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Fast thinking: Implications for democratic politics

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Abstract. A major programme of research on cognition has been built around the idea that human beings are frequently intuitive thinkers and that human intuition is imperfect. The modern marketing of politics and the time-poor position of many citizens suggests that 'fast', intuitive, thinking in many contemporary democracies is ubiquitous. This article explores the consequences that such fast thinking might have for the democratic practice of contemporary politics. Using focus groups with a range of demographic profiles, fast thinking about how politics works is stimulated and followed by a more reflective and collectively deliberative form of slow thinking among the same participants. A strong trajectory emerges consistently in all groups in that in fast thinking mode participants are noticeably more negative and dismissive about the workings of politics than when in slow thinking mode. A fast thinking focus among citizens may be good enough to underwrite mainstream political exchange, but at the cost of supporting a general negativity about politics and the way it works. Yet breaking the cycle of fast thinking – as advocated by deliberation theorists – might not be straightforward because of the grip of fast thinking. The fast/slow thinking distinction, if carefully used, offers valuable new insight into political science.

Keywords: Democracy; cognitive science; deliberation; anti-politics

Introduction

The term 'fast thinking' is taken from Daniel Kahneman's (2011) brilliant book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* in which the author provides a masterly overview of his and others' contribution to behavioural psychology. It speaks to the dominant understanding of human cognition presented in his work and is part of a wider wave of cognitive science about the way people acquire knowledge, use reason and intuition, and perceive their world that has already had a major impact on the social sciences (through the emergence of behavioural economics¹) and public policy (as, for instance, through the application of Nudge approaches (John et al. 2011)). This broad body of work is strongly supported by laboratory and field experiments that have explored multiple dimensions of how people think and, above all, make judgements, and it is justifiably regarded as the state-of-the-art understanding of active cognitive processing (Kahneman & Krueger 2006; Kahneman & Klein 2009). As such, it is an appropriate starting point for exploring how citizens think about politics. Our aim in this article is to explore how these insights into how individuals think, make decisions and process judgements could help in the understanding of the perceived malaise widely held to characterise the condition of Western liberal democracies today, particularly in Europe (Crouch 2005; Hay 2007; Papadopoulos 2013; Stoker 2006).

The essence of the insight from Kahneman and his colleagues is that humans commonly use two modes of thinking. The distinction, as we understand it and propose to use it here, is based on *relative* differences between forms of reasoning (which in fact might be

arrayed along a continuum). The first mode – fast or System 1 – of thinking is intuitive. It tends to require little effort and is characterised by the use of shortcuts and heuristics to inform judgements. The second mode – slow or System 2 – of thinking tends, in contrast, to require considerable mental effort, concentration and more systematic sifting of evidence and argument.

The opening section of this article explores this theory of dual process thinking in more detail and reflects on its relevance to contemporary political analysis and practice. The intuitive nature of fast thinking can be contrasted to the bounded or more comprehensive ‘rational’ reflective and effortful style of slow thinking, but this distinction should be not pushed too far. We use it, as Kahneman intended, as a heuristic rather than as the basis of formal modelling. But we do so because it tells us something valuable about how citizens understand and relate to the formal democratic system since, for much of the time and for many citizens, intuitive (fast) thinking dominates in getting to grips with politics, as it does in many other aspects of life. We set ourselves the task of exploring the consequences for the practice of politics of the persistent influence of intuitive, fast thinking in citizens’ interaction with formal democratic politics.

Intuitive thinking provides humans with a valuable and powerful tool, as Kahneman is keen to emphasise, but it is a tool that has its limitations and can carry costs. Intuitive thinking can use small amounts of information and with little effort can support good decisions, but equally it can lead to misjudgements reflecting its inherent biases and fallibilities. Kahneman’s argument is that intuitive thinking is dominant in human life and that even when humans move to a slower, reflective mode their judgements are often still influenced by intuitive thinking. In short, fast thinking cannot easily be removed from decision making. There are connections here to the extensive and influential literature on deliberative democracy (Chambers 2003), which in the terminology of this article would support the greater use of slow thinking by citizens in their democratic political engagement. A subsidiary aim of our article is to show how, if the ambitions of deliberative democracy are to be delivered, a clearer understanding of the grip and power of intuitive thinking would be useful.

Our reflections on the practice of citizenship are informed by and evidenced through an examination of how citizens think about politics, drawn from the analysis of focus group data. We draw on primary empirical evidence from 14 focus groups held with British citizens between 2011 and 2012. In this article, we will explore in more detail the construction of the focus groups and note some of the limitations of the evidence they provide. But we will also argue that, as a method and for a variety of reasons, focus groups offer a valuable way of exploring fast and slow thinking and, above all, the interaction between. Not the least of these reasons is that their basic operation (discussion and deliberation over 1–2 hours about how politics works) requires groups of citizens to think more deeply and extensively about politics than they ordinarily would.

In the article we also present our empirical findings, looking at citizens’ general ways of relating to politics and exploring the evidence that, when in fast thinking mode, citizens tend to judge contemporary politics in a predominantly (indeed, on the basis of our evidence, systematically) negative light. By contrast, in slow thinking mode their critiques become more subtle and a more rounded, even positive, appreciation of politics can be discerned. We go on to reflect on the wider implications of these findings before coming to a concluding

judgement that the fast/slow heuristic is a useful complement to other ways of reflecting on how citizens think about politics.

