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Jean Monnet Chair Papers

The Market for Political Activism: Interest Groups as a Challenge to Political Parties
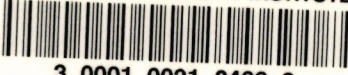
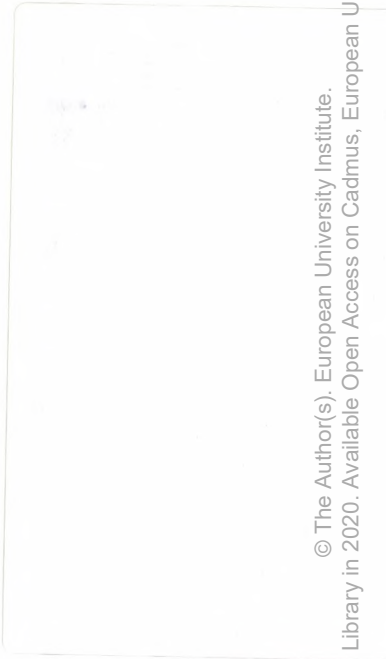### JEREMY RICHARDSON

The Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute

Jean Monnet Chair Papers

Richardson: *The Market for Political Activism: Interest Groups as a Challenge to Political Parties*

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The Jean Monnet Chair

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The Market for Political Activism:
Interest Groups as a Challenge
to Political Parties

JEREMY RICHARDSON

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Acknowledgements

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'Something for the benefit of the country as a whole. What should it be I thought? Become a blood donor or join in Young Conservatives? But as I'm not looking for a wife and can't play table tennis, here I am'.

Tony Hancock, 'The Blood Donor' BBC TV 03/06/1961

1. Citizenship and the market for participation

The quotation above, from one of Britain's most famous comedy actors, illustrates two fundamental aspects of citizenship – namely that citizens have a choice of whether to participate in politics and that they have perceptions of what particular forms of participation may offer to them as individuals. In a sense, citizens are *consumers* of participation or activism and a market has developed to meet their needs. Yet one of the fundamental assumptions of any society which claims to be a democracy is that its citizens are active *participants* in the process of governing. Indeed, liberal democratic theory argues that the active participation of citizens is not only a good in itself, but it is also *functional* to the success of a liberal democracy. Translating this ambition into a reality in modern democracies is, however, exceptionally difficult. For the ambition to be realised there needs to be a set of readily available opportunity structures for citizen participation, matched by a set of citizen attitudes towards participation.

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between these two factors in terms of a market analogy – namely to suggest that there is a changing but active '*market for political activism*'. The conditions within this market suggest that political parties as traditional opportunity structures for activism are now subject to strong challenges and that this may cause them to differentiate their market position in order to maintain their other main functions – structuring the vote and providing the governing elite.

The notion that active citizens are needed as a means of controlling governing elites has a good pedigree. For example, Benjamin Constant, writing in 1822, emphasised the importance of political citizenship and observed that England was powerful *despite* government (Holmes 1984, p. 45). Benjamin Constant is especially interesting in the context of our analysis of political activism because of his concern with the relationship between public and private

activity and because he reminds us that citizens may be conscious of the substitutability of public and private activity. For Constant, political participation '...was not to be limited to the periodic *surveillance* and *contrôle* of the legislators by the electors. It was not merely a means by which private citizens defend their security, goods and *jouissances*... Politics could be an engrossing passion. For Constant it was precisely that. He merely wanted to ensure that it was voluntary, not obligatory' (Holmes, 1984, p 45). His criticism of Ancient liberty was in part based upon his view that such political participation was not entirely voluntary nor was it particularly heroic. Thus 'the ancients preferred political participation to individual independence not because they were political animals or had higher standards than their modern counterparts, but simply because in the ancient city firsthand participation was the most effective way to further particular (that is to say, not particularly noble) interests. *Politics was the only interesting thing that citizens had to do*' (Holmes 1984, p.58, emphasis added). As Holmes argues, Constant absorbed the insight that in modern societies freedom from politics is a positive good, not a mere deprivation or lack (Holmes 1984, p. 72). Indeed, as Schumpeter noted, high levels of participation are not *necessarily* good – they can produce fairly unpleasant results (Held 1987).

Despite the need for voluntarism, and despite the dangers of 'excessive' participation and activism, the notion that citizens should at least have the *opportunity* to participate is extremely strong in western liberal democracies. For example in Almond and Verba's pioneering study of the civic culture, they argued that 'the citizen, unlike the subject, is an active participant in the political input process – the process by which political decisions are made' (Almond and Verba 1963, p. 161). Yet empirically their findings cast doubt on the reality of active participation in modern societies and brought into question the rational-activist model. Thus citizens '..are not well informed, not deeply involved, not particularly active' (Almond and Verba 1963, p.474). They concluded, however, that the rather mixed evidence from their cross-national surveys was not necessarily dysfunctional to democracy, echoing Eckstein's view that a democratic political system requires blending of apparent contradictions – 'balanced disparities' (quoted by Almond and Verba 1963 p.476). Moreover, their survey raised very considerable doubts about the practical importance of political parties as channels of political participation, long before the emergence of many of the interest groups and new social movements with which we are now so familiar (Tarrow 1989). They reported that:

'...when it comes to the support that individuals believe they could enlist in a challenging political situation, they think much more often of enlisting the support from the informal face to face groups of which they are members than from the formal organisation to which they belong. In all countries except Germany, less than one per cent of the respondents indicate that they would work through their political party if

they were attempting to counteract some unjust regulation being considered by the local government; the German figure is about three per cent. *Clearly, no matter how important the role of political parties may be in democratic societies, relatively few citizens think of them as the first place where support may be enlisted for attempts to influence government'* (Almond and Verba 1963, p. 192, emphasis added. For more recent British data see Parry et al 1992).

The theme that a good citizen is an active citizen is echoed by almost all writers on democracy. Dalton's views that 'citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful...' and that 'if political involvement is limited, then most analysts would agree that democracy is weak' (Dalton 1988, p.35) are a typical reflection of the conventional wisdom of political analysts. Yet his volume was devoted to a study of the *changing* nature of citizen political behaviour. This new focus was prompted by a recognition of the changing nature of society itself – such developments as the expansion of economic well-being, greater involvement of government in society, urbanisation, expanded career opportunities, better education, more information etc. (Dalton, 1988, pp 6-7).

