

DEMOCRACY SERIES

**DEMOCRACY
AND POLITICAL
PARTIES**

BY PROFESSOR PAUL WEBB

**With commentaries
by John Healey MP,
Geoff Mulgan and
Baroness Shephard**



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Preface

Alex Brazier
Editor, Democracy Series

Political parties were, by far, the most dominant method of political organisation in 20th century Britain and they remain central to the functioning of the democratic system. Yet their membership has dropped dramatically in recent decades and their relationship with the public is widely seen as being in crisis. This fourth publication in the Hansard Society's Democracy Series considers the role and future of political parties. The main essay is written by Professor Paul Webb (Sussex University) who addresses the issue of disaffection with party politics in democratic systems. He outlines major themes in the literature and looks at the views of those who advocate more participatory democracy. He argues that much of the existing empirical evidence is inadequate and calls for a comprehensive research agenda to examine the reasons for popular disaffection with politics and how measures might be taken to alleviate it.

There are then three commentaries which consider Professor Webb's piece and add other viewpoints. Baroness (Gillian) Shephard places the debate within the context of the issue of accountability of politicians and government to the public and draws attention to a research exercise she has mounted comparing voter attitudes in England and France. For Geoff Mulgan (Young Foundation) the real challenge is how to meld representation and participation and he argues that new methods should be tested which bridge the world of representation and decision-making and the world of civil society and public discourse.

Finally, Treasury Minister John Healey MP puts forward a six-point action plan for renewal which includes a more active role for political parties in the community along with a greater promotion of the function of parties and explanation of the impact of politics, linked to people's own lives and experiences. One theme which unites all the contributors is that there should be a much greater emphasis on politics at the local level to counteract the sense that politics is something that is inevitably distant and centralised.

The Hansard Society is grateful to Professor Webb and all the commentators for their important contributions. We would also like to thank the Department for Constitutional Affairs for funding the Democracy Series. We hope that you will join the debate on the future of political parties on the Democracy Series website: **www.democracyseries.org.uk**

Alex Brazier is Director of the Parliament and Government Programme at the Hansard Society and is a member of the Democracy Series Editorial Board

Contributors' Biographies

Professor Paul Webb is Professor of Politics at the Centre for Parties and Democracy in Europe at the University of Sussex and is author or editor of numerous publications, including *The Modern British Party System* (Sage Publications, 2000), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Societies* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford University Press, 2005). His latest book is *Party Politics in New Democracies* (co-edited with Stephen White), which will be published by Oxford University Press in 2007. He is currently an editor of the journals *Party Politics* and *Representation*.

John Healey MP is Labour MP for Wentworth in South Yorkshire and a Treasury Minister. His recently published pamphlets include *Evolution and Devolution in England* (New Local Government Network, 2006) and *MPs and Politics in Our Time* (Hansard Society, 2005). Elected in 1997, he served on the Education and Employment Select Committee before becoming Gordon Brown's Parliamentary Private Secretary in 1999. He was appointed Minister for Skills at the Department for Education and Skills in 2001, then Economic Secretary to the Treasury in 2002 and Financial Secretary to the Treasury in 2005. Before being an MP, he was Director of Communications for the TUC, a part-time tutor for the Open University Business School and Campaigns Head for charities representing disabled people and their carers.

Geoff Mulgan became Director of the Young Foundation in September 2004. Between 1997 and 2004 he had various roles in government including Director of the Government's Strategy Unit and Head of Policy in the Prime Minister's office. Before that he was the founder and Director of the think tank Demos; Chief Adviser to Gordon Brown MP; a consultant and lecturer in telecommunications; and an investment executive. He is a visiting professor at LSE and UCL, and a Senior Fellow at the Australia New Zealand School of Government. His most recent book is *Good and Bad Power: The Ideals and Betrayals of Government*.

The Rt Hon the Baroness Shephard of Northwold JP DL became a life peer in June 2005. After a career as a professional educationalist, Gillian Shephard was elected to Norfolk County Council in 1977 and to Parliament as Conservative MP for South West Norfolk in 1987. She held ministerial posts at Social Security and the Treasury before entering the Cabinet in 1992 as Secretary of State for Employment. Between 1995 and 1997 she was Secretary of State for Education and Employment. In Opposition, she was first Shadow Leader of the House, and then Shadow Secretary of State for Transport, Environment and the Regions. She is currently a member of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Norfolk and Chairman of the Association of Conservative Peers.

Political Parties and Democratic Disconnect: A Call for Research

Professor Paul Webb

Introduction

Those who purport to care about democracy are anxious. In many of the world's established democracies, there is much talk of disconnect, alienation and apathy – and the search is on for explanations and for ways to put things right. The blame for this state of affairs is heaped on various targets: the parties and the politicians inevitably lead the way, but somewhat less tangibly, 'the political system' is apt to come in for criticism from some quarters. Others prefer to level their sights on the role of the mass media, and occasionally even on the public itself.

To a considerable extent, this situation dovetails with a long-standing debate between the protagonists of participatory and representative democracy. Whereas the former are inclined to blame the politicians and in some sense or other 'the system', the defenders of representative politics as it currently operates are more disposed to say that citizens themselves, and the media on which they depend for political information, are culpable for the low esteem in which politics and its leading protagonists are currently held. From the perspective of this latter school, the radical participationists are unrealistic in their vision of a widespread popular capacity to engage with politics, and prone to stray uncomfortably close to the territory of shallow populism in their naïve and unreasonable view of the job done by political elites. From the perspective of the participationists, however, their critics appear to be apologists for an anachronistic elitist view of democracy, and take insufficient account of the cognitive revolution which has facilitated a far greater potential for popular political engagement. A recent example typifying the participationist critique is provided by the report of the Power Inquiry, while the reaction against the participationist vision is embodied in John Hibbins and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse's American study, *Stealth Democracy*.¹

This debate is conducted at least partly in normative terms, but it is also shaped to a very significant degree by the empirical evidence of citizens' disconnect from representative democracy. This evidence is largely derived from individual-level mass surveys, supplemented by aggregate-level indicators of popular disengagement from the party political process (such as falling electoral turnout and party membership). However, I would contend that much of this evidence is frankly inadequate for the

¹ *Power to the People: The Report of Power, an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy* (London: Power Inquiry, 2006; see also <http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/index.php>); John Hibbins and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

required purpose, and that there is consequently a need for further empirical research which rectifies the shortcomings. In this pamphlet, I seek not to enter into the debate about whether participatory or representative democracy is normatively preferable, but rather to outline the state of the debate, and the weakness of the evidential base on which it is founded. This implies the need for a research agenda that will enable us to better evaluate the nature and extent of popular disaffection with parties and democracy. Such an agenda should seek to achieve three things: first, a comprehensive and clear empirical account of citizen understandings of politics and citizenship under democracy; second, accurate identification of the sources of popular disaffection with politics; and third, an effective evaluation of measures which might be taken to alleviate this disaffection.

