- 8th Report – Appointment of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (HC 810, Published 19 January 2017)
- 9th Report – Appointment of the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority (HC 941, Published 26 January 2017)
- 10th Report – Lessons still to be learned from the Chilcot Inquiry (HC 656, Published 16 March 2017)
- 11th Report – Better Public Appointments? Follow-up and the Government Response to the Committee's Third Report, Better Public Appointments?: The Grimstone Review on Public Appointments (HC 1062, Published 10 March 2017)
- 12th Report – Lessons learned from the EU Referendum (HC 496, Published 12 April 2017)
- 13th Report – Managing Ministers' and officials' conflicts of interest: time for clearer values, principles and action (HC 252, Published 24 April 2017)
- 14th Report – Accounting for democracy: making sure Parliament, the people and ministers know how and why public money is spent (HC 95, Published 27 April 2017)
- 15th Report – The Work of the Civil Service: key themes and preliminary findings (HC 253, Published 02 May 2017)
- 16th Report – The work of the Committee during the 2015-17 Parliament (HC 1151, Published 02 May 2017)