2. Market changes: conventional and new channels of participation

The conventional model of liberal democracy emphasises the importance of elections, the sovereignty of the legislature and the role of political parties as both channels of participation and linkage structures in society. This has been modified by a recognition of increased executive power and the decline of legislatures. However, traditional notions of democratic accountability which link voters, parties and governments, have retained their importance. Yet, by the 1960s, advanced industrial democracies had begun to experience the burgeoning of the citizen action movement, the escalation in demands for more 'participation', and the proliferation of new procedures and new institutions designed to facilitate more and 'better' participation. That decade can be described as the start of the participation explosion in western democracies and lead to what Katz describes as the erosion of the sociological ties between individuals and parties in Europe (Katz 1990, p. 158).

This explosion of activity was in part grafted onto existing conventional modes of participation– voting and campaigning for political parties. In fact the history of democracy is one of expanding participation and of expanding the modes of participation available to citizens. For example, there has been by a steady expansion in voting (Rokkan 1970). Voting was the first participation explosion. Participation in campaign activities is an extension of electoral participation beyond the act of voting (Dalton 1988, p.41). Although fewer citizens

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participate in campaigning, he argues that '...as a result of this additional effort, this participation mode provides more political influence to the individual citizen and conveys more information than voting' (Dalton 1988, p.41).

These long established channels or modes of participation are, of course, still enormously important features of the political landscape. Whatever changes have taken place in the market for activism, citizens in Western Europe still perceive voting for the established parties in elections as a key decision. Indeed, as Peter Mair has shown, there has been a remarkable degree of stability in the share of the vote retained by the traditional parties over time (Mair 1993). Yet of central importance to our understanding of political activism today – and particularly to the dynamics of political activism – is the fact that the range and nature of opportunity structures for citizen participation has changed quite significantly. There is a 'political action repertory', consisting of both 'conventional' and 'unconventional' political involvement (Kaase and Marsh 1979 p.137). At the theoretical level they suggest that both political competence (as discussed originally by Almond and Verba in their early study) and political repertory 'assume that citizens have acquired through social learning, qualifications that will help them respond to political needs and demands to achieve the goods they strive for' (Kaase and Marsh 1979, p.137). Kaase and Marsh's focus on longitudinal change is of special relevance to our own study. Despite methodological problems in comparing their data with that from the original Almond and Verba study, they conclude that there has generally been a thrust toward more political competence among the young. A new set of political activities has been added to the citizen's political repertory – 'a set that had little political salience even among the most highly educated strata of the societies examined in the earlier years' (Kaase and Marsh 1979, p.149). Though they are at pains to emphasise that it is a mistake to see conventional and unconventional participation as mutually exclusive (in practice they are often used together to achieve a desired result), their analysis is consistent with our argument here that the 'market for activism' is now much more open, competitive and varied (See section 3 below.). Their finding, as in the Almond and Verba study, that *education* was a key factor in determining political competence is also consistent with the argument that not only has the number of opportunity structures expanded, but also that potential activitists are now much more sophisticated as potential consumers of activism. Also, citizens' understanding of the efficacy of different modes of participation in post-industrial societies has increased.

Moreover, participation in what are obviously political activities (such as joining a political party, joining an interest group, or joining a demonstration) and other forms of social activity (such as joining a voluntary, sports or cultural organisation) are not mutually independent. The multifarious social activities open to citizens in a post-industrial society are all part of a competition

for the time, interest and money of citizens. As M Lal Goel and David Horton Smith pointed out, what political scientists call 'political participation' is known more generally as 'social action' (Lal Goel and Horton Smith, 1980, p.76). Even membership of organisations thought to be non-political e.g. sports organisations can provide opportunities for political participation from time to time, as in the case of sporting boycotts against South Africa

The more sophisticated use of social action for political purposes is a recurring theme in research on participation. As Dalton suggests, 'participation in citizen orientated and policy-orientated forms of political activity is increasing (Dalton 1988 p.71). He argues that these participation modes produce greater citizen control over the locus and focus of participation. In our terminology, citizens are no longer passive consumers faced with a limited range of 'products' in the marketplace.:

> 'Political input is not limited to the issues and institutionalised channels determined by elites. A single individual, or a group of citizens, can organise around a specific issue and select the timing and the method of influencing policy-makers. These direct action technologies are high information and high pressure activities. They therefore match some of the participation demands of an increasingly educated and politically sophisticated public for more than conventional participation in voting and campaign activities' (Dalton, 1988, p.71).

3. Specialised markets, specialised issues, and 'customised' participation

Dalton's reference to the possibility of a trend towards participation around specific issues is an important indicator of why party membership (and possibly degrees of genuine *activism* within parties) appears to be in decline. That the market share of activism (though not necessarily voting support – see Mair 1993) which parties retain is in decline seems reasonably certain. The British case is one of the best documented examples. Thus, Seyd and Whiteley's study of Labour Party activism argued that 'It is clear that party membership peaked in the 1950s. The decline commenced in the 1950s and continued over the ensuing thirty years. (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p. 16). Explanations for the decline vary, but possibly include the changing social composition of the party, the decline of the party as the centre of social and political life at the local level, and the rise of pressure groups (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p.17). In terms of the latter, they cite McKenzie arguing in 1974 that pressure groups had become a far more important channel of communication than parties (McKenzie 1974) and Moran in 1985 arguing that 'pressure groups now seriously rival parties in the system of representation' (Moran 1985, p. 120). In particular, the foundation and rise of 'good cause' groups in the 1960s (for example Shelter, the Child

Poverty Action Group, and the Disablement Income Group) were felt to be especially damaging to the Labour Party (Seyd and Whitely 1992, p.18) In a telling passage they observe that 'by the 1980's, therefore, as a consequence of inertia, inefficiency, and political design, *the grass roots of this old established party had withered*' (Seyd and Whitely, 1992, p.19, emphais added).