I start by summarising the major findings on party performance in democratic countries, before proceeding to outline the evidence of popular disaffection. I draw attention to the way in which attitudes towards parties can be affected by the observer's normative idea of 'democracy', especially emphasising the differences between various types of participationist and representative democrat, before setting out a proposal for a research agenda which addresses the three goals described above.

Party performance in democratic polities

How well do political parties perform the tasks required of them in democratic systems? In assessing this, it is important to bear in mind that parties have probably never really dominated all of the functions claimed for them. There is a risk that the crisis of party which some observers describe might derive in part from the misperception that there was once a 'Golden Age' in which parties monopolised these systemic requirements. In truth, parties have always had to share the performance of, say, the representative functions with actors such as interest groups and the mass media, and they have never been more than one of a number of agents which influence the political process.

The evidence from across the democratic world points to a number of conclusions about most of the frequently cited party functions.² One of the central purposes of political parties in a representative democracy is to organise accountable and effective *governance*. Yet parties in contemporary democracies have often seemed to struggle to impose distinctive and effective policy solutions when in government. In part, this is because they often find it difficult to 'make a difference' to policy outcomes given the legacies of previous incumbents in office. Furthermore, it is well recognised that a variety of macro-social developments can seriously constrain party

² This section and the following one draw heavily on evidence published in Paul Webb, David M. Farrell and Ian Holliday (eds.), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Paul Webb and Stephen White (eds.), *Party Politics in New Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2007). See also Russell Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

governments' scope for autonomous action, including technological changes, demographic and social trends, and economic cycles. These factors help us understand why parties (particularly since the end of the long post-war boom) have suffered from the widespread perception of policy ineffectiveness; the apparent failures of government to resolve persistent national policy problems are bound to undermine the popular status of parties – especially when these failures are associated with more than one major party in a system. Moreover, the lack of autonomy has only been exacerbated by the globalisation of economic processes, which further incapacitates national governments so that 'they cannot always respond to domestic demands in a way which fully satisfies the local interests on which they depend for their legitimacy and authority'.³ Supra-national integration may offer the long-term prospect of political agencies regaining a degree of control over the international economy in Europe, but this does not necessarily imply a greater role for party unless a meaningful and accountable role for transnational parties can be introduced into the EU's decision-making processes, something powerfully advocated by some critics, but far from easy to establish.

Nevertheless, two key points should be borne in mind about the record of parties in government. First, it is an undoubted fact that parties have never really dominated the governmental function to the exclusion of all other factors. They have always acted under a variety of often powerful constraints, but in democratic polities have nevertheless generally been located at the heart of key policy-making networks, and by and large they continue to be so situated. Second, and concomitantly, there is a good deal of systematically presented evidence to suggest that party effects on governmental policy outputs are far from negligible.⁴ Thus, while government in the democratic world is never *exclusively* party government, it is virtually always *party-influenced* government. This implies that voters are required to reflect very carefully about what parties and their leaders may and may not reasonably be held to account for, but it does not mean that these vital elements in the democratic mix are beyond any form of meaningful accountability.

Then there are the key representative functions of *interest articulation* and *aggregation* which political parties have traditionally been expected to fulfil. These are absolutely central to any concept of 'representation', of course, and there would seem to be at least two significant problems for parties as mechanisms of effective representative linkage. In the first place, the capacity of the party system to articulate interests may be seriously undermined if there exists a widespread sense that parliamentary representation is inadequate for certain social or political groups. This is sometimes a question of electoral system choice, as in Britain, but is more often

³ Peter Mair, 'Political Parties, Popular Legitimacy and Public Privilege', *West European Politics*, Vol.18 (1995), pp.43-45.

⁴ Ian Budge and Hans Keman, *Parties and Democracy: Coalition Formation and Government Functioning in Twenty States* (Oxford University Press, 1990); Michael Laver and Ian Budge, *Party Policy and Coalition Governments in Western Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1993); Hans-Dieter Klingemann, Richard Hofferbert and Ian Budge, *Parties, Policies and Democracy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).

due to a perception that parliamentary parties fail to provide adequate representation for certain key social groups such as women and ethnic minorities.⁵ Still, such debates are rarely highly salient across democracies.

Of generally greater significance is the widespread perception that parties are challenged by alternative sources of interest articulation. Evidence of burgeoning single-issue group activity suggests that, in the eyes of many citizens at least, other organisations are better at articulating demands now. In part, this preference for non-partisan modes of articulation is often thought to reflect the growing difficulties that parties face in aggregating interests. With the erosion of traditional socio-political cleavages, it is less common for parties to be closely tied to particular social groups or communities (be they defined by class, religious denomination, regional affiliation or ethnicity). Consequently, contemporary parties – especially the major vote-winners – are increasingly obliged to compete for the votes of heterogeneous blocks of supporters, and the task of aggregating this diversity of interests is bound to be daunting. One consequence is that contemporary parties tend to be accused of offering electors blandly ‘catch-all’ policy programmes, thus depriving them of meaningful choices. The irruption onto the agenda of new issues which cut across old lines of conflict may offer a possible way out of such blandness, but it further complicates the task of aggregation.⁶ Consequently, as the parties struggle to aggregate interests effectively, the task of interest articulation can become individualised, with citizens preferring to participate in single-issue groups or social movements.