Fast and slow thinking: Its relevance to politics

Acknowledgment of the difference between fast and slow thinking can be identified in political science literature even if those labels are not used explicitly. From much of the study of public opinion formation (Clawson & Oxley 2012) applied to politics emerges a consensus that citizens are relatively unengaged by formal political practice and that in most contemporary democracies they pay limited attention to the hubbub of politics (Marcus et al. 2000). Citizens' preferences on specific issues are driven by what they perceive to be the most salient information immediately available to them. Such information is processed through a thin veil of values, prejudices and hunches. There is also a commonly held view consistent with this perspective that this modest level of civic engagement is enough to make democracy work (Lupia 1994; Norris et al. 2009). Time-poor citizens in the information- and opinion-rich world of politics do not require an encyclopaedic knowledge of the political world but just sufficient information to enable them to pass judgements on the platforms and positions of parties and the trustworthiness and/or competence of those standing for political office. The cues and heuristics used by citizens and the resulting judgements are good enough; indeed, they are their only realistic response to the complex nature of modern democratic politics. In short, the broad thrust of an influential perspective reflecting on this proxy for fast thinking about politics is that it is a necessary and relatively benign functioning feature of contemporary democratic practice. But is that judgement fair?

A strong counterpoint to this perspective is provided by deliberation theorists (Chambers 2003), who typically share a common starting position: the legitimacy of politics rests on the free flow of discussion and exchange of views in an environment of mutual respect and understanding. These advocates of what might be labelled 'slow thinking' argue that one of the weaknesses of contemporary democracy is its lack of space for citizen deliberation; fast thinking predominates. For them, the practice of slow thinking has an educational effect as citizens increase their knowledge and understanding of the prospective consequences of their (political) actions. David Miller (1992: 61) refers to the 'moralising effect of public deliberation' which tends to eliminate irrational preferences based on false empirical beliefs, morally repugnant preferences that no one is willing to advance in the public arena, and narrowly self-interested preferences. Citizens need to be given the opportunity to think differently and deliberative theorists support measures to increase the prospects for slow thinking through the development of forms of 'empowered participatory governance' (Fung & Wright 2003) or 'democratic innovations' (Smith 2009) that institutionalise to a greater or lesser extent the procedures and norms of deliberation. Moreover, there is evidence that large numbers of citizens, and not from the usual group of participants, might be attracted by an opportunity for deliberation (Neblo et al. 2010). As such, some of the charges of utopian aspiration against deliberation theory can be addressed. But if Kahneman is right about the grip of fast thinking, it appears that another challenge might be waiting in the wings. Can citizens reasonably be expected first, to escape from, and then, prevent themselves from regressing into fast thinking?

Table 1. Properties of fast and slow thinking

System 1 (fast thinking)	System 2 (slow thinking)
Intuitive	Analytic
More influenced by emotions and feelings	Less influenced by emotions and feelings
Greater use of heuristics and cues	More controlled and reflective
Relatively undemanding of cognitive capacity	More cognitively demanding
Innately present but also acquired through socialisation and reinforced through experience and exposure	Learned through more formal tuition and cultural inputs and developed/sustained through critical reflection

Source: Adapted from Stanovich and Toplak (2012).

In order to address the consequences of fast thinking and to judge the respective claims of those who embrace it and those who are more critical of it, we need to take a step back and examine in more detail the distinction itself. Dual process theories of cognition also refer to fast and slow thinking more formally as ‘System 1’ and ‘System 2’ modes of cognition. These terms were first coined by Stanovich and West (2000), but the ideas and experimental work on which they draw have a longer history. Table 1 presents a simple attempt to characterise some of the properties of each system of reasoning as established in this literature.

There are several things to bear in mind when looking at a stylised representation of this kind so as not to misunderstand the argument it carries about the differences between System 1 and System 2 cognitive processing (Stanovich & Toplak 2012). First, the properties listed for the two systems capture family resemblances that enable the two types of thinking to be differentiated, but most of the features reflect *relative* rather than absolute or categorical distinctions. In order to argue that fast or slow thinking is present, it is not necessary for all the properties to be in evidence. Moreover, both fast and slow thinking are broad categories capturing several modes of thinking that could be separated in a more developed analysis. In particular, we follow Kahneman (2011: 13) in using fast thinking to refer to a number of variants of intuitive thought – the expert and the heuristic – as well as the automatic activities of perception and memory. Some of these forms of thinking, especially the more automatic ones, are literally fast (at speeds of less than 100 milliseconds), but others are less so and are more consciously formed and expressed as in the case of many of the heuristics that help to drive the intuitive judgements styles that are a focus of attention for Kahneman, such as those to do with how people anchor their decision making, measure risk or forecast the future. When it comes to looking at how citizens talk about politics it is more these less automatic but still intuitive forms of thinking that will be our focus of attention.

System 1 thought processes are intuitive and reactive though often efficient enough to enable an individual to make sense of a situation quickly and effectively (such as to allow an initial orientation that might subsequently be revised through more reflective processing). System 1 thinking is an invaluable tool: ‘The main function of System 1 is to maintain and update a model of your personal world, which represents what is normal in it ... it determines your interpretation of the present as well as your expectations of the future’ (Kahneman 2011: 71).