Similar conclusions can be drawn concerning the Conservative Party in Britain. In the 1940s and 1950s, McKenzie suggested that the Party had approximately 2.2 million members (McKenzie 1974). The Houghton Committee on Financial Aid to Political Parties estimated a membership of 1.5 million in 1976. More recent work by Seyd et al, as part of their study of Conservative Party Activism, suggests that the current membership of the Party may have fallen to 756,000 (Seyd et al 1993, p. 4). Whether this picture of decline in *absolute* numbers is common across Western Europe is more difficult to establish. Indeed, Gallagher et al (1992) argue that '...despite frequent suggestions that party organisations are declining in Western Europe, no clear trend emerges'. They report 'quite dramatic' falls in some countries, e.g. Denmark and the Netherlands, but stability in others (e.g. Austria, Italy and Norway) and increases in others such as Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland and Malta. The French case appears, like Denmark and Holland, to be similar to the UK, however. Thus the French Communist Party's membership had fallen from 700,000 in the 1970s to 200,000 in 1990 and the Socialist Party's membership from 200,000 in 1970 to 150,00 in 1992 (L'Etat de la France 1993, pp 470-471). Indeed, in a 1990 poll, 60% of respondents expressed 'no confidence' in political parties (L'Etat de la France 1993, p.469). In New Zealand, too, there appears to have been an especially dramatic decline in party membership, largely as a result of major changes in the style of governing under the recent radical government. As Mulgan notes, 'The leading politicians of both Labour and National governments had become distanced from the rank and file of their parties, both the backbench in parliament and the members of the extra-parliamentary party. One result was a drastic fall in party membership by at least 80% from their highest levels of the 1980s' (Mulgan 1993, p. 20).

In general, the weight of evidence suggests that the decline theory is correct. For example Bartolini's analysis of social democratic, socialist and labour parties in western Europe in 1983 suggested '...evidence of a general decline in membership levels across all types of parties' (Bartolini 1983, p. 205). Similarly Katz's 1990 analysis suggests that the key factor (in terms of our analysis) – namely the proportion of the electorate who are members of political parties – has been in decline (Katz 1990, p. 147) (see table 1). More recently Katz and Mair, and their associates) have suggested that analysis of data on absolute membership numbers would not support the argument that there has been a wholesale collapse of party membership in western Europe. However, they sug-

gest that once membership is measured against size of the electorate, a quite different picture emerges. Thus 'membership levels have generally failed to keep pace with the pronounced growth in the size of the electorates' (Katz et al 1992, p. 333). They argue that the proportionate decline in the so-called M/E calculation (M = number of members E = electorate) '...is quite striking' (Katz et al 1992, p. 333).

Just as consumer products and services have become more differentiated and specialised in response to more sophisticated consumer demands, then so, perhaps, participation in the political process is increasingly linked to specialised or 'attentive' publics, specialised issues, and specialised participatory organisations. This trend may not be solely due to a more sophisticated and better educated citizenry. Just as with products and services in the marketplace, there are entrepreneurs (or 'movement entrepreneurs' to use Schmitt's term. Schmitt 1989) who see market opportunities for political participation. New issue-related organisations emerge, not just because of existing public concern about an issue, but also because organisational entrepreneurs emerge who see opportunities to create new organisations (and careers for themselves) by mobilising public support and funding for interest groups around new issues which they place on the political agenda. Some of these new organisations are interest groups in the conventional sense (especially public interest groups) and others are more generally described as social movements – what Tarrow defines as '...uninstitutionalized groups of unrepresented constituents engaged in sequences of contentious interaction with elites or opponents' (Tarrow 1995). In practice, it is not always clear what empirical difference there is between interest groups and social movements, particularly as the latter became more accepted and are even given institutionalised roles in the political process. However, both categories of organisation are relevant to our analysis.

Many interest groups – both new and old – use modern marketing techniques to attract support, money and members and, like firms, have marketing departments and marketing managers. These new 'entrepreneur driven' organisations are increasingly important in setting the political agenda to which political parties, as well as governments and legislatures, have to respond. For example, it was often not political parties that put such issues as women's rights, environmentalism, and consumerism on the political agenda. These issues were launched by groups (often formed in the 1960s and 1970s) which set out to challenge existing interests – often producer interests – who were closely linked to the main parties. The failure of the parties to identify and/or respond to the emergence of new concerns sufficiently early created market opportunities for those unwilling to be constrained by the complexities of party coalitions. Existing parties are not irrelevant to this process, however. Because they control governmental institutions, they are still powerful actors in the policy process.

Forcing them to take on board these new concerns is, therefore, a key strategy of the newly created groups. Indeed, it has been argued that 'in many nations, party elites have managed to adapt to the concerns of the newer agenda – clumsily perhaps, but enough to absorb some of the energies of the newer activists' (Reiter 1993, p. 101). However, the phenomenon of parties being forced to take on board new issues may itself re-enforce a tendency to see them as part of the *governmental* structures of society, rather than as organisations for citizen *participation* as such. Parties may be seen by citizens to be as much a problem as they are a solution!

Political parties now face a double challenge for the attention, support and re-sources of individuals. On the one hand there are now very many organisations offering *apparently* exciting political participation opportunities and, on the other, individuals have the opportunity to be more discriminating in their choice of political participation. Parties may, therefore, be facing the classic situation of an old 'product' which has been overtaken by innovation in the marketplace. Just as with old products, they retain a faithful (and possibly ageing, as in the case of the British Conservative Party, see Whitely et al 1994) clientele, but their market share declines as new products attract new customers. They also find themselves trying to copy the innovator, as in the case of parties taking on board new issues which have been placed on the political agenda by others.

The 'greening' of political parties can be seen as a belated response to the challenge from the environmental groups who, in Britain for example have seen considerable membership growth (see table 2). Even in Italy, where the party membership incentive of corruption was great until the recent changes, parties were not the most popular form of participation (see table 3) Similarly, in West Germany WWF has seen its membership increase from 9,300 in 1981 to 101,000 in 1993. None of these groups can, however, match the spectacular examples from the US. Surely, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) with thirty-three *million* members and $300 million revenue must be the largest voluntary organisation in the world, as Pratt suggests (1993, p. 1).