That said, care must be taken not to exaggerate the threat to party in all this, for while it is true that the decline of partisan orientations has coincided with the rise of interest group activism, research also suggests that commitment to group activity can be a stimulant rather than a hindrance to partisanship.⁷ Moreover, while interest groups or media actors might be equally (or more) effective in articulating sectional demands and placing issues on the political agenda, the fact remains that it is only the political parties (or individual candidates in candidate-centred systems of politics) that can legitimately perform the key function of aggregating demands into more or less coherent programmatic packages in democratic contexts. While this task is undoubtedly increasingly difficult, parties remain central to it.

A third function for which parties have traditionally taken responsibility is that of *political communication*; once again, however, things appear increasingly challenging, for few would deny that citizens rely far more on non-partisan forms of media for political information and comment than hitherto. Seldom now do major

⁵ Pippa Norris, *Passages to Power: Legislative Recruitment in Advanced Democracies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁶ Kay Lawson, and Thomas Poguntke, *How Political Parties Respond: Interest Aggregation Revisited* (London, Routledge, 2004).
⁷ Kees Aarts, ‘Intermediate Organizations and Interest Representation’, in H-D Klingemann & D. Fuchs (eds.), *Citizens and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.251.

parties continue to run their own press organs, accepting instead the need to compete for favourable coverage in the independent (though admittedly not always apartisan) media. This implies that the agenda-setting capacity of political parties has been squeezed. An example of the way in which the style of media treatment of party politics affects the public perception of parties can be provided by the coverage of election campaigns. It is apparent from research conducted in the USA and Britain that this focuses increasingly on the conduct of campaigns rather than substantive issues of policy or leadership. Thus, by 1997, two-thirds of the broadcast media's election campaign coverage in Britain focused on party strategies and the electoral process itself – that is, on the 'horse race' rather than the substance of policies. The print media's concentration on the campaign rather than the issues was even greater.⁸ There is something doubly dangerous about this for party legitimacy. First, it carries the potential to leave citizens frustrated with politics in general, since the media's obsession with the process of political competition appears to run contrary to the public's own preferred agenda of substantive issue concerns.⁹ Second, the intimate and constant exposés of party strategies and news management techniques leave little to the public imagination, and surely serve to foster a growing – and possibly exaggerated – cynicism about parties and politicians. Not that parties are entirely blameless in this: while they can hardly be faulted for losing control of the agenda-setting process, there is evidence that the growing inclination by parties to adopt 'negative' styles of political communication has further soured public perceptions of elite-level politics, and may even have served to depress election turnout.¹⁰

The fourth central function of parties is one on which their recent record seems to be increasingly disappointing – that of *fostering political participation*. There is incontrovertible evidence of the decline of party memberships and activism in the established democracies,¹¹ and the new democracies seem to have moved to operate in a low-participation phase of democracy without ever passing through the mass party stage of development. A variety of reasons for membership decline have emerged in the literature and are neatly summed up by Susan Scarrow as either 'supply-side' (stemming from the social changes which make citizens less willing to join parties) or 'demand-side' (reflecting the organisational reasons why party strategists might no longer seek to recruit members) in nature.¹² Of these two approaches, the supply-side model seems more plausible, since there is little hard evidence to suggest that parties *have* reduced their demand for members. Notwithstanding the undoubted impact of developments such as the

⁸ Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli Semetko, *On Message* (London: Sage Publications, Spring 1999), pp. 93, 97.

⁹ *On Message*, p.127.

¹⁰ Stephen Ansalobehere and Shinto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize The Electorate* (New York, Free Press, 1995).

¹¹ Peter Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980-2000', *Party Politics*, Vol. 7 (2001), pp. 5-22.

¹² Susan E. Scarrow, *Parties and Their Members* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

communications revolution and the growth of public funding available to them, parties still seem to believe that ordinary members constitute a valuable resource in a number of ways – to help run election campaigns, to raise money, to legitimise party standing, to act as ‘ambassadors in the community’, and so on. Thus, it is very likely an exaggeration to claim, as Kirchheimer once put it, that parties have come to regard memberships as little more than a ‘historical relic’.¹³ This does not alter the fact, however, that parties increasingly struggle to find members.

In one sense, parties are hardly threatened in respect of the final major function which I shall discuss here, *political recruitment*. National parliamentarians in most advanced industrial democracies are still overwhelmingly likely to bear party labels; moreover, the parties in most countries maintain control over important – sometimes vast – reservoirs of patronage. Thus, recruitment of candidates for representative office at both national and sub-national levels remains virtually inconceivable without political parties. On the other hand, even here the reputations of parties have often foundered, for in a number of countries, citizens have become deeply cynical about the corruption which attends some of these patronage networks (for instance, in the Italian and Belgian cases).

Overall, while this brief review of their systemic functions reveals a set of significant challenges which confront parties in contemporary democracies, a balanced judgement should not overlook the ways in which they remain central to the operation of these political systems. Thus, we have observed that parties have always faced a variety of constraints as governmental actors, and while these external pressures may be increasing, they nevertheless remain vital cogs in the machinery of government. Similarly, while parties undeniably face very significant challenges in respect of interest articulation, communication and participation, it would be an exaggeration to claim that they have been rendered insignificant in these roles. The pressures they face here reflect the nature of advanced industrial society, which is more affluent, leisured, private and cognitively mobilised (through the joint impact of education and the communications revolution) than the industrialised democratic world of 40 years ago. As a consequence, citizens are less closely bound to parties through old social group identities and less dependent on parties for their cognitive cues about public affairs. And finally, while we have observed that such developments render the aggregation function more complex, it is crucial to understand that parties continue to play a vital and indeed irreplaceable systemic role in this regard.

