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Democracy Beyond Parties

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Abstract

This paper is concerned primarily with the way in which the changing character of political parties impacts upon their standing, legitimacy, and effectiveness. We see an emerging notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—a notion of democracy without a demos. As I try to show in this paper, much of this has to do with the failings of political parties. I am not suggesting that there has been a wholesale failure of parties; rather, I am seeking to draw attention to an ongoing process in which there are party failings, and in which democracy itself tends to adapt and change to these failings. This process then provokes its own momentum, in which parties become steadily weaker, and in which democracy becomes even more stripped down.

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This paper derives from a wider project on the politics of popular democracy, and is concerned primarily with the way in which the changing character of political parties impacts upon their standing, legitimacy, and effectiveness.¹ The argument that is developed here owes much to that originally advanced by E.E. Schattschneider in *The Semi-Sovereign People* (1960) and to his contention that control over political decision-making sometimes lay beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen. This was a familiar theme in the political science literature of the 1960s, and was echoed in different ways, and differently contested, by a variety of critical scholars in the so-called pluralist-elitist debate, including Bachrach and Baratz, Dahl, Dye and Zeigler, Kariel, Lukes, and others. But although that particular debate has been put to rest, Schattschneider's thesis seems to me to remain highly relevant – albeit now in a stronger and less equivocal form. Indeed, almost a half-century after Schattschneider, I would argue that even semi-sovereignty appears to be slipping away, and that the people, or the ordinary citizenry, are becoming effectively *non-sovereign*. What we now see emerging is a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—a notion of democracy without a demos. As I try to show in this paper, much of this has to do with the failings of political parties. Note that I am not suggesting that there has been a wholesale failure of parties; rather, I am seeking to draw attention to an ongoing process, in which there are party failings, and in which democracy itself tends to adapt and change to these failings. This process then provokes its own momentum, in which parties become steadily weaker, and in which democracy becomes even more stripped down.

The paper begins with a discussion of the phenomenon of indifference to politics and to democracy, and then goes on to review some of the literature about the renewal and redefinition of democracy. Section 4 offers an overview of the failings of party, focussing on popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics, on the one hand, and on elite withdrawal into the institutions, on the other hand. The paper then concludes with a discussion in Section 5 of the fallouts from this process of mutual withdrawal

1. Democracy and Indifference

When I first began to consider the notion of non-sovereignty, I associated it primarily with indifference: indifference towards politics, on the one hand, and indifference towards democracy, on the other. Indifference has always been one of the more neglected elements in the study of the relationship between citizens and politics, and its importance seemed to be badly underestimated by much of the literature on political trust and mistrust that emerged in the late 1990s—see, for example, Pharr and Putnam (2000), Norris (1999), etcetera. From my reading, the real problem at issue here was not trust as such, at least in the sense of there being a problem of popular mistrust in politicians and governments; rather, it was one of interest, or lack of interest, such that the sense of hostility which some citizens clearly felt towards their political leaders seemed less important than the indifference with which many more citizens

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viewed the political world more generally. To put it another way, whether politicians were liked or disliked, or trusted or distrusted, seemed to matter less than whether they were seen as important or ‘necessary’ to citizens’ life situations. Of course, the dividing line between indifference and hostility is not always very pronounced, and, as de Tocqueville once observed, the loss of function can easily breed contempt for those who continue to base their privileges on its exercise. But even if indifference did lead on to hostility or lack of trust, it remained an important variable in its own right, and hence it was also worth recognizing that politics and politicians might simply be deemed irrelevant by many ordinary citizens (see also van Deth 2000).

Indifference and disinterest were not just a problem on the ground, moreover, and were not confined to what could be seen in popular attitudes. They were also compounded by the new rhetoric being employed by various politicians in the 1990s, as well as by the growing anti-political sentiment that was to be seen in the literature on policy-making, institutional reform, and governance (see also Schedler 1997). Here too it seemed that politics as a process was often being denigrated or devalued; here too it seemed that indifference to politics was acquiring more weight. Within the world of the politicians, the most obvious case was, of course, Tony Blair, who famously set himself up as being above politics and political partisanship, claiming in a BBC2 interview during his first terms Prime Minister that “I was never really in politics. I never grew up as a politician. I don’t feel myself a politician even now” (broadcast of 30 January, 2000). Blair was also at pains to caution against the belief in the problem-solving capacity of politics. For Blair, the purpose of his new ‘progressive’ politics was not to provide solutions from above, but to facilitate citizens in searching for their own solutions – “to help people make the most of themselves.” Politics in this sense was not about exercising the ‘directive hand’ of government, but about bringing together ‘dynamic markets’ and ‘strong communities.’ (Blair 2001). In other words, the role of politics was to offer synergy and opportunity, and in Blair’s ideal world it would eventually become redundant. As one of his close cabinet colleagues was later to remark, “depoliticizing of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people” (Lord Falconer, as quoted by Flinders and Buller 2004). At one level, this was of course a simple populist strategy – employing the rhetoric of ‘the people’ in order to suggest that there had been a radical break with past styles of government. At another level, however, it was an approach that gelled perfectly well with the tenets of what were then seen as newly emerging schools of ‘governance’ – and with the idea that “society is now sufficiently well organized through self-organizing networks that any attempts on the part of government to intervene will be ineffective and perhaps counterproductive” (Peters 2002: 4). In this perspective, government becomes subordinate and more deferential, and no longer seeks to wield power or even exercise authority. Its relevance declines, while that of non-governmental institutions and practices increases. In Beck’s terms, the dynamic migrates from politics with a large ‘P’ to politics with a small ‘p’ – or to what he variously calls ‘subpolitics’ (e.g., Beck 1992: 183-236)

Anti-political sentiments were also becoming more evident in the policy-making literature of the late 1990s. In 1997, Alan S. Blinder published an influential article in *Foreign Affairs* expressing his concern that government in the US was becoming ‘too political’ (Blinder 1997). Blinder, who was then a leading professor of economics, and deputy head of the Federal Reserve, and hence a weighty contributor to this debate, suggested extending the model of the Federal Reserve in particular, and of independent Central Banks in general, to other key policy areas, such that decisions on health policy, the welfare state, and so on, would be taken out of the hands of elected politicians and passed over to the control of nonpartisan experts. According to Blinder, the solutions that politics could offer were often suboptimal, and hence the role of politicians in policy-making should be marginalized, or at least confined to those difficult areas in which the judgement of experts would not be

sufficient to legitimize outcomes. Similar arguments were emerging in the European context. In 1996, for example, Giandomenico Majone argued that the role of expert decision-making in the policy-making process was superior to that of political decision-making in that it could take better account of long-term interests. Politicians, by definition, worked only in the short-term, or at least were only capable of committing themselves in the short-term, and hence to cede control of policy-making to politicians, and to allow decisions to be dominated by considerations of the electoral cycle, was to risk less optimal outcomes: “the segmentation of the democratic process into relatively short time periods has serious negative consequences when the problems faced by society require long-term solutions” (Majone 1996: 10). The solution, as in the case with Blinder’s advocacy of the Federal Reserve model, was to delegate powers to institutions “which, by design, are not directly accountable to voters or to their elected representatives” (1996: 3) – or to what Majone defined as non-majoritarian institutions.² This also brought other benefits, in that experts enjoyed the advantage of being better able to deal with the complexities of modern law-making, and with the many technical problems which often stymied or confused elected politicians. As traditional forms of state control were replaced by more complex regulatory frameworks, expertise rather than political judgement was likely to prove more valuable and effective (Majone 2003: 299). Here too, then, politics was becoming devalued, with the potential contribution of politicians themselves to the policy process being seen as either irrelevant or even damaging.

By the late 1990s, in short, it seemed that neither the citizens, on the one hand, nor the policy-makers, on the other, were keen to privilege the role of political or partisan decision-making. Even the new breed of third-way politician seemed ready to take a back seat. As far as politics was concerned, and perhaps even as far as the democratic process more generally was concerned, reason was deemed superior to interest. It was in this sense that the role of indifference needed to be highlighted.