Increased interest in specialised issues is not confined to individuals as 'join-ers'. The voters more generally have been exhibiting the same trend for some time, as illustrated by the rise of issue voting (Franklin 1985). Trends in the electorate generally are bound to have an effect on party membership. However, caution is needed in discussing the question of issue voting and electoral volatility as it appears that, for Western Europe as a whole, the average level of aggregate volatility in the period 1945 to 1989 is just 8.7 (Mair 1993, p. 124). Even so, we should not be surprised if *any* reduction in voting stability also leads to a reduction in the number of individuals willing to make a commitment to party *membership*. More voters appear to be 'available' in the marketplace for

participation and are faced with a wide range of participatory organisations offering 'tailor made' opportunities for political activism. 'Brand loyalty' has decreased at the very time that new 'products' have arrived on the marketplace.

If, indeed, *rationality* has increased amongst the electorate, then we can expect individuals to make better informed calculations about how they use their time and money – in so far as they want to participate in politics at all. The professional judgements of political scientists has long been that party members have relatively little say in policy formulation. We know from empirical studies that it would be unusual for the party members to have very much influence on policy. We also know that local canvassing and campaigning in many parliamentary seats is more about waving the party flag than about the rational use of resources to sway voters. So why should we expect a better informed citizency to behave today as they did in the early part of the century? If we see citizens as potential *consumers of participation* then parties must recognise citizens as better informed 'consumers' in 1994 than they were in, say, 1904.

As better informed consumers, with perhaps a much keener sense of opportunity cost in the use of their time and money, citizens now have an active marketplace for participation in which to shop. In deciding whether or not to participate and, if so, in what type of organisations, citizens may perceive parties as especially problematic, because of their 'catch all' nature and because of perceived policy failures by parties in office. Parties offer a wide-ranging programme of policies which may include some polices to which the individual is opposed or is at least unsympathetic. An alternative is to join or donate resources to a pressure group or to support a broader social movement – espousing either a single issue or a related group of issues – thus avoiding the need to accept policies and programmes to which one is opposed. They can support specific causes and can expect to see the political parties responding to this increased issue mobilisation. This rather 'sectorised' view of individual participation may be a reflection of the increasing sectorisation of policy-making in the real world. By concentrating on specific issues, the individual can join a group of genuinely like-minded people, can generally avoid the typical left/right ideological splits common in parties and, moreover, may see more immediate policy results. The narrower range of issues presents advantages to the interest groups, as well as to members. As Bartolini suggests, the groups '...can maintain their membership in a state of commitment, tension and purity that is hardly feasible in a larger mass party' (Bartolini 1983, p. 207). In terms of selective benefits and selective disbenefits, joining or supporting an environmental group, for example, may well present a much more attractive 'portfolio' then do political parties, even though these groups may lose as often as they win. They at least put governments and parties on the defensive and do secure some policy change.

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It may also be easier to move in and out of these organisations, as one's interests change over time, than it is with political parties. As the British Interest Group Project at Aberdeen University has shown , the turnover of some of these organisations – such as Friends of the Earth, is quite considerable – in some cases 60% per year (Jordan et al 1995). Continuing our market analogy, participation today seems to be characterised by the equivalent of impulse buying in a supermarket. Interest groups are constantly launching new products (issues) to which individuals become attracted until they spot another issue which fires their enthusiasm and interest and attracts their money. A more accurate picture of participation is, therefore, one of considerable fluidity – a range of opportunity structures, a constant flow of issues, and relatively rapid turnover of membership as individuals make an increasingly rapid *succession* of participatory decisions (purchases) over a lifetime. In this model, the terms 'unconventional' and 'conventional' participation begin to lose their meaning, with 'old and new' being perhaps more useful labels.

The question of demonstrable *results* is of special significance in terms of the competitive position of parties in the marketplace for participation. Setting aside the debate about whether parties really matter in terms of public policy outputs, the connection between party activism and *results* is tenuous and at best subject to very considerable time lags. Whilst interest groups may be less able to influence the issues of 'High Politics' (Hoffmann 1966) they can and do influence those many many issues of 'Low Politics' which impinge on their daily lives of citizens. It may be much easier for specific interest groups to demonstrate (or at least claim) to their members that the group's actions have secured a particular policy outcome e.g. the abondment of a road scheme, than for parties to demostrate policy pay-offs to their members. Moreover, groups can often demonstrate success in terms of agenda setting by forcing existing policy-makers and existing institutions such as parties to attend to new issues. In that sense they may be influential in high politics too. Even new parties may see their role as forcing the existing parties to attend to new issues, rather than seeking a long-term position in the party system. For example the leader of one of the new Dutch pensioner parties is reported as saying on election night, 'I would rather see the big parties take old people seriously ... Then I'd give up, grab my caravan and go away' (*The Guardian* 18 May 1995).

Thus, the incentive rewards systems in pressure groups may be at least as effective as in political parties, especially as parties can expect to spend some time in the wilderness of opposition. Even if one takes the genuine *activists* within the party membership and compares them with the genuine *activists*, rather than just ordinary members of, say, environmental or cultural groups, then the latter may be as likely to gain access to the corridors of power in meetings at government departments, governmental advisory committees and quan-

gos etc. as are party members. The increased level of group mobilisation means that modern societies are perhaps best characterised as interest group societies rather than as societies dominated by mass political parties. Indeed, Lawson and Merkl suggest at least the *possibility* '...that the institution of party is gradually disappearing, slowly being replaced by new political structures more suitable for the economic and technological realities of twenty-first century politics' (Lawson and Merkl, 1988, p.4). They also note, however, that the widely observed phenomenon of party decline has got to be explained and that we do not know whether:

> '...major parties are failing because they are ideologically out of touch with their electorates, poorly organized, underfinanced, badly led, nonaccountable, corrupt, overwhelmed by unethical or financial competition, unable to rule effectively, or some combination of these factors.' (Lawson and Merkl, 1988, p.3).