Popular disaffection with party politics

Even so, it cannot be denied that there is a growing body of evidence attesting to widespread popular dissatisfaction with political parties – and indeed, with the political process more generally – across the democratic world. Among other things,

¹³ Otto Kirchheimer, ‘The Transformation of West European Party Systems’, in J. LaPalombara, and M. Weiner (eds.) *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 177–200.

parties are often said to be self-interested, untrustworthy, corrupt, challenged by interest groups, social movements, the media and the internet as forms of political participation or communication, and insufficiently distinct from one another for voters to feel they have a meaningful choice. The evidence usually cited in respect of public disaffection with political parties incorporates a range of indicators, at both individual and aggregate levels, including:

- Increasingly volatile electoral behaviour;
- An increase in the fragmentation of party systems, reflecting in part the emergence of new 'protest' (or even 'anti-party') parties;
- A widespread fall in electoral turnout since 1990;
- An even more widespread decrease in the proportion of voters claiming strong partisan affinities;
- A striking reduction in party membership almost everywhere in the established democracies;
- Survey-based evidence of apparently significant levels of disaffection with and distrust for parties, politicians and the process of politics.

The last of these indicators most directly taps the phenomenon of anti-party sentiment. It is illustrated by evidence from the most recent wave of World Values Survey data (gathered since 1999 across more than 70 countries), which reveals that, on average, only 19 per cent of citizens living in democratic nations express 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of confidence in political parties. The variation across quite different types of system is strikingly limited, as illustrated by the fact that this overall figure breaks down into 16.8 per cent of Latin American respondents, compared to 18.8 per cent of East Europeans and 21.9 per cent of those from the longer established democracies.¹⁴

Of course, some of this negativity can reasonably be said to be deserved; it is not difficult to uncover egregious examples of bad faith, and self-regarding or corrupt behaviour by party politicians in most countries. Yet was it not ever thus? If so, then why is it only in recent decades that we should so often hear of the rise of anti-party sentiment and citizen disaffection with politics? Indeed, it is arguable that elected representatives of today are generally far more devoted to their constituents' causes, unsullied by corrupt practices, and willing to be held accountable than many of their predecessors.¹⁵ If correct, this only makes the wealth of evidence showing popular antipathy all the more puzzling.

I believe that the puzzle might stem at least partly from the nature of the evidence that is cited. Bluntly, the existing evidence is often limited, unclear and ambiguous. It

¹⁴ The Latin American countries in the sample are Argentina (1999), Chile (2000), Mexico (2000), Peru (2001) and Puerto Rico (2001). The East European countries in the sample are Albania (2002), Bosnia (2001), Moldova (2002), Macedonia (2001), Serbia (2001) and Montenegro (2001). The established countries are Canada (2000), USA (1999), Japan (2000) and Spain (2000). Source: www.worldvalues.com.

¹⁵ Philip Cowley, 'In defence of politicians', *The Westminster Hour*, BBC Radio 4, 3 January 2006.

therefore follows that the narrative of widespread popular disappointment with politics and its actors should not be accepted in an unqualified way. Much of the evidence is drawn from closed-ended surveys of citizens, and is based on questions which are not primarily designed to gauge attitudes towards representative democracy and its institutions. Thus, we are dealing with sometimes highly imperfect instruments of measurement, which present researchers with difficulties of interpretation. This leaves us confronting a need for research that clarifies the present ambiguity in much of the evidence, and which rests on a deeper understanding of citizen attitudes towards democratic institutions and processes. Such research would help create the conditions for a more sustained and sharply defined debate about the state of democracy today.

How good is the evidence?

For one thing, the significance of some of the indicators is open to more than one interpretation. For instance, falling turnout, the erosion of partisanship (and related phenomena such as the growth of voter 'hesitancy' in making electoral choices) could all be explained by temporary processes of ideological convergence between the major parties in a political system, rather than by active disillusionment with parties. Under such circumstances, deciding between the alternatives on offer becomes a more difficult but less consequential task for many citizens; equally, partisan loyalty and voting simply do not matter so much when the perceived differences between parties are not so great. Should the perception of ideological convergence prove a purely transient phenomenon, however, it is possible that partisanship and turnout would increase once more, while voter uncertainty could be expected to decline. Of course, the fact that we find consistent developments across these indicators in most advanced industrial democracies gives the impression that an underlying long-term process might be at play, rather than something which is merely transient. If this is indeed the case, it carries serious implications for the theory of (democratic) party government, since the most persuasive reason for believing in it is that parties continue to offer a meaningful degree of choice and popular control to voters.¹⁶ Be that as it may, however, one is left with a sense that the existing evidence does not get directly to the heart of the matter.

Furthermore, the survey data indicators are frequently problematic. Juan Linz makes this case persuasively. He points out that even when people appear to be critical of parties, they usually agree that parties are nonetheless important for democracy. But despite this widespread acceptance of the functional need for parties, citizens tend to hold opinions which are ambiguous, contradictory or downright illogical. Linz cites several examples: for one thing, people resent the bluster and acrimony of competitive party politics, and yet dislike 'all parties being the same'; it seems that people have a sense of the need for parties to represent plural interests in society,

¹⁶ For a detailed explanation of this argument, see Paul Webb 'Conclusion: Political parties and democratic control in advanced industrial societies' in Webb et al (eds.), *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Societies*, pp.450-454.

while nevertheless finding distasteful the conflict that goes with it. Or again, people expect parties to articulate the interests of ‘people like me’, but may be critical of party links to other groups on the grounds that these are ‘special interests’. And with respect to the vexed question of party funding, while people generally agree that parties are necessities of democratic political systems, they seem unwilling to accept any of the major forms by which parties might be resourced: party money should not be mine, not from my taxes and not from interest groups, as Linz puts it. Thus, we are left to ponder how far these confusing evaluations of parties are:

...based upon unreasonable expectations or a lack of understanding of the complexities and cross-pressures that parties are subjected to in performing their many roles in democratic politics?¹⁷