But while the different sources of evidence did indeed point to a widespread sense of indifference to politics and to politicians, they seemed to offer a much less robust foundation for the notion of indifference towards democracy as such. Indeed, if one looked at the debates about constitutional reform during the late 1990s, as well as at the more theoretical literature, the impression that was received was of a large and burgeoning interest in democracy, with more attention being paid to how democratic systems worked, and to what they meant in reality, than probably at any stage in the previous twenty or thirty years. Democracy was on the agenda in the late 1990s, and far from being treated with indifference, it had become a research priority within both empirical political science and political theory. Already in 1997, for example, Collier and Levitsky were able to document some 500 different scholarly uses of the term, a number that has probably increased even more substantially since then. The catalogues of academic publishers were also beginning to brim over with new titles on democracy, such as Oxford University Press, for example, which posted as the lead publication in the 2002 political theory catalogue Robert Goodin’s *Reflective Democracy*, closely followed by Iris Young’s *Inclusion and Democracy*, John Dryzek’s *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, and Henry Richardson’s *Democratic Autonomy* – all published for the first time or in new editions in 2002. Democracy was also becoming more of an issue on the daily political agenda, with debates on institutional reform beginning to play a substantial

² There is some sleight-of-hand in this definition. Majone (1996: 12) comes to the notion of non-majoritarian institutions via a reference to Lijphart’s (1984) distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies, and hence, by implication, Majone’s idea of non-majoritarianism is equivalent to Lijphart’s idea of consensus. This is not in fact the case, however. In contrast to Lijphart’s idea of consensus democracy, which depends on elections, parties and political accountability, Majone’s non-majoritarian institutions are depoliticized and are expressly removed from the electoral and partisan process. For Lijphart, the contrast with majoritarian democracy is consensus democracy; for Majone, the contrast with majoritarian democracy is expert rule, or non-democracy.

role in a large number of western polities, with various emphases on ‘participatory governance’ beginning to emanate from the World Bank and other international organizations, and with discussions of the reform of the European Union polity achieving a degree of salience that would have been almost unimaginable ten years before—as, for example, could be seen in the lead-up to and the discussion of the European Commission White Paper on Governance in 2001, and its attention to participation and openness. By the end of the 1990s, democracy—whether associative, deliberative, or reflective; global, transnational, or inclusive; electoral, illiberal, or even just Christian—had become a hot topic. At these levels at least—that is, institutionally and within the academy—indifference didn’t seem to figure.

2. Indifference and the Renewal of Democracy

Which leads me to my first puzzle: as the century turns, we can see clear and quite consistent evidence of popular indifference to conventional politics (I deal with this at greater length later) and, more arguably, of popular indifference to democracy, or at least to playing a part in the sort of conventional politics that is usually seen as necessary to sustain democracy; and yet, when it comes to the intellectual level, and sometimes even to the level of practical institutional reforms, we see a massive renewal of interest in democracy (if not necessarily in politics as such—see above). How do we square these developments?

There are two possibilities. The first is that they are in fact related, and that the growing intellectual and institutional interest in democracy is in part a response to the expanding scale of popular indifference. That is, it reflects a concern with combating that indifference. In other words, we get a lot of discussion about democracy, its meanings, and its renewal, at the moment when ordinary citizens begin to pull away from conventional forms of democratic engagement. Making democracy relevant comes on to the agenda at the time when it otherwise risks becoming irrelevant.

But while the timing suggests that this may be the case, the actual content of the discussion suggests a different story. For, far from seeking to encourage greater citizen participation, or trying to make democracy more meaningful for the ordinary citizen, many of the discussions of institutional reforms, on the one hand, and of the theory of democracy, on the other, seem to concur in favouring options that actually discourage mass engagement. This can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on stake-holder involvement rather than electoral participation that is to be found in both associative democracy and participatory governance, and in the emphasis on the sort of exclusive and reasoned debate that is to be found in deliberative and reflective democracy. In neither case is there real scope afforded to conventional modalities of mass democracy. It can also be seen in the new emphasis that is placed on output-oriented legitimacy in discussions of the European Union polity, and in the related idea that democracy in the EU requires “solutions that are ‘beyond the state’ and, perhaps, also beyond the conventions of western style representative liberal democracy” (Shaw 2000: 291). In other words, while there may be concern with the problem of popular indifference to democracy, making democracy more mass-user friendly does not seem to be the favoured answer. For Philip Pettit (2001: §46), for example, who discusses the issue of democratic renewal in the context of deliberation and depoliticization, the issue comes on to the agenda because “democracy is too important to be left to the politicians, or even to the people voting in referendums.” For Fareed Zakaria (2003: 248), in his more popular account, renewal is necessary because “what we need in politics today is not more democracy but less.”

Hence the second possibility: the renewal of interest in democracy and its meanings at the intellectual and institutional levels is not intended to open up or reinvigorate democracy as

such, but is rather intended to redefine democracy in such a way that it can cope more easily with, and adapt to, the decline of popular interest and engagement. Rather than being an answer to disengagement, the contemporary concern with renewing democracy is about coming to terms with disengagement. In other words, what we see here is a wide-ranging attempt to define democracy in a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty – at the extreme, it is an attempt to redefine democracy in the absence of the demos.

Part of this process of redefinition lies in highlighting the distinction between what has been called ‘constitutional democracy’, on the one hand, and what I also refer to here as ‘popular democracy’, on the other, a division that overlaps with and echoes Robert Dahl’s (1956) earlier distinction between ‘Madisonian democracy’ and ‘populistic democracy’ (see also Mény & Surel 2002; Dahl 1999; Eisenstadt 1999). On the one hand, there is the constitutional component – that which emphasises the need for checks and balances across institutions and which entails government *for* the people; on the other hand, there is the popular component – that which emphasises the role of the ordinary citizen and popular participation, and which entails government *by* the people. In other words, these are two separate components that co-exist with and complement one another. At the same time, however, though conceived of as two elements within a ‘unified’ sense of democracy, we also now begin to see them being disaggregated, and then being contrasted with one another both in theory and practice (see also Mair 2002a: 83). Hence, for example, the recently emerging notions of ‘illiberal’ or ‘electoral’ democracy (Diamond 1996; Zakaria 1997) and the attempt to separately categorize those democracies that combine the provision of free elections–popular democracy–with restrictions on rights and freedoms, and with the potential abuse of executive power. As many studies of Third Wave democracies in particular seem to indicate, popular and constitutional democracy are no longer necessarily bound together.

Not only can we identify a growing conceptual distinction between the popular and constitutional components, therefore, but we can also see evidence of the distinction becoming more important in practice. And with this development comes also the relative weighing process, in which the popular element becomes downgraded with respect to the constitutional element. Once democracy is divided into its popular and constitutional elements, in other words, the centrality of the popular element begins to be downplayed. For Zakaria, for example, it is the presence of the constitutional rather than the popular component which is essential for the survival and well-being of democracy, and it is also the reason why democracy has proved so successful in the west. As he put it (1997: 27): “For much of modern history, what characterized governments in Europe and North America, and differentiated them from those around the world, was not democracy but constitutional liberalism. The ‘Western model’ is best symbolized not by the mass plebiscite but the impartial judge.” In this view it is not elections – or not elections as such – that make for democracy, but rather the courts, or at least the combination of courts with other modes of non-electoral participation. Moreover, as some of the good governance literature implies with respect to the developing countries, there already exists a relatively clear formula: NGOs + judges = democracy. That is, while an emphasis on ‘civil society’ is acceptable, and while a reliance on legal procedures is essential, elections as such should not necessarily be valued (see also Chua 2003).

A similar reasoning can be seen in various applications to constitutional reform in the advanced democracies and to reforms within the EU context in particular, in that here too democracy is sometimes redefined in a way that downgrades the importance of popular pillar. As Michelle Everson (2000: 106) has noted in her discussion of Majone’s work, for example, “non-majoritarian thought...forcefully claims that its isolation of market governance from political forces serves the goal of democracy by safeguarding the democratically set goals of

the polity from the predatory inclinations of a transitory political elite.” In this case the opposition is unequivocal: in one corner, the goals of the polity, objectively defined; in the other, the claims of a transitory—because elected—and hence predatory elite. The one is sustained by the networks of good governance, the other by the crude power and ambition of electoral politics. There is clearly no contest here. In other arenas, and in the context of different processes, the story appears the same. In their review of new modes of delegation, for example, Thatcher and Stone Sweet (2002: 19) underline the growing importance of ‘procedural legitimacy’, which “relies on a process of decision making by NMIs [Non-Majoritarian institutions] being better than the insular, often secret, deliberations of cabinets and executives.” In this case, the benefits of transparency, legality and the provision of access to stakeholders are held up against the limits and distortions induced by partisan politics, and are seen to lead to a process which can offer “a fair and democratic substitute for electoral accountability.” The shift becomes even more pronounced when we see the importing into political processes of the standards set by the New Public Management. In this case, the forms of accountability avoid not only the electoral channel, but also the public sector writ large, being driven instead by values of cost-efficiency, fair procedure, and performance (see, for example, Peters 2003: 125).

This, in turn, leads me to a second puzzle: If democracy is being redefined to downgrade its popular component, then why is this happening, and why now? In other words, why does this particular shift occur barely one decade after the much heralded ‘victory of democracy’ (e.g., Hadenius 1997), and at a moment when, for the first time in history, democracy is acclaimed as having become ‘the only game in town’ (Linz and Stepan 1996)? Having seen democracy triumph, why does there now appear to be a concern to limit its scope?