They see the main focus of their book – emerging alternative organisations – as possible 'would-be surrogates' for parties' (Lawson and Merkl 1988, p.5). They classify these new organisation into four types – environmental organisations, supplementary organisations, communitarian organisations, and anti-authoritarian organisations. Environmental organisations are seen as a response to today's 'New Politics' and are characterised as determined to leave behind what seem to them to be the outdated class or communitarian struggles of the dominant parties. They also have a different participatory style within their organisations, said to be more in tune with the aspirations of the activists who join. Supplementary organisations are more familiar. They are dealing with old issues – such as lower taxes and sectional issues. Their primary characteristic is not that they see their issues as new, nor that they constitute a community distinct from all this,'...but simply a belief *that at the present time there is no way to compel the existing parties to pay adequate attention to them*' (Lawson and Merkl 1988, p.7, emphasis added). This view is consistent with our own analysis, above, which suggests that the greatest 'rewards' of political participation may be to see one's pet issue actually given political attention, even though one may have little chance of influencing detailed policy outcomes. The 'processing' of the issue can be left to policy professionals, after what Schattschneider termed the supreme exercise of political power has taken place – namely determining what politics is actually about (Schattschneider 1960). If parties and party systems fail to provide these opportunities or fail to respond quickly to new agenda items, then their market position is bound to be eroded. Where they succeed in incorporating the new issues then their chances of survival are that much greater. One popular view is that one of the major problems facing existing parties is that they still reflect the interests and issues of the original mobilising elites. As Hans Daalder's perceptive review of the 'crisis of party' debate suggests, this view can be drawn from a particular interpretation of Rokkan's *freezing proposition*. Rokkan's emphasis on the crucial role of past political

alignments could be read as a proposition that parties which represented such alignments would inevitably lose their relevance in the contemporary world, at some point no longer reflecting the 'new politics' of another era' (Daalder 1993, p.282).

Lawson and Merkl also see 'communitarian' responses to party neglect as a familiar phenomenon – '...party politics has never successfully aggregated the interests of every religious, racial, ethnic, or caste community in any nation and the non-aggregated have often been ready and willing to form separate political movements to battle for their rights' (Lawson and Merkl 1988, p.8). Anti-authoritarian organisations – such as Solidarity in Poland – address their attention to the rights and interests of the people at large, especially in hegamonic party systems heavily backed by military leadership. Even in Britain, it might be argued that, because of the electoral system, the strong two-party dominance of general elections encourages the use of alternative channels by the (still) minority of citizens who do want to be political activists, via such organisations as the Anti-Racist alliance and the Anti-Nazi-League.

Lawson uses the concept of 'linkage' to suggest possible explanations for the decline of parties and the emergence of alternative organisations. Preferring to use the term linkage rather than the old term 'transmission belt', she suggests that there may be a connection between the failure of political parties to continue to perform a linkage between citizens and the state, and the emergence of new organisations either to replace the linkage when parties fail, or to provide the kind of linkages hitherto lacking in the political system (Lawson 1988, p.17). Indeed, Katz goes so far as to suggest that the function of linking citizens to rulers may become merely a vestigial function for parties (Katz 1990). Thus, he argues that '...the survey data suggest that this trend in aggregate members (of parties) is part of a more general evolution of a "new politics" that has been observed in other contexts. The sociological ties between individuals and parties are breaking down as European societies become more fluid, diversified and "modern" ' (Katz 1990, p. 158). Lawson also argues that the 'replacement' of party linkage is due to party failure, rather than that the new organisations are providing new linkages (Lawson 1988, p.30). Some of the new organisations are of course, new parties, rather than new interest groups. As Poguntke argues, these 'new parties' should be clearly identifiable as a product of conflict over the dominant political paradigm and political style (Poguntke 1987, p.81). In France, for example, Machin suggests that there has been a growing importance of other forms of political participation (demonstrations by doctors, travel agents, supporters of private schools, sit-ins by lorry drivers), although it needs to be noted that participation levels in France seem to be low in comparative terms. Also, new movements and parties have emerged – SOS Racisme, ecology parties – which claim to be qualitatively different in terms of organisation

and political style. Indeed the Socialist Party has sought to develop links with these social groups and networks in order to retain a broad electoral appeal (Machin 1990, p. 45-51). Similarly, in Britain, the Labour Party, particularly at the local level in London, has often been accused by its critics of trying to create a 'rainbow coalition' of newer groups in order to maximise its support – the political equivalent of mergers, acquisitions and franchising in the marketplace.

In the British case, with the exception of the Green Party, there has not been the emergence of 'new politics parties'. No doubt the explanations for this are complex. However, one reason may be that Britain has a very well developed set of 'opportunity structures' (Kitschelt 1986) (alongside a restrictive electoral system) which inhibit the formation of the new parties seen in some other western European countries. Put simply, Britain has a very long tradition of interest group formation and interest group access (Richardson 1993) making it very easy for those citizens who do want to participate to do so in some way. If our 'market for participation' analogy is correct, Britain already had, even prior to the participation explosion of the 1960s and 1970s, a well developed market structure which has been able to exploit the faltering of political parties. There is also some evidence that leaders of both old and new interest groups in Britain have been adept at developing and adopting commercial marketing techniques as a means of attracting new members and financial support.

Not only are citizens more sophisticated consumers of participation, they now face a much wider range of demands and opportunities on their time and resources more generally. It is mundane but true to say that the development of the leisure industry has been so extensive in post-industrial societies that *all* organisations are now operating in a much more competitive market for our time and money as citizens. If party activism means – as it appears to do – sitting through party meetings which are considered by the overwhelming majority of members as pretty mind-numbing, spending a significant proportion of time on fund raising, and having to pay for the privilege, it is not surprising that individuals decide to stay home to watch TV, play sport, or become DIY and gardening enthusiasts! As leisure time has increased, then so the market for leisure has expanded with it – so much so that it is a fairly committed individual who wants to spend his or her leisure time in activities that can rarely be described as exciting. Not only is party membership having to compete with other leisure pursuits, it must also compete with other opportunities for straightforward socialising. At one time the Tony Hancock joke – cited at the head of this article – may have been near the truth i.e. parties were a convenient means of socialising – but there are now so many other organisations offering social opportunities that this somewhat unrecognised 'selective benefit' of party membership has declined. Indeed, even Hancock had been Hon Sec of the British Legion (Earls Court Branch) and Treasurer of the Darts Team Outings Committee! With in-