Moreover, the indicators which suggest low public confidence in parties and politicians need to be seen in a wider context, for they are not always to be taken as evidence of something profoundly pathological of democracy. For one thing, many have observed that a certain level of scepticism about the motives and veracity of politicians may actually be healthy for democracy. For another, it is useful to take account of a conceptual distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ anti-party sentiment; the latter would be disparaging of parties in various ways, but would nevertheless accept that they remain central and necessary elements of any system of open, plural and democratic politics. By contrast, hard anti-party sentiment would consist of genuine antipathy, based on the notion that parties are pathological to the body politic in some way. One can further conceive of at least two variants of this: the first might be consistent with a broad preference for competitive democratic politics, but would favour a highly personalistic system of presidential rule; central to this conception of democracy would be belief in the need for charismatic leaders who are capable of being ‘above politics’ and expressing the will of the nation. Parties would be regarded as embodiments of partial group interests, and sources of national disunity. De Gaulle’s form of ‘rassemblement’ politics provides a classic example of such a phenomenon. The second variant of hard anti-party sentiment would go further still, in as much as it would represent one element of a fundamental hostility towards democracy *per se*. Clearly, democrats need not panic to the same extent about ‘soft’ anti-party sentiment as about its ‘hard’ counterpart, and even then not all expressions of the latter represent a threat to democracy *per se*.

It is surely high time that research was designed in such a way as to tap directly into popular opinion on the subject of democratic politics, processes, institutions and actors. Such research needs to draw at least in part on qualitative methods (such as focus groups), since such an approach most easily facilitates the kind of exploratory discussion necessary to uncover the true extent of people’s understanding of the political process and the roles of parties within it. This is a key issue to which I shall

¹⁷ Juan J. Linz, ‘Parties in Contemporary democracies: Problems and paradoxes’ in Richard Gunther, Jose Ramon Montero & Juan J. Linz (eds.), *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.294.

return in due course. Before doing that, however, it is important to set this call for new research in its intellectual context, by showing how it is linked to the debate between the proponents of radical participatory democracy and the defenders of representative democracy.

The participationist critique

Underlying the ambiguity in the evidence is a fundamental question about how the citizens of democratic nations see democracy and what they expect of it. In particular, it is quite common for critics to argue that the solution to the perceived problems of contemporary democratic systems lies in an injection of more participatory forms of democracy. Among other things, this approach proposes that, given the particular weakness of parties in terms of representative and participatory linkage, citizens are becoming disaffected and disengaged. Give them more and better forms of democratic linkage, goes the argument, with an emphasis on greater participation, and the disaffection will evaporate. Germany is an example of a country which has implemented direct democratic reforms at the sub-national level in response to the perceived problem of voter disengagement, albeit it with little clear evidence of the intended effects as yet.¹⁸

A particularly striking recent example of the argument that participatory reforms can (in part) provide an answer to the problem of democratic disconnect is provided by the report of the Power Inquiry. The Power Report was published in the spring of 2006 as 'an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy', funded by Joseph Rowntree and carried out by a Commission headed up by Helena Kennedy, QC. The Report is essentially a reaction to what its authors believe is a crisis in British governance. At the heart of this crisis, it suggests, lies a sclerotic system which has failed to keep pace with social change and which is run by elites disconnected from those they are supposed to serve, many of whom are therefore turning away from conventional politics altogether.¹⁹

In effect, the Power Report counterposes a people seemingly bursting with pent-up democratic energy with an elitist and bankrupt political system incapable of tapping that burgeoning potential. A good example of this is the Report's diagnosis of disengagement and declining turnout in general elections – one of its major preoccupations. The 'reality', it seems, is that 'the process of formal democracy' – a process about which people feel ill-informed – (a) offers people insufficient influence, (b) is run by parties they think are too similar and which require them 'to commit to too broad a range of policies', and (c) involves an electoral system whose procedures are 'inconvenient' and whose results are marred by 'unequal and wasted votes'. The Report's solution to these problems is to propose a set of recommendations²⁰ which

¹⁸ Susan E. Scarow, 'Party competition and institutional change: The expansion of direct democracy in Germany' *Party Politics*, 3 (1997), pp. 451-71.

¹⁹ For a more detailed account and critique of the Power Inquiry's report, see Tim Bale, Paul Taggart and Paul Webb 'You can't always get what you want: Populism and the Power Inquiry,' *The Political Quarterly* 77: 195-216, April-June 2006.

²⁰ See *Power to the People*, pp.20-25 for a summary of these recommendations.

will apparently contribute to the ‘three fundamental shifts’ it wants to see, namely (1) ‘a shift of power away from the Executive... and from central to local’, (2) ‘the creation of an electoral and party system which is responsive enough to the changing values and demands of today’s population to allow the necessary and organic creation of new political alliances, value systems and organisations which better represent those values and demands’, and (3) ‘the creation of a culture of political engagement in which policy and decision-making employs direct input from citizens’. It is the last of these objectives which most obviously entails the greater deployment of direct and participatory democracy, although some of the detailed proposals designed to weaken the cohesion of parliamentary parties would also be important in paving the way for greater influence of direct democracy in so far as they would likely undermine the representative model’s central feature – party government and its attendant chain of accountability. The Report contains few recommendations as to the precise forms by which direct participation might be enhanced, though it argues that ‘citizens should be given the right to initiate legislative processes, public inquiries and hearings into public bodies and their senior management’,²¹ and expresses its confidence that advances in communication technology will ‘increasingly allow large numbers of citizens to become engaged in political decisions in a focused way’.²²

There are several variants of radical participatory democracy within contemporary political theory, three of which I shall focus attention on here. The first is associated with what might broadly be labelled the New Left. Carole Pateman has been one of the most prominent and influential champions of this position, and we may regard her position as representative.²³ Noting the inequalities which are intrinsic to modern life, she argues that the state is not merely a neutral arbiter, as liberal theory would suggest, but serves to maintain and reproduce these inequalities and render implausible the assertion that individuals are ‘free and equal’. However, she dismisses the crude Marxist-Leninist view that modern liberal democracy is a mere ‘bourgeois’ device that serves little purpose beyond fostering the interests of the dominant class. Rather, she embraces the developmental perspective first associated with Rousseau and liberal thinkers such as JS Mill. That is, ‘participatory democracy fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs’.²⁴ She further concedes that many of the central institutions and processes of representative liberal democracy – chiefly parties and elections – will remain necessary, as few citizens have the capacity to become deeply engaged with the relatively distant policy choices of national and international politics. Nevertheless, she argues that there is

²¹ *Power to the People*, p.24.