In the wider project of which this paper is part, I discuss a number of different but related answers to this question—including the impact of the end of the Cold War, the decline of ‘embedded liberalism’, the declining purchase of party government, and the more general fallout from processes of globalization and Europeanization. In this particular paper I wish to explore a more basic answer, however, in that I wish to suggest that the shift from popular to constitutional democracy, and the concomitant downgrading of politics and of electoral processes, is in part a consequence of the failings of political parties. As parties fail, so too fails popular democracy. Or, to put it another way, thanks to the failings of parties, popular democracy can no longer function in the way in which we have come to understand and accept it, and in the way it has always functioned up to now. By going beyond parties, democracy also manages to get beyond popular involvement and control.

3. Parties and Democracy

Some twenty years before publishing the *The Semi-Sovereign People*, Schattschneider (1942: 1) famously proposed that democracy without parties was unthinkable. The phrase itself comes from the opening paragraph of his *Party Government*, and is worth citing in its full context:

“The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as *makers* of governments, more especially they have been the makers of democratic government. It should be stated flatly at the outset that this volume is devoted to the thesis that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. As a matter of fact, the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime. The most important distinction in modern political philosophy, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, can be made

best in terms of party politics. The parties are not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are in the center of it and play a determinative and creative role in it.”

As always in the writings of this period, of course, democracy in this case was both popular and constitutional; it was the democracy of elections as well as of checks and balances, and the democracy of mandates, popular accountability, and representative government. This was the democracy that Schattschneider found unthinkable except in terms of parties, and his sheer conviction has led to his proposition being cited by party scholars, especially in their own defence, ever since. Thus, for example, it is argued that despite all the problems facing parties, and despite different and cumulative challenges, they will continue to survive, as Schattschneider suggests, as long as democracy survives. This is one of the key motifs in Dalton and Wattenberg’s (2000) assessment, for example, which begins by asking readers to ‘think Schattschneider’s unthinkable’ and to consider what might happen should parties fail, and which concludes on a more sanguine note by reaffirming that “it remains difficult to think of national governments functioning without parties playing a significant role in connecting the various elements of the political process” (p. 275).

But if we take account of the different components of democracy, and then think Schattschneider’s proposition through to its potentially logical conclusion, we may come to a different answer. In other words, while Schattschneider’s proposition is usually taken by party scholars to mean that the survival of democracy will guarantee the survival of parties (and since the survival of democracy is guaranteed, this means that the survival of parties is also guaranteed) we can also read it the other way around, to suggest that the failure of parties might indeed imply the failure of democracy; or, adopting Dalton and Wattenberg’s terms, to suggest that the failure of parties might imply the failure of modern [representative] government. If democracy, or representative government, is unthinkable save in terms of parties, then perhaps, facing party failings, it does indeed become unthinkable, or unworkable.

Without parties, and still following Schattschneider, we are then either left with no real democracy and no real system of representative government; or with what continues to be called democracy, but which has been redefined so as to downgrade or even exclude the popular component – since it is this particular component that depends so closely on party. Without parties, in other words, we are simply left with a stripped down version of constitutional democracy or Madisonian democracy; or we are left with other versions of democracy that are shorn of their popular component, such as Pettit’s republican polity (1998: 303 – democracy “is never presented as the center-piece of the republican polity”), or such as those systems of modern governance that seek to combine ‘stakeholder participation’ with ‘problem-solving efficiency’ (Kohler-Koch 2005). These are certainly not unthinkable forms of polity, but they are systems in which conventional popular democracy plays little or no significant role, and in which neither elections nor parties remain privileged. When democracy in Schattschneider’s terms becomes unthinkable, in short, other modes of democracy move to the fore. Hence the contemporary intellectual interest in the theory of democratic renewal, and hence the more practical interest—from Chua, Diamond and Zakaria among others—in proposing new forms of institutional politics. All of these approaches share a common concern to find or define a notion of democracy (a) that works; (b) that is seen to be legitimate; and yet (c) that no longer places at its centre the notion of popular control or electoral accountability.

But in what sense are we without parties, and in what sense are they failing? My argument is that they are failing in two related ways, and I will go on to look at these at greater length below. First, as has now been well attested in the literature, parties are increasingly failing in their capacity to engage the ordinary citizen. As the overview which I present below clearly indicates, and as the participants in this workshop will know all too

well, citizens are voting in fewer numbers and with less sense of partisan consistency, and they are also increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to parties, whether in terms of identification or membership. In this sense, citizens are withdrawing from conventional political involvement.³ Second, the party can no longer adequately serve as a base for the activities and status of its own leaders, who increasingly direct their ambitions towards, and draw their resources from, external public institutions. Parties may provide a necessary platform for political leaders, but this is increasingly the sort of platform that is used to spring to other locations. In sum, parties are failing as a result of a process of *mutual* withdrawal, whereby citizens retreat into private life or into more specialised and often ad hoc forms of representation, and whereby the party leaderships retreat into the institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. Parties are failing because the zone of engagement – the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of belonging towards their political leaders – is being evacuated. In the following section of the paper, I will look at this process in more detail.

4. The Failings of Parties

Popular Withdrawal

Let me first turn to the question of citizen withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics. Two qualifying remarks should be emphasized from the beginning. First, this process of withdrawal is far from complete: indeed, in some respects, but not all, it is not much more than a trickle, and hence I am dealing with something that is ongoing rather than fully realized. Second, what I am discussing here is a familiar process which has already been dealt with, sometimes in great detail, elsewhere in the scholarly literature, as well as in more popular commentary. What has not usually been clarified, however, is how pervasive and wide-ranging the process actually is, in that while some aspects have received ample attention, others have not, and hence the whole gamut of features has not been brought together in one overall and accessible assessment. This section of the paper aims to do just that, and to indicate the breadth and variety of the modes of disengagement, even if some of these are less substantial than others.

Although concern with citizen disengagement from conventional politics is now more and more frequently expressed, both in the scholarly literature and in the popular media, the evidence of this withdrawal has sometimes been disputed. The evidence is also quite scattered, making it difficult to sketch an encompassing picture. A major purpose of this section of the paper is therefore to conduct an inventory, and to bring together the disparate sets of evidence with a view to underlining the degree of coherence and consistency that they reflect. Indeed, one of the reasons why this evidence, or, more properly, the weight of this evidence, is sometimes disputed, is because the different elements are seen in isolation from one another. The fact that levels of participation in national elections do not always register a sharp or very steady decline, for example, is sometimes cited as evidence of a continuing popular commitment to conventional politics, even though the small changes that so take place in this regard are often consistent with other trends that do appear to underline a wide-scale pattern of withdrawal. In other words, even a small decline in, say, the level of turnout, may be seen to weigh more heavily when placed in the context of other shifts in mass political behaviour.

³ To which it must be added that they are then becoming involved in other areas of social and political activity. As Pattie et al. (2004: 107) argue in the case of Britain, the focus on conventional political institutions and behaviour tends to result in an exaggeration of “the public exit from civic behaviour.”

In fact, what we see here are two features that are not normally seen to be applicable to cross-national changes at the level of mass politics. The first of these is that virtually all of these separate pieces of evidence that will be cited here point in the same direction. This in itself is very unusual. Analysts of data relating to mass politics almost invariably expect to find mutually opposing trends in the different streams of indicators – that is, while one indicator might point in one direction, it is often contradicted by a second indicator pointing in a different direction. Mass politics rarely moves *en bloc*, as it were, but in this case it is precisely the consistency of the trends that is striking. Second, virtually all of these trends in the data are consistent across countries. This again is most unusual. The normal expectation in comparative political research is that while particular trends in mass politics may well be noted in some countries, they are almost never pervasive. Some countries may shift together, but it is only very rarely that all, or even most, shift in the same way and at the same time. What we see now, however, is a much clearer indication of cross-national convergence in the trends that matter. In other words, not only are these various trends now pointing in the same direction, they are also doing so almost everywhere.

Electoral Participation

So what sort of trends are we talking about here? Let me begin with the most obvious and most immediate indicator: the levels of participation in national elections. Given what has been said about citizen withdrawal in the more popular media in particular, it is with this indicator that we might expect some of the most striking trends to be identified. At the same time, however, it is often this particular evidence that is most strongly disputed. In other words, while various expectations regarding the possible decline in levels of electoral turnout have been current for some years, they have often been found to have little backing in the aggregate empirical data. Although long-term stability in levels of participation has been followed by a slight decline, this is usually not seen to be sharp enough that it becomes a source of worry for those concerned with the healthy functioning of modern democratic life.