System 2 thinking requires a lot more consciously focused mental effort. It involves concentration and is experienced more directly as the product of sustained and considered reflection, as a conscious choosing between cognitive alternatives. Its role is often to provide an initial check on, and evaluation of, explanations and understandings offered by System 1 reasoning, such as might lead to a rejection of them if, as and when they appear problematic or premature in some way. But such processing is not just about the rejection of hunches as inadequate, for it opens a space in which alternatives come to be posited. That is where a lot of the effort in System 2 reasoning is expended as it often involves abstract reflection – hypothetical reasoning and cognitive simulation – and then the testing of those models against more or less carefully sifted evidence and/or more abstract reasoning. We are often cognitive misers and fairly reluctant users of System 2 forms of reflection, which typically draw on a range of analytical, statistical and other complex computational strategies, because of the effort, time and cognitive capacity involved in concentration and reasoning at this level.

System 1 thinking is an unavoidable and necessary part of human reasoning. For much of the time it does an effective job, but, as Kahneman was at pains to point out in much of his earlier pioneering work with Amos Tversky on human judgement, the use of System 1 reasoning is prone to certain typical kinds of error (Tversky & Kahneman 1974). As Kahneman (2011: 45, 85 and 86) comments:

If System 1 is involved, the conclusion comes first and the arguments follow. ... The measure of success for System 1 is the coherence of the story it manages to create. ... System 1 is radically insensitive to both the quality and the quantity of information that gives rise to impressions and intuitions.

System 1 thinking tends disproportionately to confirm existing explanations, neglects ambiguity and suppresses doubt; it focuses on existing evidence rather than prompting the search for new information; it uses potentially misleading prototypes to make judgements; it prefers to answer an easier question rather than prompt a more challenging one; it overweighs low probability actions in coming to a judgement; it is more sensitive to change than stable states; it can exaggerate risk based on high intensity or high profile events; and it frames decisions narrowly. Moreover, as Kahneman (2011: 110) himself suggests (in a manner crucial for what is to follow): ‘System 1 is highly adept in one form of thinking – it automatically and effortlessly identifies causal connections between events, sometimes even when the connection is spurious.’

There are a number of caveats that are useful for political scientists to have in mind when adopting the fast and slow thinking distinction (Shleifer 2012). First, as Kahneman recognises, the domains of fast and slow thinking vary across individuals; a topic that requires effortful slow thinking for some might be a focus for fast thinking by experts more familiar with the issues involved. Second, fast thinking is not a simple substitute for the idea of bounded rationality familiar to political scientists since the work of Herbert Simon (1947). The point made by the concept of bounded rationality is that even in System 2, slow thinking mode, decision making is not perfect: searches are limited and only a few available options are considered as time pressures kick in. But Kahneman’s point is that decision making is more often intuitive and may never get even to the position of bounded rationality in slow thinking mode. The dilemma for the analyst, however, when considering a decision error

is that it is ‘not obvious whether to attribute it to System 1 thinking, System 2 failure, or a combination’ (Shleifer 2012: 1083). Finally, there are tricky questions about the relationship between System 1 and 2 thinking. How does System 1 feed into System 2, and how is a move to System 2 thinking triggered?

Another consideration is that Kahneman’s psychological point of departure could be contrasted with the more sociological starting point of Gamson (1992) and others (e.g., Walsh 2004) when it comes to understanding how citizens think about politics. In the former case, the dynamic comes from processes taking place in minds of individuals; while in the latter, the processes are viewed as more collective and involve the use of symbols and shared understandings in order to create meaning. Given that politics is both an individual and a collective activity, a case can be made to examine the processes of both individual and group cognition. Our focus is on the consequences of a shift from fast to slow thinking. A more group cognition focus could have investigated the influence of media priming on issues or on how dominant cultural ideas were replicated in the discussion. The different understandings of politics that we explore in the fast and slow thinking modes in both instances most likely draw on these social processes, but our concern is more on contrasting the positions than fully analysing their origins.

From within psychology some query whether there are two coherent types of reasoning and argue that there is a single process going on (Osman 2004). Others question whether there are only two forms of reasoning and speculate about there being more (Moshman 2000). The critique that has gained most traction challenges both the boldness and seeming rigidity of the distinction between the two forms of reasoning (Evans 2012) and the failure to explore the weaknesses of System 2 reasoning. We have some sympathy for these critiques and propose to use the distinction between fast and slow thinking less as depictions of distinctive and measurable cognitive states of mind and more as two ends of a spectrum of forms of reasoning. Yet from the perspective of political science, we would argue that it remains valuable to operationalise in the analysis of political practice a distinction between citizens’ political judgements that rely on faster thinking and those that rest on slower thinking. In short, we want to use the distinction between fast and slow thinking as a heuristic – which, after Kahneman (2011: 98) we treat as ‘a simple procedure that helps find adequate, though often imperfect, answers to difficult questions’. The question we pose in the remainder of this article is: What are the likely benefits and costs of the predominance of fast thinking in contemporary policy exchange?