²² *Power to the People*, p.229.

²³ Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²⁴ See David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 2nd edition, pp.267-8.

still scope for radical enhancement of participatory democracy. First and foremost, this can happen at the local level, where people can engage more readily with their direct interests. This means the workplace, the neighbourhood and local government. In addition, the major structure of national political involvement – political parties – should become democratised according to the principles of direct participation and accountability of leaders to members.

A second (and not mutually exclusive) variant of participatory democratic theory is provided by deliberative democracy. There is no one model of deliberative democracy, but common to all such arguments is the view that deliberative procedure is the source of political legitimacy, and that the goal is a rationally motivated consensus.²⁵ Recourse to majoritarian democracy should only occur when consensus proves impossible. The deliberative process is ‘reasoned’ in the sense that parties to deliberation are required to state reasons for proposals, and proposals are accepted or rejected based on the reasons given. Participants should be regarded as formally equal in so far as anyone can put forth proposals, criticise, and support measures without reference to any institutional or social hierarchy, and neither are they to be limited or bound by particular distributions of power or resources.²⁶

Deliberative democracy in this vein is in many ways consistent with the New Left position on participation – for instance, in stressing the need for equality of participants. However, some proponents prefer to root deliberative democracy in social and political pluralism. The goal is to foster human development and better and more legitimate decision-making by engaging different voices from the community in the discussion. To this extent, it is studiously neutral and even-handed, randomly selecting people who represent a wide range of views and experiences, and sometimes providing them with balanced materials to guide their discussions. Perhaps the best known example of this approach is provided by James Fishkin’s experiments in deliberative polling. These ‘microexperiments’ involve surveys of random samples of citizens before and after the group has had a chance to receive information and deliberate seriously on an issue; typically, such exercises generate substantial shifts in opinion across the course of the experiment, as participants learn more about the issue under consideration.²⁷

Such is the confidence of Fishkin that he has now taken this challenge beyond the point where Pateman felt it feasible to take radical participatory democracy – to the national level. This is manifest in the proposals for ‘Deliberation Days’ – national holidays in which millions of ordinary people would be given the chance to engage in constructive and developmental dialogue about public issues. Fishkin and

²⁵ See, for instance, Joseph Bessette, ‘Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government’, in *How Democratic is the Constitution?* (Washington, D.C., AEI Press, 1980), pp. 102-116; C. S. Nino, *The Constitution of Deliberative Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Joshua Cohen, ‘Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Legitimacy’, from A. Hamlin and P. Pettit (eds.), *The Good Polity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 17-34.

²⁷ See, for instance, James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

Ackerman regard this as an exercise in 'realistic utopianism' which, if realised, promises to revolutionise methods of governing, campaigning and accountability in modern democracies.²⁸

Finally, it should not go unremarked in this brief review of the debate that there is a further, but quite different, type of supporter of participatory – or at least, direct – democracy. This is populism. Populism is a peculiar variant – many might say pathology – of democracy which is characterised by a number of features including:

- The view that society is 'separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté generale* (general will) of the people';²⁹
- A preference for a direct plebiscitary relationship with a heroic leader, unmediated by the institutions, checks and balances of liberal and representative democracy;
- The professed aim of defending the established culture, traditions and rights of 'the people' against perceived threats from alien influences, which may be defined in terms of social groups (e.g., immigrants) or political institutions (e.g., the EU).

Populism thus constitutes a rejection of representative politics *per se*. As Gianfranco Pasquino says, 'in the populist mentality, there is no appreciation at all that some groups of individuals are needed who acquire political and institutional knowledge and apply it to the running of public affairs. Party politicians are always considered an obstacle to the expression of the "true" will of the people.'³⁰ Populists frequently advocate 'more' democracy in the form of referendums that will permit the people to bypass the 'self-interested liberal elite that is systematically betraying the interest of ordinary citizens',³¹ at least on issues where they are convinced they have a popular majority (such as capital punishment or immigration). This is illustrated in the UK by the shared preference of all of the main parties of the radical populist right for referendum democracy; BNP, UKIP and its short-lived offspring Veritas, all vaunted this ambition in their manifestos at the 2005 general election.³²

The sceptics' response

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which the participationist critique and prescription have been met with a sceptical response: the first is to argue that the problem of disaffection with the central institutions and processes of representative

²⁸ Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.13-15.

²⁹ Cas Mudde, 'The popular zeitgeist,' *Government & Opposition*, 39, Vol. 3, pp.543.

³⁰ Gianfranco Pasquino, 'Populism and Democracy,' in Daniele Albertazzi (ed.), *Twenty First Century Populism: Structure and Agency of the Unwelcome Guest of European Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, Forthcoming).

³¹ Gerry Stoker, 'Immature democrats,' *Prospect*, January 2006, p.11. See also Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2000).

³² See Paul Webb, 'The continuing advance of the minor parties,' in Pippa Norris and Christopher Wlezien (eds.), *Britain Votes 2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

democracy flows in large part from a palpable failure of most ordinary citizens to understand the nature of politics and their role as citizens; the second is to deny that more participation provides a plausible way out of the problem anyway. To be sure, the latter position often flows from the former. Since the problem, in their view, is not essentially one of systemic failure or elite shortcomings, the solution should not be to transform our institutions by making them radically more participatory; rather, we should be seeking to understand why so few people really see what politics is about, and therefore to better educate them and eradicate the sources of their incomprehension.