Is this a reasonable conclusion? On the face of it, and especially with regard to the European data, this interpretation is certainly plausible.⁴ Thus through each of the four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, average turnout levels in western Europe scarcely altered, increasing marginally from 84.3 per cent in the 1950s to 84.9 per cent in the 1960s, and then falling slightly to 83.9 per cent in the 1970s and to 81.7 per cent in the 1980s. This was essentially the steady-state period, as has been emphasized by Norris (2002: 54-5) and Franklin (2002). That said, the decline from the 1970s to the 1980s, while small, was remarkably consistent across the long-established European democracies, with just three (Belgium, Norway, The Netherlands) of the fifteen countries countering an otherwise general trend. The decline may have been marginal when looked at cross-nationally, but it was almost universal, and hence might well have justified a sense of concern.

But what is even more important to note is that this very marginal shift accelerated in the 1990s, with average turnout across Western Europe falling from 81.7 per cent to 77.6 per cent in the last decade of the century. To be sure, even at this level, which is the lowest recorded in any of the postwar decades, turnout remains relatively high, with an average of slightly more than three-quarters of national electorates casting a ballot in the elections held during the 1990s, a figure that remains substantially higher than that recorded in nationwide elections in the United States, for example (see Franklin 2002). Even allowing for this, however, and even allowing for the fact that this drop from the 1980s to the 1990s is less than 5 per cent, it is nevertheless striking to see the overall European figure now dipping below the

⁴ For details of the figures reported here, see Mair (2002b), from which the discussion of the aggregate indicators is largely drawn.

80 per cent level for the first time in five decades. Here also, moreover, there is a striking consistency across countries, in that 11 of the 15 democracies involved also recorded their lowest ever decade averages in the 1990s. The exceptions to this pattern again include Belgium, where the decade averages are almost invariant, but where the lowest level was recorded in the 1960s, and Denmark and Sweden, which both recorded their lowest levels in the 1950s. Even in these three cases, however, it should be noted that the average level of turnout in the 1990s was lower than in the 1980s. The fourth exception is the United Kingdom, which was unusual in recording its trough in participation in the 1980s. Indeed, the United Kingdom is the only one of these fifteen countries which recorded even a marginally higher level of turnout in the 1990s than in the 1980s, although in this case turnout later plunged to an all-time low of just 59 per cent in the first election of the 21st century.

This trend has also persisted into the beginning of the twenty-first century. As noted, the election of 2001 in the UK was marked by the lowest level of turnout since the advent of mass democracy. The 2002 parliamentary elections in both France and Ireland were also marked by historic low levels of turnout; the same was true of the 2001 elections in Italy and Norway, the 2002 election in Portugal, and the 2000 election in Spain. Levels that were close to historic lows were recorded in Greece in 2000, in Austria in 2002, and in Finland and Switzerland in 2003 (the last year included in this recording). By the beginning of the new century, in short, the trend towards ever lower levels of participation was continuing. Why this should be the case remains, of course, an open question, and it is something we will come back to at a later stage. It may simply reflect generational shifts. It may also be because of sheer boredom. The key point, however, is that we are seeing something that is both unidirectional and pervasive, and that offers a striking indicator of the growing enfeeblement of the electoral process.

Before leaving these crude turnout figures, it is worth noting one other way of seeing this picture that is perhaps even more telling. Indicators of turnout change are somewhat like those of climate change: the shifts that we see do not necessarily occur in great leaps or bounds, and are not always linear. Moreover, while indicating withdrawal and disengagement, change in turnout levels is often registered as simply a trickle rather than as a flood. For these reasons, and again like the indicators of climate change, the importance of what is often just a slight or uneven trend may be underestimated or even disputed. One way in which climatologists get around this problem is by laying less stress on the trends as such, and by noting instead patterns in the timing and frequency of the peak values in their indicators. This is, in fact, a very simple approach to measurement, which is also intuitively meaningful. Thus, for example, clear evidence of global warming is derived by noting that the warmest decade on record was the most recent, the 1990s, while 1998 emerges as the warmest single year, followed by 2001. Further evidence of global warming is adduced by noting that the eight warmest years on record have all occurred since 1990, even though in that same period air temperatures were also recorded (e.g., in 1992, 1993 and 1994) which were little more than those reached in the late 1970s (Jones and Moberg 2003). In other words, the pattern is evident, even if the trend is not wholly uniform. This is also more or less true of turnout levels, and indeed of many other indicators of mass political behaviour, and for this reason the extent of change at this level is also often underestimated. Although there is no undisturbed downward trend in levels of participation, for example, record lows now come with greater frequency, and in a greater number of polities.

Table 1: Low Turnout Elections

(a) Record Low Levels of Turnout in Western Europe, 1950-2003

Country	Years of Lowest Turnout (N = 3)
Austria	1994, 1999, 2002
Belgium	1968, 1974, 1999
Denmark	1950, 1953 (i), 1953 (ii)
Finland	1991, 1995, 1999
France	1988, 1997, 2002
Germany	1990, 1994, 2002
Iceland	1995, 1999, 2003
Ireland	1992, 1997, 2002
Italy	1994, 1996, 2001
Luxembourg	1989, 1994, 1999
Netherlands	1994, 1998, 2002
Norway	1993, 1997, 2001
Sweden	1952, 1956, 1958
Switzerland	1995, 1999, 2003
UK	1970, 1997, 2001

(b) Frequency of elections with record low turnout, by decade

Period	N	%
1950-59	6	13.3
1960-69	1	2.2
1970-79	2	4.4
1980-89	2	4.4
1990-03	34	75.6
All	45	100.0

As can be seen from Table 1, which lists the three elections with the lowest levels of turnout in each of the 15 long-established European democracies, more than three-quarters of these 45 elections have taken place since 1990. In other words, not only do the 1990s hold the record for the lowest turnout of any postwar decade in western Europe (Mair, 2002b), but within the great majority of west European democracies, most, and sometimes even all of the individual national elections that are marked by record low turnout have occurred since 1990. The two clearest exceptions are Denmark and Sweden, where, seemingly for unexceptionally contingent reasons, the lowest turnout elections fell in the 1950s. Beyond these cases, the only other odd exceptions are one low turnout election in the 1960s (in Belgium), two such elections in the 1970s (in Belgium and the UK), and two in the 1980s (in France and Luxembourg). The remaining 34 cases all date from 1990 or later. In other words, however small the overall shifts in turnout might be, they are nevertheless clustering together in a remarkable fashion. Indeed, this pattern also extends to the newer southern European democracies: the three lowest levels of turnout recorded in post-authoritarian Greece were those in 1974, which was the first free election, in 1996, and in 2000; in Portugal, the lowest levels were recorded in 1995, 1999 and 2002; and in Spain in 1979, 1989 and 2000. Here, as in the long-established democracies, the more recent the election, the odds are that it will record a trough in participation. There is no certainty here, of course; like the pattern evinced by climate change, turnout also sometimes bucks the overall trend, even today. In the long-

term, however, the overall direction and reach of the change is unmistakable, and it offers the first strong indicator of the increase in popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics.⁵

Electoral Instability

A second key aggregate indicator that is relevant here relates to the behaviour of those citizens who do participate, and measures the extent to which their voting patterns reveal consistency and stability over time in the distribution of partisan preferences. Those citizens who continue to vote in elections are clearly still engaged with conventional politics, even if voting itself is only a marginal token of engagement (e.g., Parry et al. 1992); as popular involvement fades, however, and as indifference grows, we can anticipate that even these citizens who do continue to participate will prove more volatile, more uncertain and more random in the expressions of their preferences. If politics no longer counts for so much, then not only should the readiness to vote begin to fade, as has already been noted above, but so also should the sense of partisan commitment among those who continue to take part. Choices are likely to prove more contingent, and to be more susceptible to the play of short-term factors. In practice, this also means that election outcomes are likely to prove less predictable. Electoral volatility is likely to increase; new parties and or new candidates are likely to prove more successful; and traditional alignments are likely to come under pressure. Inconsistency goes hand in hand with indifference.

As was the case with patterns in turnout, expectations about the growth in this form of unpredictability in the balance of party support in national party systems in Western Europe have been current for a number of years. Here too, however, the empirical record at the aggregate level usually failed to meet these expectations. Thus while party systems in some countries did indeed experience a substantial increase in their levels of electoral flux through the 1970s and 1980s, others appeared to become even more stable than before, resulting in what was generally a “stable” and relatively subdued level of aggregate electoral change across western Europe as a whole (Bartolini and Mair 1990; Mair 1992). Here again, however, as with the evidence of turnout, we see the picture changing in the 1990s. Across Western Europe as a whole, the 1990s became the peak decade for electoral volatility, with a score of 12.6 per cent, almost 4 points higher than that recorded in the 1970s and 1980s. Not too much should be made of this, of course. On a scale which has a theoretical range running from 0 to 100, and which even here has a range of decade averages that run in practice from 2.5 (1950s Switzerland) to 22.9 (1990s Italy), a mean value of 12.6 still reflects more (short-term) stability than change. On the other hand, the 1990s is the first of the five postwar decades in which the overall mean of instability breaches the 10 per cent threshold, while it is also the first decade to record such a major shift from the previous mean value.