The role of focus groups in exploring fast and slow thinking

Focus groups were selected as our prime research tool to identify participants’ perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and understandings of politics and political conduct and to capture something of the inter-subjective process in and through which evaluations of politics and political conduct emerge, are articulated and are negotiated. Separate group discussions were undertaken with 14 groups between November 2011 and March 2012. Details of their locations and demographics are provided in Online Appendix A. A facilitator, drawn from the research team, led each focus group drawing on a topic guide (see Online Appendix B). This covered early experiences of politics, asked participants to identify and articulate common words and phrases they themselves associated with politics. It then turned to

participants' broad attitudes towards politics, their sense of how particular issues are being dealt with by the political system, the pros and cons of the current political system and proposals for reform.

Focus groups have a long history in the study of political attitudes, given the highly discursive nature of the subject and the typically dialogic manner in which opinions of politics are framed and reframed (Gamson 1992; Duchesne et al. 2013; Duchesne & Haegel 2007). Focus groups typically 'produce more in-depth information on the topic in hand' – and, crucially, they reveal more of the inter-subjective cognitive processing of political cues that particularly interest us (Morgan 1996: 137). By virtue of the time devoted to a limited range of topics, focus groups provide the potential for in-depth exploration of issues. Moreover, their group dynamic adds to this capacity to encourage a shift towards slow thinking for participants because the public exchange it demands persuades people to spend more time ordering their thoughts and, in addition, be stimulated in their thinking by new insights from others. So focus groups are designed to deliver slow thinking but they can also facilitate a move from fast to slow thinking among participants in the discussion. This might be seen as an almost natural feature of the method in that it provides an opportunity for participants to reflect collectively on their initially intuitive responses to the issues with which they are confronted. But this almost natural move from fast to slow thinking we seek to reinforce methodologically.

In order to get people unfamiliar with each other talking in their own terms about 'how politics works' each focus group started with two quick starter exercises of a general kind. The first asked citizens to identify and articulate their first experience of politics; the second asked them to offer, out loud to the group, words or short phrases they associated with politics. In effect, without much time for reflection and before the group dynamic was established, we invited participants to give us their fast thinking responses to politics itself – having first tried to encourage participants to think about what politics might mean for them personally. Once the standard dynamics of focus groups kicked in, participants were moved more towards a slower thinking mode as they reflected collectively on the associations of the word politics they had identified and their respective first experiences of politics.²

Fasting thinking responses: Politics as the work of knaves, fools and bores?

At the beginning of each of our focus groups, ostensibly as part of a 'warm-up exercise', we asked about participants' first political memory. The vast majority (103 out of 151) were purely 'observational', with the most frequent response being the recall of an election or the actions of a major national political figure. It is perhaps not surprising that the focus was on observational incidents given the limited direct engagement of citizens in politics and especially the limited opportunities available to younger citizens (Stoker 2006: Chapter 5). Some more active first political memories were recalled, although these included taking part in school debates and only seven of the participants remembered their first political action as something active such as leafleting or protesting. In intuitive, fast thinking mode, the bulk of observational and other responses suggest that participants' immediate sense is that politics is done to them rather than something where they are players.

Alienation from politics became an even more explicit theme in the responses to the second of our 'warm up exercises'. Participants were asked for words or short phrases they

Table 2. Negatives about contemporary politics

Word association category	Number of expressions
Deception (lies, spin, broken promises, unfulfilled pledges, etc.)	31
Corruption (corrupt conduct, scandal, legal criminality, cheating, etc.)	24
Feather-nesting (expenses overpaid, multiple houses, side-payments, nepotism, etc.)	20
Self-serving (self-interested, self-regarding, unprincipled, ambitious, etc.)	12
Politicking (confrontational, canny, mudslinging, not listening)	15
Privileged social background (public school, 'old boys' clubs)	8
Boring (mind numbing, dull, uninteresting)	7
Incomprehensible (confusing, impossible to understand, a mess)	9
Other (cuts, slow to respond)	6
Total	132

associated with politics. This association exercise parallels, in a simplified form, the standard psychology test developed by Greenwald to enable the measurement of fast thinking (Greenwald et al. 1998).³ Crucially, from our perspective, word association is one reliable technique for accessing fast thinking.

When participants in the focus groups were asked for words to describe politics and politicians they offered up 209 word associations. Of these, the vast majority were negatively connoted ('sleaze', 'corruption', 'duplicity', etc.), a small proportion were neutral and only seven were in any sense positively connoted. Let us start with the positive associations. They were focused around the idea that politics is needed and provides a service. It was seen to express ideals and in one instance was viewed as 'fascinating'. The neutral words picked were almost entirely descriptive, associating politics with the institutions of government and parliament (nine mentions), political parties (nine mentions), elections (seven mentions) and, above all, with the perceived functions of formal political processes (29 mentions): passing legislation, budgets, raising taxes, debating and providing services.

By far the strongest response, however, associated politics with a series of negative factors with strong and unambiguously pejorative connotations. Table 2 captures some of the detail. What emerges is that fast thinking about politics today clearly taps into a highly negative, even cynical, stream of thinking – a vernacular of political disaffection in effect. Although a few of the negative associations capture a certain sense of the inadequacies felt by participants (their lack of perceived political competence, for instance) the overwhelming majority express a combination of distaste, distrust and extreme scepticism about how politics works. 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.