There have recently been a number of outspoken expressions of dismay at the apparent misapprehensions of so many citizens and commentators regarding the nature of democratic politics. Representative of this line of argument is Meg Russell's Fabian pamphlet, in which she poses the question '*Must Politics Disappoint?*', self-consciously taking up the mantle of Bernard Crick's classic *In Defence of Politics*.³³ She contends that 'many of our problems stem from our having forgotten what politics is there for, and why it is beneficial'. Starting from Crick's definition of politics as 'the activity by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated by giving them a share of power in proportion to their importance to the welfare and to the survival of the whole community', she laments that politicians and the media too often fail to communicate the essence of politics – 'that it is about negotiation and compromise, difficult choices and taking decisions together'. Instead, 'it is now seen as something largely divorced from everyday life, where politicians are expected to "deliver", and increasingly talk their profession down rather than up, within a media environment that is hostile rather than supportive'.³⁴ Culpability for this state of affairs should be shared by citizens, politicians and the media, in her view. Russell identifies a number of causes for the political malaise, chief amongst which is the modern culture of consumerism:

It is difficult to find anything more antithetical to the culture of politics than the contemporary culture of consumerism. While politics is about balancing diverse needs to benefit the public interest, consumerism is about meeting the immediate desires of the individual. While politics requires us to compromise and collaborate as citizens, consumerism emphasises unrestrained individual freedom of choice. While politics recognises that there are always resource constraints, modern consumerism increasingly encourages us to believe that we can have it all now.³⁵

Russell goes on to offer further causes of the crisis of politics, including the adversarial style of (British) politics, the advent of modern political campaigning, the

³³ Meg Russell, *Must Politics Disappoint?* (London: Fabian Society, 2005); Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (London, Pelican: 1962).

³⁴ *Must Politics Disappoint?*, p.4.

³⁵ *Must Politics Disappoint?*, p.10.

nature of media coverage of politics, ideological convergence between major parties, and the growing mutual autonomy of leaders and the parties that should sustain them. While the solutions she proposes contain some elements of enhanced participation (e.g., within political parties) they are largely focused on the need to construct a new, franker, more open and positive culture which emphasises the value of politics and its central institutions. Politics should come to be regarded as a source of pride, 'a cause not for despair, but for celebration'. It should be noted that much in Meg Russell's broad vein of argument is echoed strongly in Gerry Stoker's notable recent addition to the literature *Why Politics Matters*.³⁶

The sceptics also reject the view that more participation would work. There is a long tradition of democratic theory, of course, which is generally sceptical of the supposed benefits of participatory democracy. Advocates of elitist representative democracy, such as Joseph Schumpeter, have always regarded the popular control requirement of democracy as satisfied by little more than the electorate's capacity to remove leaders when they are no longer wanted. This is a relatively undemanding criterion for assessing the performance of political parties, which implies that antipathy or disaffection might be based mainly on the ignorant and unreasonable expectations of citizens. In any case, representative democrats would argue, more participation is not the answer to the problem. From the perspective of this school, the solution to the problem of popular disaffection with politics is not to compel citizens to undertake more of it, but rather to find a way of getting them to better understand and appreciate it. This brings us back to Meg Russell's call for a 'new culture of politics', and also resonates with the introduction of citizenship education as part of the national curriculum in the UK (something which owes a considerable debt to the work of Russell's inspiration, Bernard Crick).

A powerful contribution to this part of the debate has been made in recent years by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse in their research on American voters. They offer a stark challenge to the participationist visionaries:

The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision-making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know the details of the decision-making process... This does not mean that people think no mechanism for government accountability is necessary; they just do not want the mechanism to come into play except in unusual circumstances.³⁷

Like Russell and Stoker, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse are struck by the naïve and unrealistic views about the nature of the political process which many citizens

³⁶ Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). A very similar argument about the failure of so many citizens and commentators to recognise the essential nature of politics can be found in Bale et al's 'You can't always get what you want' *op.cit.*

³⁷ *Stealth Democracy*, pp. 1-2.

maintain. They discovered a widespread belief that Americans generally shared similar basic goals, but were betrayed by elites in hock to the 'special interests'. This was seen to create a cacophonous power struggle based on the pursuit of self-interest, whereas it was felt that an impartial technocratic elite should be able to make policies based on the public interest. There is perhaps more than a hint of populism in all this, and in the consequent belief 'that the common good is not debatable but, rather, will be apparent if selfishness can be stripped away'.³⁸

Hibbings and Theiss-Morse summarise the orientations of American citizens as a preference for some kind of 'stealth' arrangement, whereby citizens know that democracy exists, but expect it to be barely visible on a routine basis – an attitude that they describe as naïve and unfeasible. The upshot of the *Stealth Democracy* study is that the authors criticise both the naïveté of popular attitudes towards politics, and the insistence of some observers that participatory democracy provides the solution to it. 'People need to understand that disagreements can occur among people of good heart and that some debating and compromising will be necessary to resolve these disagreements and come to a collective solution. As such, education designed to increase people's appreciation of democracy needs to be a crucial element of efforts to improve the current situation.'³⁹ The alleged benefits of participatory democracy are derided as 'wishful thinking', and they point out that research tends to reveal that it only works under very limited conditions. 'Deliberation will not work in the real world of politics where people are different and where tough, zero-sum decisions must be made...real deliberation is quite likely to make them hopping mad or encourage them to suffer silently because of a reluctance to voice their own opinions in the discussion.'⁴⁰ Indeed, they cite a variety of research evidence to debunk three of the major claims of the participationists: that deliberative and participatory democracy produces better decision-making; that it enhances the legitimacy of the political system; and that it leads to personal development ('improves people').

Clearly, democracy needs to be actively nurtured and sustained and not just appreciated in the abstract if it is to remain healthy. But how should this be done in the light of the alleged evidence of widespread disaffection with representative democracy? Whereas the participationists recommend new opportunities for public deliberation, the sceptics tend to place greater emphasis on better citizenship education and, where possible, the regulation of sources of political ignorance and disaffection. In order to contribute usefully to the prescriptive debate, however, it is important to start from a strong evidential basis.

Understanding anti-party sentiment: Thoughts on a research agenda

In my view, there is considerable scope for further empirical research which can help shed light on various aspects of this controversy. Specifically, three things need to be

³⁸ *Stealth Democracy*, p. 9.

³⁹ *Stealth Democracy*, p. 10.