The significance of the 1990s can also be underlined by reference to the individual national experiences. Thus, in all but four of the countries (the exceptions are Denmark, France, Germany and Luxembourg), the 1990s also constitute a national peak in volatility levels, which, in the majority of cases, easily exceeds 10 per cent. This confluence is also unprecedented, and again signals that the patterns at the end of the century are markedly different from those of the earlier postwar years.

As in the case of the turnout data, there is no sign that these new excesses are abating in the new century. Already in elections in 2002, both Austria and the Netherlands experienced record high levels of aggregate instability, as did Italy in 2001. France, Norway and Sweden also recorded remarkably high levels of volatility in their first twenty-first

⁵ This is also the conclusion drawn by Paterson (2002) in his valuable lengthy study of the American case.

century elections, although in these cases no absolute records were broken. More generally, as can be seen in Table 2, a clear majority of the most unstable national elections to be recorded since 1950 have occurred since 1990. The very simple approach to presenting the data here is again borrowed from the climatologists, and follows the breakdown applied to the turnout data in Table 1 above. In this case the pattern is not so one-sided: volatility data inevitably prove more erratic than turnout data, being quickly responsive to both political crises as well as to institutional and social-structural change (Bartolini and Mair 1990: 253-308). Nevertheless, it is again striking how exceptional seems the period since 1990: not only do more than half of the record national highs in volatility fall in this period, but it is also noteworthy that no other decade comes even close to matching this clustering. Indeed, in no other decade does the number of high volatility elections come even close to double figures. With the marginal exceptions of Denmark and Luxembourg, at least to date, it seems that the more recent the election, the less likely it is to yield a predictable outcome.

Table 2: High Volatility Elections

(a) Record High Levels of Volatility in Western Europe, 1950-2003

Country	Years of Highest Volatility (N = 3)
Austria	1990, 1994, 2002
Belgium	1965, 1981, 2003
Denmark	1973, 1975, 1977
Finland	1970, 1991, 1995
France	1955, 1958, 2002
Germany	1953, 1961, 1990
Iceland	1978, 1991, 1999
Ireland	1951, 1987, 1992
Italy	1992, 1994, 2001
Luxembourg	1954, 1984, 1989
Netherlands	1994, 1998, 2002
Norway	1989, 1997, 2001
Sweden	1991, 1998, 2002
Switzerland	1987, 1991, 1999
UK	1974(i), 1978, 1997

(b) Frequency of elections with record high volatility, by decade

Period	N	%
1950-59	5	11.1
1960-69	2	4.4
1970-79	7	15.6
1980-89	6	13.3
1990-03	25	55.6
All	45	100.0

What we see since 1990, therefore, is that ever fewer voters seem ready to participate in elections, although turnout levels in themselves still remain reasonably high, while among those who do participate, there is a greater likelihood that they will switch their preferences from one election to the next.⁶ Not only does each of these indicators reach a relative extreme

⁶ This counters an earlier observation based on the US data by Bennett (1998: 745), who suggested that even though conventional political participation may be in decline, “those who continue to participate in traditional

since 1990 (whether recording troughs in the case of turnout, or peaks in the case of volatility) across western Europe as a whole, but they also tend to the extreme in a large majority of the individual polities. That is, *both* extreme lows in turnout *and* extreme peaks in volatility have been recorded since 1990 in almost all of the long established European democracies. The exceptions were Luxembourg, which had very low turnout but only moderate volatility; Sweden, which recorded high volatility but not exceptionally low turnout; and Denmark, which proved extreme on neither indicator during this recent period. Beyond these cases, the evidence of unusual patterns since 1990 is not only striking, but it is also consistent. Across Western Europe, voters are not only pulling back from the act of voting, but they are also pulling back in terms of partisan commitment. In these heightened levels of instability, we therefore see a second strong aggregate indicator of disengagement.

Partisan Attachment

This is also the message that comes through more and more clearly from various survey data. That is, the often substantial shifts evinced by these aggregate data on turnout and volatility now correspond closely to the evidence about individual-level experiences as tapped by election studies and commercial polling projects. Many of these latter data have been collated and summarised by Dalton and Wattenberg (2000) in their comprehensive volume on *Parties without Partisans*, and what is also striking in this instance is both the consistency and the pervasiveness of the various changes that have been observed. One key indicator revealed by the survey data, for example, is the degree to which individual voters feel a sense of belonging or commitment to particular political parties, a feeling which is captured by various measures of partisan identification. And on this key indicator, according to the Dalton and Wattenberg data, decline is more than evident: in seventeen of the nineteen countries (including a number of non-European polities) for which relevant data are available—the two exceptions are Belgium and Denmark—the percentage of voters claiming a sense of identification with parties has fallen over the past two decades or so. Even more strikingly, the smaller numbers of voters who report a strong sense of belonging or identification has also decidedly fallen, and this time in every single one of the countries concerned. As Dalton notes, it is not just the scale of the decline that is important here, but more the fact that it occurs in each of the cases for which data are available. There therefore seems little that is either contingent or circumstantial: “The similarity in trends for so many nations forces us to look beyond specific and idiosyncratic explanations...For public opinion trends to be so consistent across so many nations, something broader and deeper must be occurring” (Dalton 2000: 29)

Further evidence of this broader and deeper process can be seen in the other sets of survey data that Dalton and his colleagues marshal. Split-ticket voting, for example, whereby voters opt for one party in one electoral arena, and for another party in another electoral arena, is also on the rise across all those cases where it can be measured over time (Australia, Canada, Germany, Sweden, and the United States). A committed and engaged voter, with a strong partisan loyalty, will undoubtedly vote for the same party regardless of the arena involved—for example, voting Democrat in U.S. Presidential and Congressional elections, as well as probably in local state and county elections. Less partisan commitment, and less engagement, is more likely to be associated with more free-range voting patterns, and hence with a greater willingness to split the ticket; and it is this latter practice which is growing. Voters are also less ready or less able to decide in advance how they will vote, preferring to observe the campaign, or even to remain disinterested, until closer to polling day itself. Here

politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation, and policy deliberation.” Looking at the west European data, it appears that they don’t.

too, with a single Danish exception, it seems that this pattern is more and more prevalent, with almost every election study reporting an evident increase in the proportion of voters who make their decision how to vote either during the campaign or only shortly before the day of the election. Again, the implication is one of a lack of commitment on the part of voters, and hence also a lack of engagement. One way or the other, as the compilers of these data conclude, “the trend is clear: contemporary voters are less likely to enter elections with standing partisan predispositions” (Dalton et al. 2000: 49). It is also then hardly surprising to see that these voters are also far less likely to engage in more demanding campaign activities, whether this might be by way of attending political meetings, working for a party or candidate, persuading others to vote in a particular way, or even donating money. On almost all of these measures, and in almost all the countries for which data are available, the survey evidence once again clearly points to decline: individual voters are less and less willing to participate in this more demanding sense – for many, at least as far as conventional politics is concerned, it is enough to be simply spectators (Dalton et al. 2000: 58; see also Mair 1998).

Party Membership

Voters are also obviously much less willing to take on the obligations and commitments associated with membership in party organizations. Here too, it is striking to note not only the sheer decline in the number of party members over time, but also the extent to which this decline seems characteristic of all long-established democracies (Mair and van Biezen 2001). Although the pattern here is more pronounced than in the case of changes in levels of turnout or changes in levels of electoral instability, the way in which conclusions have been drawn about party membership levels tend to echo those drawn about the more general levels of participation. That is, though to the 1980s, the evidence of decline in this form of political engagement tended to be somewhat equivocal, and it has also been sometimes disputed.

The first major study based on aggregate—often official party—data (see Katz Mair et al. 1992) found that although the party membership ratio had fallen in most of the European polities for which such data could be traced, the absolute levels of membership had often held up. In other words, while there was a decline in the numbers of party members when measured in proportion to the various national electorates (the only exceptions were the cases of Belgium and West Germany), which were themselves expanding substantially in this period, there was little evidence of decline in the actual numbers involved. In general, these data offered little support for the idea that these countries were then experiencing “a spreading disillusionment with partisan politics” (Norris 2002: 134, 135).