Fast thinking from citizens, captured in the initial responses in the focus groups, reveals a starkly negative vernacular about politics. It also displays many of the characteristics of fast thinking judgement that Kahneman specifies.⁴ The views emerged with little seeming

effort and were imbued with considerable feeling and emotion. No one felt inclined to challenge the negativity toward politics to any great degree (although later in the focus groups, as we shall see, debate did emerge between participants). The negative views on politics were expressed, to use Kahneman's (2011: 105) terms, with a sense of 'cognitive ease', they carried 'an illusion of truth' and there was little cause for challenge given 'the reduced vigilance' mode of System 1 thinking. The exchanges were biased towards confirmation and the suppression of doubt, and drew on a limited range of assessment options: politicians were knaves, fools or bores.

The judgements formed in fast thinking mode were difficult to let go for some participants. In several focus groups a discussion developed over the salaries of UK Members of Parliament (MPs). It started like this in Focus Group 2:

Male #6: Too overpaid. MPs are too ... they're paid too much.

Facilitator: How much do you think they're paid?

Male #6: £200,000 a year.

Some of the focus group members then suggested that it was (correctly) a much lower figure; this was confirmed by the facilitator. A female participant in early fast thinking exchanges expressed the belief that recruitment to politics was a path paved in corruption arguing: 'You have to otherwise you won't get in if you're not corrupt. It's like you're in a clique isn't it?' When a little later in the focus group a discussion developed about MPs salaries with the true amount (much lower than others had suggested) being confirmed, her retort was not to accept this new information but to state, 'But then you've got expenses as well.' This response was seemingly to confirm that while the salaries were relatively lower than expected, nonetheless MPs were still a waste of money and corrupt.

Slow thinking about politics: It has a place and performs a role

The focus groups also saw instances of fast thinking giving way to slow thinking. In the later stages of the focus groups, as participants had more time to consider and reflect on the dialogue that they were having with one other, conditions became more conducive to slow thinking. Time after time, across all the different focus groups, no matter what their composition and despite changes in facilitator, we found that a similar pattern unfolded: extreme negativity and cynicism about the conduct of politics in contemporary democracy in the starting minutes of the focus group gave way to a more considered critique and a more rounded judgement about what politics delivers.

Some of the most developed discussions in the focus groups revolved around the issue of compromise in politics. This topic may have appeared particularly relevant given the emergence of a coalition government in Britain after the national election of 2010 where two parties shared power. For example, in nine out of 14 focus groups there were extended discussions about the issue of compromise. From Focus Group 9:

Female #1: But a lot of politics is about compromise though?

Male #2: Well it is when you've got to ...

- Female #1:* I'm just thinking about Clegg, that to get into power, they suddenly realise, Oh my god, this is all about politicking and about different parts of the same party, not just between different parties.
- Male #2:* Well there's no difference between them all nowadays in my view, but I mean you can, thinking of Thatcherism, she wouldn't have compromised, love her or hate her, she didn't compromise.
- Female #1:* She did.
- Male #2:* Well, not really.
- Female #1:* They were negotiating with the IRA whilst she was in power.
- Male #2:* Well that's not compromising, that's sense.
- Male #6:* She did on the council tax, didn't she?
- Male #2:* I mean she was a strong person, a strong leader whether you liked her or you didn't. We haven't got that now.

In Focus Group 1 reference was also made to the role of Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats who was the junior partner in the 2010 coalition government.

- Facilitator:* Do you think that one of the problems about politics, or one of the issues about politics, is that, people are always compromising, selling out their principles? Is compromise a part of politics or is it just selling out your principles?
- Female #1:* I think a lot of the time it's selling out. I think Nick Clegg's a fine example of that. He massively sold out to the big blue, but yes. Yes, it's not compromise, there's no compromise there. It's one way or no way. So, I think there's a lot of selling out.
- Facilitator:* That's an interesting distinction. What's the distinction between selling out and compromise then in your mind?
- Female #1:* Compromise is you give a little bit, you get a little bit back. You don't just go 'Oh I don't want any of it then. You know just change it completely.' There's no kind of do this with this one, but then we'll do that with that. It was a total selling out of all his principles. He's not kept any of them.

Most focus groups developed discussions of compromise along similar lines, seeing its virtues but also understanding that sometimes in political practice it is difficult to justify. A good example emerged in focus Group 6:

- Facilitator:* Sorry, should politicians compromise or is compromise a sort of selling out of their principles?
- Female:* What do you mean?
- Female:* It depends if there's going with the general opinion of the public or if they're compromising because that's the easy way out. So if they've said 'Oh, I'm going to do this' and then public say 'No, no, no, we don't want you to' and they back down, then that's fair enough. But if they say 'We're going to do this' and then they can't, then they've just given back.
- Female:* It's an empty promise.
- Female:* So ...

Facilitator: Yeah, so if they're persuaded to do the right thing because actually that's what we the citizens want then if that's a compromise then that's a good compromise. But if, but if it's just easy politics for them, it's bad. Yeah. Okay. Any – anyone else?

Female: It's give and take.

Facilitator: Yes.