creased leisure and social opportunities, the cost/benefit analysis of party membership (particularly if the party system is relatively uncorrupt and, therefore, offers few pecuniary rewards) may, as Kazt suggests rise quite dramatically. Katz specifically identifies a complimentarity between growth of state services and the central role of political parties – and the ability of parties to use demand for services as a spur to organisation – as one of the reasons for the growth of parties, especially in Europe (Katz 1990, p. 144). during the last decades, he argues, this complimentarity has come unstuck as 'continued growth, or even maintenance at current levels, of social spending no longer seems possible, and this creates problems for parties (Katz 1990, p. 144). Parties, however, are not the only victims of this trend. For example, Pratt cites the case of antipoverty groups in the US – 'The number of such groups at the national level increased steadily during the 1960s and early 1970s, reaching a peak in 1974, yet by 1990, with government legitimation in this field no longer forthcoming, their number had declined to fourteen' (Pratt 1993, p. 222). As with firms in the marketplace, the death rate of new businesses is quite high. In the antipoverty case, the National Welfare Rights Organisation (NWRO) formed in 1966 and seeing a subsequent period of considerable growth, was disbanded in 1974 (Pratt 1993, p. 222).

Moreover, it is at least possible that being a party activist may have become an activity which attracts more obloquy than admiration socially. There may be a link between the very low esteem of politicians and politics generally, and declining party membership. If politics and politicians are seen as having a low esteem, then this is bound to make it more difficult for parties to persuade individuals to join, to *admit* to joining, and above all to be actually *active* when they have joined. It may be that party membership should now be regarded as *unconventional* participation – both in terms of a rational political actor model of behaviour and in terms of social behaviour more generally. As with other forms of social behaviour, what was once unconventional eventually becomes conventional and *vice versa*. Amongst the young, party activism may be seen as decidedly odd and might be difficult to explain to one's peers! Rather like the churches in many western countries, parties are now somewhat *passé* amongst an increasing majority of citizens. Thus, it is not just political parties which appear to be less attractive as participatory organisations. Alongside the decline in party membership and in Church membership, traditional organisations which appear not to have 'modernised' – such as Women's Institutes, have also declined. Literally hundreds of new more radical and modern women's organisations have emerged to challenge the traditional organisations for women (see table 4).

If our hypothesis is correct – that the 'market for activism' is like any other competitive market – there will be winners and losers – then we should expect

the market share of some types of groups to decline as much as political parties. This is especially true for trade unions, of course, which have experienced a rapid decline in membership.

4. Sporadic interventionists, surrogate activism, and the decline of parties

'If there is a single key to political participation in Britain, it must be group membership. The proportion of the population belonging to a group is already high, even if most of the groups in question are rarely, if ever, concerned with politics. The importance of groups is in part that they can mobilise people to action in support of interests and causes. Indeed ...half of the participation uncovered in the study was of a mobilised nature. But groups are also of importance as a conduit through which individual citizen can hope more effectively to raise issues and problems that concern them. *British politics is firmly in the collectivist age and, so, organisation counts*' (Parry et al 1992, p. 422, emphasis added).

This quotation from the authors of the most comprehensive study of participation in Britain illustrates perfectly the thrust of this article – namely that although the British are not particularly active politically (for example a quarter do not even vote regularly), of those who participate there are clearly preferred modes of participation. Approximately a quarter appear to be quite active in some way, with 'collective action' representing the largest category of activists (8.7%) followed by 7.7% who have mainly contacted representative and officials. Only 2.2% have been more active in party campaigning, less than the 3.1% who are prone to forms of direct action (Parry et al 1992, p. 288). Moreover, collective action appears to breed collective action, with 36.5% of those engaged in collective action being members of four or more organisations.

The data from the British participation study also suggest interesting conclusions regarding people's perception of participation. Again, group activity scores very favourably when compared with party campaigning. For example, not only have a higher percentage of respondents been engaged in group activity, but also a lower percentage would never consider such activity. Thus approximately 80% respondents could not contemplate campaign fund raising or canvassing compared with approximately 54% who could not contemplate organised group activity. (See table 5).

As Parry et al suggest, there may be a trend for 'single issue groups to defend or promote interests and values (to) become even more frequent' (Parry et al 1992 p.422). They see this as possibly enhancing participation, even though it 'need not imply a nation of regular activists, noisy and restless'. Using Dowse and Hughes' term 'sporadic interventionists' (Dowse and Hughes quoted by

Parry et al 1992 p. 422) they see the possibility of a highly mobilisable population. Taking a very positive view of this potential, they see what may be a rather reactive form of participation as an important element in the civic culture and reflecting a considerable confidence in the ability of groups to affect outcomes. Thus, 'this perception of collective political efficacy, coupled with the existence of a network of group allegiances (even if normally apolitical) suggests the presence of latent participation ready to emerge in episodic and reactive forms' (Parry et al 1992, p. 423).

Although systematic and reliable data are not available, there is at least some evidence that group formation in Britain has, indeed, been on the increase – particularly in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The 'group industry' is now so comprehensive as to be able to meet almost any conceivable taste for participation. Even though we lack a comprehensive map of associational activity in liberal democracies, the British case is perhaps illustrative. For example, the 1970s and 1980s has seen a proliferation of small specialised groups concerned with various rare diseases such as the Association for Post-Natal Illness (2,500 members, formed in 1979), the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalous (15,000 members, formed in 1966) and the Altzheimers Disease Society (13,000 members, formed in 1979).

The 'rare diseases' category is just one small snapshot of associational life in Britain. Other types of groups can claim quite large numbers of members. For example Alcoholics Anonymous claims between 40,000 and 45,000 members (in 1991), up from 20,000 in 1986. Environmental and countryside groups are, of course, now recognised as having far more members than do the political parties. For example, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has 852,000 members, the Council for the Protection of Rural England 45,000 members and the National Trust 2,152,000 members. More radical groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth also claim very large memberships – 410,000 and 114,000 respectively. In France too, it is reported that there has been an increase in the number of public opinion campaigns signifying both the use of new material means (money) and symbolic means (introduction of lobbying and business techniques imported from abroad) and the limitation of traditional forms of actions'. (Offerle, quoted in L'Etat de la France 93-4, p. 464).