By the end of the 1990s, however, and regardless of whatever conclusions might have been drawn from the survey data, the patterns in the aggregate data had become unequivocal. The Mair and van Biezen (2001) data included 13 long-established European democracies, and in each of these countries the ratio of party membership to the electorate at large had fallen markedly between the beginning of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s (see also Scarrow 2000: 86-95). That is, there was not one single European case in which the membership ratio had remained steady, let alone increased. In 1980, an average of 9.8 per cent of the electorates in the 13 long-established democracies were party members; by the end of the 1990s, this had fallen to just 5.7 per cent. To put it another way, and to trace the contrast back even further, at the beginning of the 1960s there were ten democracies in Europe for which it is possible to trace reliable membership figures, and across all ten the average membership ratio was 14 per cent; in a majority—in six of the ten—of the countries, the ratio was above 10 per cent. That is, in a majority of the countries for which data were available, more than one in every ten eligible voters were members of political parties. At the

end of 1990s, by contrast, there were 20 democracies for which it was possible to find reliable membership data, some old democracies, some new. Across all 20, the average membership ratio was just 5 per cent, little more than a third of the level recorded in the early 1960s, and of these 20 countries, only one – Austria – recorded a ratio that exceeded 10 per cent.⁷

This evidence of uniform decline was also reinforced by the figures on the absolute numbers of party members, for here too, and in marked contrast to the earlier pattern noted by Katz, Mair et al. (1992), the fall-off was pervasive: in each and every one of the long-established democracies included in the analysis, the absolute numbers of party members had fallen, sometimes by as much as 50 per cent of the 1980s levels. In no single country, had there been an increase in the number of party members. This was exit on a grand scale – both in terms of reach and direction. Throughout the old democracies, as the analysis concluded, parties were simply haemorrhaging members (Mair and van Biezen 2001: 13).

Popular Withdrawal: A Summary

So what can we conclude from this brief review of the evidence regarding citizen behaviour in Western Europe? The most obvious conclusion is that it has now become more than evident that citizens are withdrawing and disengaging from the arena of conventional politics—that is, they are withdrawing and disengaging from involvement in big ‘P’ politics. Even when they vote, and this is less often than before, or in smaller proportions, their preferences emerge closer and closer to the moment of voting itself, and are now less easily guided by cohesive partisan cues. For whatever reason, and there is no shortage of hypotheses that have been advanced to explain this change, there are now fewer and fewer standpatters, and hence there are also more and more citizens who, when thinking about politics at all, are likely to operate on the basis of short-term considerations and influences. Electorates in this sense are becoming progressively destructured, affording more scope to the media to play the role of agenda-setter, and requiring a much greater campaign effort from parties and candidates. What we see here, in short, is a form of voting behaviour that is increasingly contingent, and a type of voter whose choices appear increasingly accidental or even random. Much of this change has only become really apparent since the end of the 1980s.

To be sure, we are dealing with sometimes quite small pieces of evidence here, and the changes which have been noted are also sometimes, but not always, relatively marginal. As was stated in the beginning, we therefore sometimes deal with a trickle rather than a flood. But when all of these disparate pieces of evidence, great and small, are summed together, they offer a very clear indication that there has been a marked shift in the prevailing patterns of mass politics. This shift is not only consistent in terms of its focus—that is, all of these indicators now point in a common direction—but is also remarkably consistent across the different European polities. The conclusion is then clear: all over Western Europe, and in all likelihood all over the advanced democracies, citizens are heading for the exits of the national political arena. As in the US case as depicted by Hibbings and Theiss-Morse (2002: 232) “a passive democracy can settle for a passive citizenry... A vigorous democracy is the last thing people want, and forgetting entirely about politics is precisely what they do want.”

⁷ The pattern is comparable in the advanced democracies outside Europe. In Australia in 1967 there were 251,000 members, the equivalent of 4.1 per cent of the electorate; in 1997, the number had fallen to 231,000, equivalent to just 1.9 per cent of the then much expanded electorate – see the figures in McAllister (2002: 389-90); in Canada, the fall-off was from 462,000 members in 1987 to 372,000 in 1994, or from 2.6 per cent of the electorate to 1.9 per cent (Carty 2002: 355); in New Zealand, the decline was from 272,000 members in 1981, or 12.5 per cent of the electorate, then the peak of a growing wave, to 133,000 in 1999, or 4.8 per cent of the electorate (Vowles 2002: 416-419).

In early 2002, in an interview with the Dutch social science magazine *Facta*, Anthony Giddens drew attention to the changes which had recently been wrought in mass media entertainment through the growing popularity of docu-soaps and reality television. “A watershed has been passed here,” he noted. “Previously television was something that reflected an external world which people watched. Now television is much more a medium in which you can participate....”⁸ In conventional politics, by contrast, the shift has been the other way around. Previously, and probably through to at least the 1970s, conventional politics was seen to belong to the citizen, and was seen to be something in which the citizen could, and often did, participate. Now, to paraphrase Giddens, conventional politics has become part of an external world which people watch from outside. There is a world of the parties, or a world of political leaders, that is separate from the world of the citizenry. As Bernard Manin (1997: 218-235) put it a few years ago, what we now witness is the transformation of party democracy into ‘audience democracy’.⁹ Whether the increasing withdrawal and disengagement of voters is responsible for the emergence of this new mode of politics, or whether it is an emerging form of politics that is encouraging voter withdrawal and disengagement is, at least for now, a moot point. What is beyond dispute is that each feeds the other. As citizens exit the national political arena, they inevitably weaken the major actors who survive there – the political parties. And this, in turn, is part of, and promotes, audience democracy. As Sartori (2002: 78) puts it, ‘video politics’ – and hence also audience democracy – is stronger when parties are weak, and it is weaker when parties are strong. Strong parties are difficult to sustain when politics turns into a spectator sport.

The Withdrawal of the Elites

On the face of it, we might anticipate that popular withdrawal from conventional politics would leave a lot of angry and frustrated politicians in its wake. Indeed, given how difficult it has become to engage citizens in the conventional political arena, we might well expect that party and political leaders will devote a considerable effort to try to keep politics alive and meaningful. At a certain level, this is in fact the case, and, as noted above, there has rarely been such widespread discussion of institutional reform, whether this involves reform of the electoral system, parliamentary procedures, local or regional government, or plebiscitary mechanisms, or whatever. Almost none of the advanced democracies has proved immune from these discussions, and almost all have devoted considerable research effort to discussing the limits of their present institutional arrangements and the ways in which they might be changed—sometimes quite drastically so. But beneath the beating of official breasts and the apparent distress at the hollowing out of mass politics, there exists in the practice of organized democracy a clear tendency to match citizen withdrawal with elite withdrawal. That is, just as citizens retreat to their own private and particularized spheres of interest, so too do the political and party leaders retreat into their own version of this private and particular sphere, which in their case is constituted by the closed world of the governing institutions. In other words, disengagement tends to be mutual, and for all the rhetoric that is to be heard on each side of the political divide, in practice both are cutting loose.

The changes in the forms of party politics which followed from the emergence of the catch-all party and its later successors, as well as the transformation in the patterns of party competition with which these changes can now be associated, may be specified under two broad headings: the *location* of the parties, on the one hand, and their *political identity*, on the other

⁸ Interview with Anthony Giddens by Henk Jansen in *Facta* 11:1, February 2003, pp. 2-5, at page 4 (my translation).

⁹ For a comparable discussion, see Statera (1986) and Sartori (2002). For an earlier version of some of the arguments here, see Mair (1998).

hand. As far as location is concerned, which is the main concern of this particular section of the paper, the last decades of this century have witnessed a gradual but also inexorable withdrawal of political parties from the realm of civil society towards the realm of government and the state. As far as their political identities are concerned, which is a topic to be addressed in a different context, the end of the century has seen the gradual erosion of partisan distinctiveness, and the blurring of inter-party boundaries. Together, these two parallel processes have led to a situation in which each party tends to become more distant from the voters that it purports to represent while at the same time tending to become more closely associated with the various protagonists against whom it purports to compete. Party-voter distances have become more stretched, while party-party differences have become foreshortened, with both processes combining to reinforcing a growing popular indifference to parties and, potentially, to the world of politics in general. This also becomes one of the sources of the growing popular distrust of parties and of political institutions more generally.

Although there is some dispute among observers about how precisely the recent transformation of parties might best be understood, and particularly those changes which have followed in the wake of the catch-all party and have led to the emergence of the cartel party (Katz and Mair 1995), there is at least consensus about the two broadly-defined processes which lie behind these transformations. On the one hand, party organizations, however defined, are now less strongly rooted within the wider society. On the other hand, they are also now more strongly oriented towards government and the state. Hence, if we conceive of parties as standing somewhere between society and the state, which is the most obvious approach to understanding their role and location within a democratic polity, then we can also suggest that they have shifted along the continuum which links society to the state, and that they have moved from a position in which they were primarily defined as social actors—as in the classic mass party model—to one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors.