Female: It's give and take. If they, you know if we're happy, if they say to us 'We know you don't like this but we're going to have to. How about, you know, we'll try and meet you halfway rather than, you know.' We're all adults.

These discussions reflect many more of the properties of System 2 or slow thinking identified earlier in the article. There is a more careful sifting of evidence. There is a greater openness to other ideas. There is a greater subtlety in how judgement is formed. The impact of the discussions in slow thinking mode invariably also led to a greater acceptance of the complexities of modern politics. When the reasoning processes were more analytical, controlled and discursive in nature, it was, in practically every case, possible to see a substantial shift in the tone and content of the thinking about politics. Discussions became more subtle and reflective and generous to the spirit of what politics might be trying to achieve.

What emerged in the discussions as the focus groups developed and unfolded was a greater subtlety of judgement, with some participants offering a complex diagnosis of the problems of politics and others even displaying a grudging respect for the political process. Some brief illustrations of these examples of slow thinking about politics are provided below. In each case what we see is greater care in weighing of evidence and a willingness to give politicians and the processes of politics more leeway.

It is impossible to please everyone (nine comments)

I mean it's alright having principles but everyone has principles and it has to come down to one person's principles at the end of the day. You can't have everyone's policy, which they're principled about coming in. I think they've got the most difficult job on the planet 'cos I can't keep my other half happy and that's one person let alone 56 billion, or million or whatever it is so I think they've got the hardest job on the planet 'cos there's probably not one policy that would satisfy us 12 people. (Male FG3)

The media creates a difficult/negative context for politics (22 comments)

They're under the microscope now. New technologies mean that they're far more vulnerable to their weaknesses and to ... and this is now being opened up. Newspapers are ... I think are different now to ten, fifteen years ago. Therefore, they suffer from that. (Male FG7)

Maybe it's up to us to make more of an effort (13 comments)

Also I kind of feel we're all working hard, it's difficult to find the energy to see my friends and do the nice things never mind trying to get involved with something where

I feel like I don't even know if I could make a blind bit of difference anyway and so I feel, which sounds so apathetic, I know. But that's why I choose not to get involved in politics, because I'm not really sure I can make a difference anyway and I'm not sure I've got the energy. (Female FG8)

Not all politicians are in it for the money or self-serving (15 comments)

The majority become an MP for a good reason, they probably started as someone going I want to make a difference, I want to be the one to make a change and then it's all a bit corrupt and underhand and they think that's the way to go forward. (Female FG5)

On excessive moaning (15 comments)

Aye, it's easy for us to blame them and not do anything about it ourselves. It's easy to sit in a chair and slag someone. (Male FG11)

Life without politics (nine examples)

On the need for politics: 'Yes, it's a necessary evil, I think, really' (Female FG10).

Grudging respect for politics (17 examples)

I don't know much about politics but I like to see the good side of people so maybe they do have good intentions so maybe they do just go in and say things that they'd love to do but it's not realistic. So they try and do as much as they can and sometimes that will be nothing and sometimes that will be something and maybe that's something little bit of hope that maybe we should hang on to. (Female FG9)

In slow thinking mode, respondents were more forgiving of the mechanics of politics and the tone of their critique became more nuanced although they were far from uncritical. For us, this confirms the sense that participants did not experience some dramatic conversion in their basic orientation towards politics in the shift from fast to slow thinking. They were not being persuaded by the facilitator or their fellow focus groups members to shift their ground much. In fast thinking mode their negativity was raw and emotional but in slower thinking mode their negativity was more analytical and more carefully evidenced. Respondents provided a number of repeated complaints about how politics works. The strongest themes that emerged were: 'politicians don't listen'; 'they are not accountable in a meaningful sense for their actions'; and 'they are a separate class or cadre divorced from the experiences of "ordinary" people'. Examples are provided below under each theme alongside, in brackets, an indication of the number of similar sentiments expressed by others in our focus groups. In each case it is noteworthy that although the tone is negative, it displays the expected slow thinking characteristics of more developed reasoning and more careful use of evidence.

They don't listen (23 comments)

What does listening mean? 'It's the majority. If they listened to the majority of people, normal, everyday people that go to work, pay bills, bring up children, work hard, can't afford a holiday each year and you're just working to pay your bills, if they just listened to what the majority of people said we could all say the majority. (Female FG4)

Accountability does not work (26 comments)

I just work on the tills, and occasionally help out stocking shelves. I still get a three monthly evaluation on what I've learned and what I'm doing, where I want to go and so on. And that's just a menial, every ... bottom wage job, and I'm still getting that. So the ones at the top end, the politicians, should be under the same sort of scrutiny. (Female FG12)

It's us and them (33 comments)

But they do tend to be people that tend to go to private schools. Go to finishing schools, go to university, and then go straight into politics. They don't seem to go out and do anything or see anything that's going on and the things that they could be commenting on. They've not worked, they've not really contributed to society in the way that everybody else has. They've had this lush life that they had daddy's pot of money and then gone straight into the Houses of Commons and sit on their arses and do nothing all day anyway. It's not like us, they're not like us at all. (Female FG1)

When it comes to the theme of politicians' inattentiveness ('politicians not listening'), it is worth noting that the tone was invariably not strident; such concerns were expressed more in terms of a certain frustration and an associated sadness. With respect to the lack of accountability, a strong theme emerged comparing workplace accountability systems that participants experienced as having a direct impact on their own lives and the (perceived) lack of similar mechanisms (and equivalent standards) for elected officials. Finally, when participants spoke (as they did frequently) of 'us and them' dynamic in the politics they described there was, again, a very clear sense of regret – here couched typically in terms of a certain nostalgia occasioned by the passing of a previous era in which the social gap felt less wide. Other complaints about politics that received a significant airing in the discussion included the degree of self-interest driving political actors; the tendency of elected leaders to break their promises; the complexity of the process; the degree of spin and mud-slinging in political discourse; the lack of clear information with which to judge political performance; and the perceived incapacity of citizen action and engagement to make a difference.