As Jordan et al have demonstrated, however, we do need to be very cautious in quoting membership figures, simply because in practice *membership* is an illusive concept. In their study they found a very rapid turnover in membership of some of the sampled organisations, even though the totals often remained very high. More importantly membership of groups or support of social movements often means no more in terms of active participation than it does in political parties and it is quite common to refer to supporters rather than members.

Thus, many groups exhibit the phenomenon known in the 'group industry' as *credit card participation* – namely individuals making a credit card donation as an expression of support, but playing no further part in the activities of the organisation to which they 'belong'. Indeed Greenpeace advertisements refer to supporters and volunteers and not to members as such. Studies of party 'activism' in Britain suggest party membership may be similarly low key on any scale of activism. Most party activists are more accurately described as party in-activists. (Whiteley et al 1994). We should, perhaps, not be too cynical about 'credit card membership'. It can be seen as some kind of surrogate activism in which individuals support a particular cause – often single issue – but leave the formulation and delivery of the campaign to organisational professionals or to the few genuine activists within the organisation. Having paid one's contribution, one can rest in the knowledge that the organisation will campaign on one's behalf or on behalf of one's pet issue. Like other forms of activity in a post-industrial society, it is easy to 'contract out' the tasks one doesn't want to, or need to, perform oneself.

The experience of 'credit card participation' in certain kinds of interest groups may have some important lessons for political parties. Just as we have suggested that it might be necessary to turn the usual definitions of conventional and unconventional participation on their head, then so it may be necessary to challenge the assumption that mass *membership* parties are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of democratic society. Should we necessarily worry if parties are no longer the main channel of political participation? There are many organisations which survive – indeed thrive – on either a very small membership base or with 'members' that are little more than a financial resource, leaving the entrepreneurial leaders of their organisations free to set agendas, formulate policies, and influence the policy process. Indeed, Seyd is reported as recently describing the British Labour Party as a 'de-energised credit card party'. (*The Guardian*, 7 August 1993). Here, Mulgan's study of the almost seismic changes to the New Zealand political system are instructive. Following the collapse of party membership, he argues,

> 'both major parties have relied increasingly on a small number of wealthy donors for their campaign funding and on computerised mailouts to groups of targeted voters rather than on labour intensive door knocking as the main means of getting out the vote. *This has reinforced the new pattern of electoral politics in which party elites use mass marketing techniques to communicate with the public and are freed of the obligation to answer to an active rank and file*' (Mulgan 1993, p. 20-21, emphasis added).

In some states, of course, getting out the vote is not a problem for political parties, as there is compulsory voting. In Australia, part of the explanation for the comparatively small membership of political parties is that state regulation performs the work of the parties for them. Thus, there has been a degree of

'regulatory capture', in order to rig the workings of the market by changing the rules.

The argument here is not that parties are unimportant political actors or that we will *necessarily* continue to see a decline in party membership. As Mair argues, there has been a general *increase* in the number of votes won by the old parties in Western Europe (Mair 1993, p.127). His findings are not inconsistent with our argument. Thus, in elections where governments are being chosen by the voters, parties are likely to remain the focus of citizen's attention. Voting is a minimal level of participation, it is very easy and costless, and voters know that a government will emerge from the electoral process. Not to participate would be somewhat irrational bearing in mind the low cost of voting. Citizens can have it both ways. They can continue to participate, as voters, in the electoral process and continue to support the stability offered by existing party systems. Once this has been resolved they have an array of participatory opportunities, including party membership. We argue that interest groups and social movements have come to present a major challenge to parties as channels of participation and for the resources which citizens are willing to donate. The two types of organisations perform different and perhaps increasingly specialised functions. It is not surprising that modern citizens are perfectly capable of distinguishing between the two. Two rather different markets for participation and activism may be able to live together. Parties, in this scenario, would be more Schumpetarian i.e. about winning elections rather than being a link between citizen and state (Katz 1990, p. 159). In terms of winning elections, parties might 'bundle' interest group preferences, re-marketing them as a complete package in the electoral market.

In trying to predict the collective outcome of these individual 'consumer' choices over time, we would need to anticipate the reaction of political parties to the challenge. Can the parties to 'reposition' themselves in the marketplace for participation and activism? They face the same problems as do the new 'movement entrepreneurs'. Organisational success (in terms of members) ultimately depends upon whether leaders of these organisations can deliver what members and potential members want. It also depends upon the general market 'image' of the organisation. Just as large firms need to produce the right product, they also make great efforts to create a favourable 'image' for themselves (oil companies being a classic example). Party leaders are not stupid. We might expect them to develop organisational responses in response to market challenge. This might mean a further extension of state funding for parties or even compulsory votings so that members are not needed in order to get out the vote.

Whether we should be concerned about the likelihood of parties responding successfully to the market challenge for members is, of course, a matter for de-

bate. For Duverger, mass parties were desirable for democracy. Instead of appealing to a few big private donors, industrialists and bankers etc. for funds – and becoming dependent upon them – '...the mass party spreads the burden over the largest possible number of members', making the electoral campaign free from electoral pressures (Duverger 1957, p. 64). In contrast, Epstein, drawing heavily on the American experience suggested that the model of party typified by mid twentieth century Britain may have been a product of particular times, places and circumstances. Based upon his analyses of the US, he reflected '...a disbelief in the universal relevance of the highly organised programmatic party capable of governing on behalf of an electoral majority' (Epstein 1980, p. 375). More recently, Scarrow has suggested that we also need to examine the issue of membership from the perspective of the parties themselves. As she puts it there is as much a 'paradox of enrolment' as there is a 'paradox of participation'. Thus she argues that there are also *costs* to parties in having a mass membership, as well as benefits (Scarrow 1994). Katz, too has suggested that members are less necessary with the advent of TV etc. and that they may even be a nuisance (Katz 1990, pp 145-6). As Heidar notes, a more realistic rather than idealistic view of parties suggest that '...the recruitment and electoral functions of parties may clearly be fulfilled without an active membership, if not the function of linking people to the policy process' (Heidar 1994, p. 84). He is surely right to suggest that the answer to the question of whether decline in party membership matters depends upon whether one adopts an 'idealist' or a 'realistic' conception of democracy, and in part on the availability of other channels of participation (Heidar 1994, p. 84). Our argument here is that citizens are increasingly willing to use other channels of participation, reflecting a very strong and vibrant market for activism in western democracies. Decline in the market share of political parties may, therefore, be as much a sign of vitality than of de-politicisation, as Bartolini suggested over a decade ago.