Evidence of the erosion of the parties' roots in society has been reviewed above, and incorporates most of the trends that were discussed in the context of citizen withdrawal. As we have seen, the strength of electoral identification with political parties is now almost universally in decline, and the sense of belonging to party has been substantially eroded. Levels of party membership are now markedly lower than was the case even twenty years ago, and other evidence suggests that those members who remain within the parties tend to be less active and engaged. At the same time, the former privileges of membership have also tended to disappear, in that the demands of electoral success are now encouraging party leaders to look beyond their shrinking membership to the electorate at large. The voice of the ordinary voter is seen to be at least as relevant to the party organization as that of the active party member, and the views of focus groups often count more than those of conference delegates.¹⁰ In addition, a sense of dissipation and fragmentation also tends to mark the broader organizational environment within which the classic mass parties used to nest. As workers' parties, or as religious parties, the mass parties in Europe rarely stood on their own, but constituted just the core element within a wider and more complex organizational network of trade unions, churches, or whatever. Beyond the socialist and religious parties, additional networks of farming groups, business associations and even social clubs combined with political organizations to create a generalized pattern of social and political segmentation which helped to root the other old mass parties into place within the

¹⁰ As, for example, when British Labour leaders shrugged off their defeat when the Labour Annual Conference voted to restore the link between pensions and average earnings. The vote had gone 60-40 against the leadership, and the proposal for change had been made by the delegated trade union leaders. Gordon Brown responded: "I'm not going to give in to the proposal that came from the union leaders today... It is for the country to judge, it is not for a few composite motions to decide the policy of this government and this country. It is for the whole community, and I'm listening to the whole community." Quoted by Michael White, 'Angry Brown defies unions', *The Guardian [Europe]* 28.09.00.

society and to stabilize and distinguish their electorates. Over at least the past thirty years, however, these broader networks have tended to break up. In part, this is because of a weakening of the sister organizations themselves, with churches, trade unions and other traditional forms of association losing both members and the sense of engagement. With the increasingly individualisation of society, traditional collective identities and organizational affiliations count for less, including those that once formed part of party-centred networks. As Rudy Andeweg (2003: 151) has noted, “religion is increasingly expressed outside churches, interest promotion is taken care of outside interest associations, such as trade unions, physical exercise outside sports clubs...., work outside permanent employment, love outside marriage, and even gender differences are becoming divorced from sex differences.” Small wonder, then, that the collectivities that once sustained parties have become so enfeebled.

But this is not the whole story, for party networks have also weakened as the result of a sharpening division of labour, with the parties themselves often seeking to reduce the weight of their ties to associated groups, and to downplay the privileged access which was formerly accorded to affiliated organizations.¹¹ In other words, the landscape has also been changed by the increasing tendency of parties to think of themselves as self-sufficient and specialized political organizations, that are willing to heed any cues provided by any of the various social actors, but that prefer to remain unrestrained by close formalized links to these actors. Parties have therefore distanced themselves from civil society and its social institutions, while, at the same time, they have become ever more firmly and inextricably caught up in the world of government and the state. This process of party change has been fully analysed elsewhere and need not be detailed again here.¹² Suffice it to summarise a number of key developments which have marked most western democracies in the last decades of the twentieth-century, and which look likely to become even more reinforced in future generations.

In the first place, as is now widely recognized, parties in most democracies have moved from a position in which they were principally dependent for their organizational survival on the resources provided by members, donors and affiliated organization to one in which are now increasingly reliant on public funds and state support, such that in most countries today, and in particular in almost all newly-established democracies, the preferred source of party funding has become the public purse.¹³

Second, parties are now increasingly subject to new state laws and regulations, which sometimes even determine the way in which their internal organization may function. Many of these regulations and party laws were first introduced or were substantially extended in the wake of the introduction of public funding for parties, with the distribution of state subventions inevitably demanding the introduction of a more codified system of party registration and control. Controlling party access to the public broadcasting media has also required a new system of regulations, which again acts to codify the status of parties and their range of activities. From having been largely ‘private’ and voluntary associations which developed within the society, and which drew their legitimacy therein, parties have therefore increasingly become subject to a regulatory framework which has the effect of according them a (quasi-) official status as part of the state. In other words, as the internal life and even the external activities of parties become regulated by public law, and as party rules become constitutional or administrative rules, the parties themselves become transformed into public service agencies, with a corresponding weakening of their own internal organizational autonomy (see Bartolini and Mair 2001: 340).

¹¹ A trend already noted *in nuce* by Otto Kirchheimer (1966) in his then highly prescient analysis of party development in the advanced democracies.

¹² See Katz and Mair, 1995, 2002; see also van Biezen’s (2004) notion of parties as public utilities.

¹³ For a recent overview of the patterns involved and the guidelines used, see van Biezen (2003).

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, parties have also cemented their linkage to the state and to the public institutions by increasingly prioritising their role as governing (as opposed to representative) agencies. In the terms adopted by the analysts of coalition formation, parties have become more office-seeking, with the winning of a place in government being now not only a standard expectation, but also an end in itself. Some forty years ago, a now classic review of political developments in western democracies was organized around the theme of ‘oppositions’ (Dahl 1966); nowadays, however, within the world of the conventional party politics, there is less and less sense of enduring opposition, and more and more the idea of a temporary displacement from office. Opposition, when structurally constituted, now increasingly comes from outside conventional party politics, whether in the form of social movements, street politics, popular protests and boycotts, or whatever. Within politics, on the other hand, the parties are either all governing or waiting to govern. They are now all in office. And with this new status has come also a shift in their internal organizational structures, with the downgrading of the role of the ‘party on the ground’, and an evident enhancement of the role of the party in the institutions. In other words, within party organizations, there has been a shift in the party centre of gravity towards those elements and actors that serve the needs of the party in parliament and in government; as Maurizio Cotta (2000: 207) notes, “those who control the government appear to be better able than in the past to also control from that position the whole party”. This shift might also be seen as a final manifestation of the classic Downsian or Schumpeterian notion of parties as ‘competing teams of leaders’, in which the party organization outside the institutions of the polity, and the party on the ground in all of its various manifestations, gradually wither away. What we see is ‘the ascendancy of the party in public office’ (Katz and Mair 2002). What remains is a governing class.

All of this has had major implications for the functions that parties perform, and are seen to perform, within the wider polity. Conventionally, parties are seen to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry; to articulate and aggregate interests, and then to translate these into public policy; to recruit and promote political leaders, and to organize the parliament, the government, and the key institutions of the state. That is, just as parties aimed to combine government for the people with government by the people, so too they combined key representative functions with key procedural functions—all within the same agency. As parties have changed, however, and as the mass party model has passed away, the functions which parties can—or do—perform in contemporary polities have also been rebalanced, such that they now lay much more emphasis on procedural functions alone.¹⁴ This development goes hand in hand with the concurrent move of parties from society to the state, and is therefore also part of the process by which parties and their leaders separate themselves from the arena of popular democracy.

The key element within this transformation, whether seen in terms of the location of the parties within the polity, or in terms of the functions parties are expected to perform, is the ascendancy of the party in public office. Parties have reduced their presence in the wider society, and have become part of the state. They have become agencies that govern—in the widest sense of the term—rather than represent. They bring order rather than give voice. It is in this sense that we can also speak of the disengagement or withdrawal of the elites, although with this obvious difference: while the exiting citizens are often headed towards more privatised or individualised worlds, the exiting political elites are retreating into an official world – a world of public offices.

But although the safe havens that are being sought in the wake of the passing of the mass party may be different, the process of withdrawal is mutual, and it is this conclusion that needs to be most clearly underlined. It is not that the citizens are disengaging and leaving

¹⁴ I discuss this at greater length in Mair (2003).

hapless politicians behind, or that politicians are retreating and leaving voiceless citizens in the lurch. Both sides are withdrawing, and hence rather than thinking in terms of a causal sequence in which one of the movements leads to the other, and hence in which only one side is assumed to be responsible for the ensuing gap – the crude populist interpretation – it makes much more sense to think of a process that is mutually reinforcing (see also Hibbings and Thiess-Morse 2002). The elites are inclined to withdraw to the institutions as a defence against the uncertainties in the electoral market. Just as state subventions to political parties have compensated for the inability of parties to raise sufficient resources from their own members and supporters, so the security of an institutional or procedural role can compensate elites for the vulnerability they experience when dealing with an increasingly disengaged and random electorate. At the same time, citizens withdraw from parties and from a conventional politics that no longer seem to be part of their own world. Traditional politics is seen less and less as something that belongs to the citizens or to the society, and is instead seen as something that is done by politicians. There is a world of the citizens—or a host of particularized worlds of the citizens—and a world of the politicians and parties, and the interaction between these worlds steadily diminishes. Citizens turn from being participants into spectators, while the elites win more and more space in which to pursue their own shared interests. As Hanna Pitkin (2004: 339) recently put it:

“Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather, administers – passive or privatised masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them....They are professionals, entrenched in office and in party structures. Immersed in a distinct culture of their own, surrounded by other specialists and insulated from the ordinary realities of constituents’ lives, they live not just physically but also mentally ‘inside the beltway.’”