Discussion: Reflections on fast and slow thinking about politics

The evidence from our focus groups suggests that the workings of modern politics can look very different to citizens depending on whether they are in fast or slow thinking mode and that the consequences for democratic practice might be non-trivial. In fast thinking

mode, focus group participants invariably identified substantial concerns about how politics works and in particular its (seemingly pervasive and inexorable) tendency to deception, corruption, feather-nesting and so on. If politics is conducted only through a series of fast thinking exchanges in contemporary democracies, then it appears likely that citizens will be trapped in a cycle of negativity about politics that, in turn, supports a level of cynicism and disengagement from politics that leads to questions about its sustainability. Stepping beyond the evidence we are able to present in the focus groups we can find further support for the emerging concern about the negativity shaped by fast thinking.

For a citizen on the margins of politics, System 1 is screaming at them that when they engage with politics they should fear being duped; when dealing with something unknown, and something that it would take considerable effort to get to know, it is reasonable to jump from that fear to the assumption that one is likely to be tricked (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002). Yet, in a slower thinking mode, deception is somewhat recast as an unavoidable (if still unfortunate) feature of all politics to a degree (Mackie 1998). What becomes important here is not so much the prevalence of deception *per se* as the capacity to identify and challenge the deceptions of those in authority and to hold them to account for their actions and their recounting of their actions. In fast thinking mode, the focus is on being deceived; in slower thinking mode, it is about how democracy enables a citizen (or citizens collectively) to challenge deception.

The sense that corruption is widespread in Britain compared to other countries is arguably misplaced, as Allen and Birch (2015) note. But it may well reflect judgement biases, as they go on to suggest, that in turn these have their origins in the anchoring and availability biases that characterise System 1 thinking. More specifically, the judgement of citizens about the behaviour of politicians is anchored by their own work environment which (in their perception) is generally more controlled and subject to immediate supervisory oversight than that, for example, of an elected representative. The news media and popular culture are all too willing to bring to the attention of citizens claims of corrupt practices, making such behaviour an accessible and available script for citizens trying to understand political decision making. Similarly, the fears of citizens about feather-bedding and expenses scandals may reflect a judgement driven by another classic System 1 type error: the tendency to extrapolate and generalise too readily from vivid (yet still anecdotal) examples. One story of a politician getting his personal moat cleaned at taxpayers' expense is worth a thousand statistics about the care taken by other MPs in claiming expenses – as long, that is, as one remains within a fast thinking response mode.

Too much System 1 judgement thrown at any institution or process may create a negative prism for the focus of attention. In fast thinking mode the very nature of politics – its conflicts, rhetoric and practices – tend to attract negative judgements. In addition, the way that politics has increasingly been packaged over the last few decades opens up opportunities for fast thinking responses to it. Politics in this respect may be its own worst enemy. Three developments in contemporary politics have facilitated System 1 fast thinking responses from citizens. First the marketisation of party and other stakeholders' campaigning, appeals and approaches have grown enormously, often deliberately trying to lean on fast thinking mechanisms (Lees-Marshment 2001). Voters are not to be engaged in reflective debate, but hooked by sound bites, 'dog whistle' issues and, above all, through targeted marketing. All of these approaches confine political communication to System 1 exchanges.

Second, the mediatisation of politics plays far more to System 1 than System 2 modes of reasoning (Papadopoulos 2013). The core role of the media in presenting contemporary politics is widely acknowledged and indeed understood by citizens themselves (Street 2011; Hansard Society 2012). The impact of the media is complex, and mainstream and new social media can and do play a role in challenging governments and driving accountability. But commercial pressure to maximise audiences can lead to parts of the media in some countries with a stronger market model presenting a ‘dumbed down’ version of the news, or sensationalist and negative coverage focused on scandals and personalities, reducing complex problems to simple terms (Hallin & Mancini 2004; Crick 2005; Mazzoleni 2008). The emergence of intense 24-hour media coverage of politics and the parallel developments in social media have developed a sense that politics is obsessively short-term, focused on spin and presentation and lacks the substance to demand engaged public attention.

Does it matter that fast thinking dominates? As noted earlier, there is a coherent position in political science that argues that the effects of fast thinking are benign. Perhaps citizens need the emotional charge of fast thinking to tee up their engagement with political issues; without fast thinking exchanges, most issues slip past most citizens unnoticed (Marcus et al. 2000). In the light of the evidence we have presented, we are not convinced by this rather convenient line of thought. Fast thinking may smooth the path of politics in contemporary democracies, but it may also be having a long-term corrosive effect on citizens’ attitudes to politics and their faith in the political system. Our focus groups reveal citizens alienated, hostile or, at best, queasy about the conduct of politics. The construction of modern politics and the fast thinking diet it offers may be sowing the seeds of its own decline.