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Table 1

Party membership as a percentage of the national electorate (five year averages).

	1945 to 1949	1950 to 1954	1955 to 1959	1960 to 1964	1965 to 1969	1970 to 1974	1975 to 1979	1980 to 1984
Austria								
People's Party (ÖVP)					15.2		16.0	10.3
Socialist (SPÖ)	13.6	13.9	14.8	15.1	14.6	13.9	13.7	13.5
Belgium								
Christian (PSC/CVP)					2.4	2.4	2.8	2.7
Socialist		2.2	2.5		3.3	3.8	4.1	4.1
Volksunie					0.4	0.8	1.1	
Denmark								
Conservatives	3.3			3.8		3.2	1.7	1.2
Liberals	8.2			6.4		3.8	3.1	2.5
Social Democrats	12.0	10.9	9.6	8.1	5.9	4.4	3.4	2.8
Germany								
Christian Democrats	1.6				1.0	1.2	1.9	2.0
Free Democrats	0.4	0.2	0.2		0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2
Social Democrats	2.5	1.9	1.7	1.7	1.9	2.2	2.4	2.2
Italy								
Christian Democrats	2.7	3.4	4.2	4.4	4.8	4.9	3.4	3.1
Socialist (PSI)	2.2	2.4	1.8	1.4	1.7	1.4	1.2	1.2
Communists	6.1	7.0	5.9	4.9	4.3	4.2	4.3	4.0
Social Democrats (PSDI)				0.4		0.8	0.2	
Netherlands								
Catholic People's (KVP)	7.6	4.4	6.9	5.7	2.9		0.6	
Labor (PvdA)	2.1	1.9	2.2	2.1	1.7	1.2	1.1	1.1
Norway								
Liberal			1.2		0.8	0.4	0.3	0.4
Conservative	1.7	2.5	4.1	4.2	4.6	3.8	4.2	5.5
Center		2.2	2.8		2.5	2.1	2.0	1.7
Christian People's			1.3			1.6	2.1	2.2
Labor	9.7	8.1	7.3	7.0	6.3	5.5	5.4	5.4
Sweden								
Social Democratic	12.8	15.5	15.8	16.7	16.3	16.5	18.5	19.6
Conservative	2.4			4.0		2.3	2.1	2.1
Agrarian	3.1			3.5		3.2	3.6	2.2
Communist	1.1	0.7	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3
United Kingdom								
Conservative	4.4	8.1		6.4		4.0		2.9
Liberal				0.7	0.7	0.5		
Labour*	1.9	2.7	2.4	2.2	2.1	1.7	1.6	1.4

* Individual members only.

Source: Katz 1990, p. 148.

Table 2
Membership of Selected British Environmental Groups (Thousands)

	1971	1981	1989	1990	1991	1992
Civic Trust	214.0	-	-	293.0	222.0	-
Conservation Trust*	6.0	5.0	-	3.0	1.6	4.5
Council for the Protection of Rural England	21.0	29.0	-	40.0	45.0	-
Friends of the Earth	1.0	18.0	-	110.0	114.0	-
Greenpeace (UK)	-	-	320.0	380.0	410.0	-
National Trust	278.0	1,046.0	-	2,032.0	2,152.0	2,219.0
National Trust for Scotland	37.0	110.0	-	218.0	234.0	240.0
Ramblers Association	22.0	37.0	-	81.0	87.0	90.0
Royal Society Nature Conservation	64.0	143.0	-	250.0	204.0	250.0
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds	98.0	441.0	-	844.0	852.0	-
World Wildlife Fund for Nature (UK)#	12.0	60.0	-	247.0	227.0	204.3

* In September 1987 the Conservation Society was absorbed by the Conservation Trust. In 1992 the Conservation Trust merged with the Environmental Council.

These figures exclude an additional one million 'other' supported and donors who are non-members.

Source: British Interest Group Project,
Aberdeen 1993, with additions by author

Table 3
Membership of Associations and Parties in Italy 1992

Political parties plus social movements	4.9 M
Trade unions (traditional and 'new' autonomous trade unions)	13.8 M
Associations (from employers' associations to WWF, Common Cause etc.)	27.26 M

Source: Censis 1992.

Table 4
Membership of Selected British Traditional Women's Organisations
(Thousands)

	1971	1981	1991
Mothers' Union	308	210	169
National Federation of Women's Institutes	440	378	310

Source: Social Trends Vol. 23, 1993

Groups Funded by Greater London Council Women's Committee
June 1982 – September 1985

Type of Group	Totals	Ethnic Groups
Women's Centres	40	16
Resources and information	31	9
Printing and publications	7	4
Health	11	5
Counselling and support	41	10
Welfare, legal and other	54	18
Arts, media, recreation	15	1
Campaigns and research	35	11
Child care	301	23
Festivals and conferences	5	-
Transport	6	-
Total	548	97

Source: Green 1992

Table 5

Present and potential participation compared (%)

	Have done at least once in past five years	Would 'certainly' or 'probably' consider action in future	'Might consider'	Would 'never' consider
Contacting				
Local councillor	20·7	33·3	40·4	26·3
Town hall	17·4	28·4	41·1	30·5
MP	9·7	24·2	39·5	36·3
Civil servant	7·3	18·8	38·6	42·6
Media	3·8	11·0	30·7	58·3
Group activity				
Informal group	13·8	16·4	34·9	48·7
Organised group	11·2	14·4	31·3	54·3
Campaigning				
Fund-raising	5·2	6·2	14·8	79·0
Canvassed	3·5	5·0	13·1	81·9
Clerical work	3·5	4·0	14·3	81·7
Attended rally	8·6	8·8	23·9	67·3
Protesting				
Attended protest meeting	14·6	23·8	39·8	36·4
Circulated petition	8·0	14·0	36·4	49·6
Blocked traffic	1·1	2·4	9·2	88·4
Protest march	5·2	7·3	20·3	72·4
Political strike	6·5	8·0	15·8	76·2
Political boycott	4·3	9·5	25·8	64·7

Source: Parry et al, 1992, p. 423.