It seems pointless trying to establish where this process might have been initiated, and by whom. What matters is that it is mutually reinforcing, and that the ensuing gap between rulers and ruled—or, perhaps more accurately, between administrators and administered—is being stretched by the withdrawal that is taking place on both sides of the divide. Conventional politics becomes marked by passivity and indifference—albeit occasionally broken or challenged by populist protest – and does so by mutual consent: by the consent of those who govern and those who are governed. The result has been the emergence of a new form of politics, one in which the citizens stay at home while the parties become, or seek to become, governors.

5. Fallouts

There are two immediate fall-outs from this process that can be briefly noted. In the first place, it is evident that the gap which has opened through this mutual withdrawal from the arena of conventional party politics has sometimes helped to fuel a populist mobilization – usually, but not exclusively, on the right (see, for example, Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2004). In other words, partly as a result of this process of withdrawal, the political class has itself become an issue of contention in a large number of democratic polities. Second, and as noted above, the growing gap between citizens and their political leaders has also helped to fuel demands for more ‘non-majoritarian’ decision-making, and for a greater role to be accorded to various non-partisan and non-political agencies—to judges, regulatory bodies, central banks, international organizations and, most grandly, to the EU itself.¹⁵ In short, given

¹⁵ I deal with this issue at greater length elsewhere (Mair 2004).

the problems faced by conventional processes of political representation, we see the emphasis falling instead on either the populist or the expert; and occasionally, as in the case of the Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn—Professor Fortuyn, as he liked to be called, who filled his party list with doctors, civil servants and other professionals – we get both at the same time.¹⁶

There are also longer-term fall-outs, however, and these are more serious, in that it is through these that democracy comes seriously under stress. In the first place, as I have argued elsewhere (Mair 2002), it is largely through the separation of representative and procedural party functions, and through the schism between a party presence, or lack of presence, in civil society and that in the institutions, that the idea of distinguishing between popular democracy and constitutional democracy comes to the fore. Parties have always been unique organizations that combined within one agency the crucial functions of representation and government. That is, through party, one and the same institution within mass democracy gave voice to the citizenry and governed on their behalf. In such a context, epitomised most clearly by the presence of the mass party and by the reliance on the legitimacy afforded by party democracy and party government—for which, again, see Schattschneider (1942)—popular and constitutional democracy were more or less inseparable. In theory, the one could scarcely be conceived without the other; in practice, in party practice, they were effectively synthesised.

Through the failings of party, on the other hand, and through the gap that opens up between the citizenry and the political leaderships, comes a growing inability to affect this sort of synthesis. And it is this, in turn, which allows the two modes of democracy to become distinguished from one another. Through the failings of party, in other words, a space is created in which the features of popular democracy, taken more or less on its own, can be weighed against those of constitutional democracy; through the separation of representative and procedural functions, government ‘by the people’ comes to be judged against government ‘for the people’. It is in this sense that the failings of party leads to a rethink of democracy: since parties cease to function as they once did, the conventional modes of democracy become unthinkable. Moreover, in this newly attractive weighing process, it is usually popular democracy, and government by the people, that is found wanting.

The difficulty runs even deeper than this, however. As argued above, parties were unique in combining both a representative and a procedural role, and in being engaged both in the wider society and in government. Over time, however, as I have also argued here, these two functions became separated from one another and rebalanced, with the role in society, and the representative function, being slowly downgraded and diminished, while the role in the institutions, and the procedural function, became more important. Elsewhere, I have argued that this was part of a more or less necessary process of party adaptation: precisely because they no longer functioned so effectively as representatives, parties sought to compensate by building up their role within the institutions. They may have grown less capable of giving voice to citizens, but they had also come to be regarded as an essential element in the functioning of democracy. These were not therefore parties in decline, I then argued, but were instead parties that had adapted to a new set of circumstances and that would seek to survive in the context of a new organizational equilibrium (e.g., Mair 2003).

This now seems far too sanguine an interpretation, however. Parties might well seek to compensate for diminished capacities in one direction with enhanced capacities in another, but there is no guarantee that they will prove successful in this regard. On the contrary: while

¹⁶ Trying to get both at the same time is not necessarily exceptional, and recalls James Morone’s (1990: 98) characterization of the Progressive Movement in America: “At the heart of the Progressive agenda lay a political paradox: government would be simultaneously returned to the people and placed beyond them, in the hands of experts.”

parties might well have the capacity to govern, and be unchallenged – democratically – in this respect, their abandonment of a representative role can mean that they are unable to legitimize that role. Parties may be able to fill public offices, but they may no longer be able to justify doing so.

In other words, if parties as governors are to be trusted, and if party government more generally is to be legitimate, it is likely that the parties must also be seen to be representative. For a party, and for an elected politician, it is not enough to be just a good governor, for without some degree of representative legitimacy, neither the parties themselves, nor their leaders, nor even the electoral process that allows them to be chosen, will be seen to carry sufficient weight or authority, and this will also help force a retreat from government by the people. Parties may be seen as necessary for the effective functioning of democracy, but this doesn't mean that they are liked or respected. The distinction is already evident in popular evaluations: thus Dalton and Weldon (2004: 382) have recently shown that although an average of some 76 per cent of respondents in surveys conducted in 13 advanced democracies regard parties as necessary to the functioning of democracy, only some 30 per cent see these same parties as being interested in what ordinary people think; in the Eurobarometer data, parties emerge as the least trusted of a host of public and private institutions, winning the endorsement of some 17 per cent of the European public, as against an average of 65 per cent who trust the police, for example, 56 per cent who trust television, and 49 per cent who trust the churches (Dalton and Weldon 2004: 385).

Scepticism towards elected politicians is nothing new, of course. Already some 60 years ago, for example, Schumpeter (1947: 288) warned against relying too heavily on those who were emerging from the electoral process, and suggested that “the qualities of intellect and character that make a good candidate are not necessarily those that make a good administrator, and selection by means of success at the polls may work against people who would be successes at the head of affairs.” The argument that was later reiterated by March and Olsen (1995: 136), who suggested that “it is not self-evident that electoral political competition will necessarily produce leaders who represent the interests of the people well or who are competent to govern.”¹⁷ But while the skepticism may not be new, it does acquire a more robust foundation when articulated within a context in which popular democracy has become distanced from constitutional democracy. Again, what we see here is a largely self-reinforcing process. Because partisanship and politics are no longer seen as beneficial to the policy process, decision-making becomes depoliticized, with non-majoritarian and other non-political agencies acquiring more weight and authority. This in turn hollows out political and party competition even further, thereby offering even more encouragement to the politics of the spectacle and the horse-race. And this, in turn, becomes yet more likely to produce the sort of candidates and elected politicians whose qualities, following Schumpeter, are even less inclined to be those of the good administrator. Hence more depoliticization, hence even more hollowing-out of the electoral process, and hence even less competent candidates, and so on.

Sartori, as is so often the case, already drew attention to this dilemma some time ago. In a text from 1967 (that was finally published in 2005) he argued that the real justification for party was derived by virtue of its representative capacities, and not just because it provided government. Indeed, if government was our only concern, he argued, there were probably other and even better ways of providing it than through the resort to parties. Echoing Schumpeter's concerns, he concluded (2005: 29):

¹⁷ See also Brittan (1975: 136): “The attitudes and abilities that make for a good candidate are not necessarily those of a good MP, and a good MP is not necessarily a good minister. Above all there is a danger that the political process may repel men who could make a success of anything else.”

“If we have the party as a recruiter, it is because we want ‘representative’ leadership, that is, because we are interested in a mechanism of recruitment that fulfills the expressive function. Supposing that parties do not secure representative leadership; supposing that they are not utilized as a means of ‘expressive selection’; then why should we have recourse to party recruitment? Surely the answer is not that parties remain the best means of qualitative selection. Qualitatively speaking, the party channel has often produced very poor leadership. Therefore, if we no longer look for ‘responsible’ leaders who are an ‘expression’ of their electors, we can think of a number of better ways of securing a political class that meets the qualitative standard.”

So back to the earlier questions: why do parties fail, and why do they fail now? The short answer is that they have moved too close to the institutions of the state, and they have consequently neglected, or have been forced to neglect, their representative role. Although this may be seen as a strategy of survival, in which new weaknesses become compensated by new strengths, it probably cannot succeed in the longer term. In other words, unless parties are also representative, they will experience considerable difficulty in legitimizing their procedural role.

Party democracy worked well when it provided the synthesis between popular democracy and constitutional democracy. As parties have changed, however, this synthesis has broken down, with the one mode being increasingly weighed against the other, and then being found wanting. The failings of party therefore stimulate a rethink of democracy both in theory and practice, and a concomitant downgrading of the role of popular involvement. Faced with the failings of parties, democracy is encouraged to go beyond parties. Faced with the failings of parties, we find ourselves reaching for a democracy without the demos.

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