Our findings, though, also raise tricky issues for deliberative advocates for more slow thinking. Our findings provide for politics a particular illustration of Kahneman’s convincing claims that fast thinking is the default form of human reasoning and only moved away from with effort and in an unusual context. The importance of understanding the grip of fast thinking becomes clearer still following Goodin and Niemeyer’s (2003) study of a citizens’ jury asked to reflect on an environmental issue in Australia. It found that it was the internal reflection of the jurors, rather than the public discussion and deliberation, which did the bulk of the work in changing participants’ minds. But the depth and intensity of that internal reflection is subject to the same cognitive tropes that have been at the heart of this article. Participants in any of the democratic/deliberative innovations referred to above may have done their internal thinking in slow mode, but they may also have moved only a little beyond intuitive fast thinking mode. In short, any institutional innovation may provide a path to slow thinking, but it is far from clear that even those who are participants will stick to that path. Moreover, the effort to engage in slow thinking may ebb away quickly and may have disappeared altogether when it comes to public discussion. There is, of course, the broader point still, that engaging large numbers of citizens in these sorts of democratic innovations remains a significant challenge – one painfully recognised by their advocates (Smith 2009). The grip of fast thinking plainly can be broken as our research suggests, but it is not a straightforward task.

There are complexities to consider. The literature on deliberative democracy typically assumes that the interaction between citizens in an idealised democratic polity is (and/or gives rise to) a collective process of deliberation. Yet, as our focus groups in effect show,

deliberation – even in public and through an extended process of social interaction – can be as much individual as collective. What we tended to witness was citizens recalibrating and revising (slow thinking) their intuitive responses to political cues (fast responses) as they discussed and debated the issues collectively. It would be difficult, we suggest, to see this as the group working out and developing a shared deliberative consensus (as in the Habermasian ideal that underpins so much of the literature on deliberative democracy). Much more credible, we think, is to see this process as citizens as individuals revising and developing their own views as they debate and engage with others and ‘think out loud’ in public. This form of socially mediated yet individual deliberation is, we contend, insufficiently explored in contemporary political science.

Conclusions

If the distinction between fast and slow thinking is viewed as relative, a characterisation of two broad types of thinking, then the construction of our focus groups has enabled us to demonstrate the impact of a shift from fast to slow thinking about politics. When in fast thinking mode our evidence suggests citizens will tend towards a general negativity, even hostility, towards politics. In slow thinking mode our findings reveal citizens are more forgiving towards politics, although not uncritical. In fast or intuitive thinking mode the judgements of citizens do not weigh evidence too carefully, infer or even invent causes of events and the intentions of others, and operate in a context of reduced vigilance for countervailing evidence and argument and exaggerated emotional consistency. The impact of the fast thinking mode therefore creates a difficult context for democratic politics and its problems, and the positive dynamics of the slow thinking mode make the case for democratic deliberative innovation. Yet here is the rub for contemporary democracies. Modern marketing techniques favoured by political elites lead invariably down the path of reinforcing the fast thinking mode and the reforms favoured to support slow thinking, favoured by deliberative democrats, may be difficult to deliver because of the embedded preference for intuitive mode thinking in human decision making.

It is not that most citizens cannot engage in slow thinking because, as our focus groups showed, different groups with a range of demographic make-ups all had many individuals who demonstrated their capacity to travel down that path. What is in question is how to get citizens to sustain the effort, commitment and time required when in that mode. In short, understanding the grip and consequences of fast thinking poses challenges to both advocates of deliberation as the antidote to democratic malaise (since it shows how entrenched fast thinking is) as well as to those who see fast thinking as fit for purpose (since it shows how profoundly cynical about politics such thinking has typically become).

One factor in any consideration of how to respond to negativity towards politics might be the reform ideas of citizens themselves. Our focus groups ended with a request to participants to write down their reform ideas. An analysis of these ideas produced a set of options that were later tested in a wider representative survey of British citizens conducted in late 2012. There was a considerable consistency between both focus group participants and the wider representative sample about favoured reform ideas, and the fulcrum of change for both was to improve the presentation, transparency and accountability of representative politics while allowing some greater scope for a direct say over decisions by citizens. The

slow thinking of citizens about how to make a better politics might just be a good starting point for dealing with the negativity about politics shaped, in part, by the dominance of fast thinking in political exchange in contemporary democracies.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Appendix A: Focus group composition

Appendix B: Topic Guide for Focus Groups

Notes

1. For an excellent review that captures the importance of Kahneman's work for economics, see Shleifer (2012).
2. We offer access to all of the available comments on our university website to enable the reader to check whether our interpretation and classification of the comments is fair. Full transcripts of all the focus groups are available from the ESRC DataStore: <http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=850697&type=Data%20catalogue>
3. There are techniques other than the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to explore the differences between explicit and implicit attitudes, and these include exploratory eye tracking research (see Beattie & McGuire 2014).
4. As well as Table 1, see the list of characteristics and discussion in Kahneman (2011: 105).

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