⁴⁰ *Stealth Democracy*, p. 207.

done: First, a comprehensive and clear empirical account needs to be provided of citizen understandings of politics and citizenship under democratic conditions; second, we need to identify accurately the sources of popular disaffection with party politics; third – and having achieved the first two objectives – an effective evaluation needs to be provided of the measures which might be taken to alleviate the cancer of popular disaffection with representative democratic politics. Let us consider each of these challenges in turn.

A comprehensive and clear empirical account of citizen understandings of politics and citizenship

I suggested earlier that much of the evidence of public opinion on which this debate draws is imperfect, indirect, ambiguous and potentially misleading. The confusion is exemplified by the stark contrast in the findings reported by the Power Inquiry in the UK and the *Stealth Democracy* project in the USA. Whereas the former claims evidence of highly-motivated citizens frustrated at the lack of opportunities for meaningful participation, the latter reveals quite the opposite phenomenon: people who do not like politics, and have little inclination to engage with it in an active sense. Of course, it is always possible that both sets of findings are accurate, and that the explanation simply lies in the profound cultural differences between Americans and Britons. Indeed, we cannot completely rule out this possibility; with its stronger tradition of populism, it is conceivable that America is different to the UK in this respect. As already noted, some of the evidence that Hibbings and Theiss-Morse report is consistent with the populist mindset (the sense of betrayal by an elite in hock to special interests, and so on). In any case, the point is that we cannot know without undertaking further research which addresses the puzzle.

So the challenge is to design research that will clarify our understanding of the issues set out in this pamphlet. Certainly, there is relevant work which has already been undertaken, though nothing, I believe, that fully addresses the range of required knowledge. For instance, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley's authoritative monograph *Citizenship in Britain*⁴¹ provides a sophisticated and authoritative model of how people participate in politics, but little direct insight into the questions that are central to the debate we have identified; their survey does not directly address such issues as how citizens conceive of politics and the roles of elites and themselves, or how 'reasonable' and well-informed their evaluations of politics, parties and politicians might be. It does not allow us to see whether they regard themselves more as political citizens or as 'consumers', and neither does it address the question of whether or not most people actually want more political participation.

The *Audit of Political Engagement*, a survey that has been jointly commissioned by the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society annually since 2003, comes

⁴¹ Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

closer to the line of inquiry I am advocating.⁴² For example, it asks of respondents how willing they would be to participate in various ways, as well as a battery of questions designed to elicit a sense of what they ‘understand by politics’. This certainly provides some relevant and interesting material, and seems to have generated conclusions which are much more consistent with those of *Stealth Democracy* than the Power Inquiry. Thus, Declan McHugh reports that ‘only a fraction of the public has either been, or is willing to become, seriously involved in influencing decisions’; indeed, he suggests that protestations of a desire to be heard should not be confused with a genuine willingness to actually participate. Consequently, ‘representative democracy can still better balance the collective need to confer legitimacy on policy outcomes while allowing individual citizens the opportunity to decide on the level of participation that best suits their concerns’.⁴³

A recent addition to the literature comes in the form of Mactaggart, Mulgan and Ali’s pamphlet for the Young Foundation.⁴⁴ This draws on new survey material to argue that people specifically want more participation in local decision-making and a decentralisation of power. They offer a range of prescriptions for reform, some quite novel, but my focus here is on the nature of the new data which they are able to offer us. Some of the survey findings are intriguing, but they exemplify the tendency for this kind of research to generate more questions than answers. Consider the following examples:⁴⁵

We are told that 54 per cent of respondents would find parties more appealing if they ‘involved people more in local decision-making’. Similarly, 16 per cent would prefer them to allow ‘interested people to influence policy more’. Putting to one side the probable incredulity of the sceptics, this information leaves the curious researcher wondering what the desire for ‘greater involvement’ in decision-making and ‘influence’ over policy might actually mean in precise terms. Even vaguer is the news that 48 per cent of respondents would be more attracted to parties if they ‘would listen more to the public’. There is perhaps something ironic about such views in this age of focus group-driven political marketing, but it would be fascinating to probe what people have in mind when they demand to be ‘listened to’. Is it possible that people simply mean that governments or parties are not doing *what they want* when they say this? It is, of course, inevitable that all government actions will involve measures that *some* voters do not want; this will be the case regardless of whether or not they take pains to ‘listen’ to public opinion. If this interpretation is correct, then it would be grist to the mill of those like Meg Russell who argue that many citizens fail to grasp that the essence of politics lies in the art of compromise and negotiation, such that a peaceful and stable outcome may be

⁴² See, for instance, Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 3* (London: Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, 2006).

⁴³ Declan McHugh, ‘Wanting to be heard but not wanting to act? Addressing political disengagement,’ *Parliamentary Affairs* 59 (2006), p.541.

⁴⁴ Fiona Mactaggart, Geoff Mulgan and Rushanara Ali, *Parties for the Public Good* (London: Young Foundation, 2006).

⁴⁵ The following examples are taken from *Parties for the Public Good*, p.25.

achieved, albeit one that is sub-optimal for some and perhaps for all particular group interests. For those individuals incapable of understanding this central fact of political life, politics must indeed be destined to disappoint.

The point of citing these examples is not to denigrate *Parties for the Public Good* – it is readable, the analysis is largely plausible, and the prescriptions somewhat novel and certainly worthy of consideration – but to illustrate the limitations of even the more recent bespoke inquiries into the subject of anti-party sentiment and democratic disconnect. But we can go further in our critique of the current state of the evidence, for it is limited in a wider variety of ways. For instance, there is a need to understand people's views about the continuing centrality (or otherwise) of political parties to contemporary politics: what roles and functions do people think parties (should) play in politics, and how well do they think parties succeed in fulfilling these roles? Do they feel that parties are now superseded by interest groups, social movements and the media in respect of some of these functions? Could democracy operate without parties? How are parties resourced and how should they be resourced? Should the state intervene to regulate the internal operations and distribution of power within parties?

Beyond these rather disparate topics, however, there lies a deeper issue with which research has to engage: the question of the underlying mindsets that frame citizen attitudes towards politics and representative democracy. This takes us back to the contrasting visions of democracy that we outlined earlier: to what extent can we infer attitudinal positions among groups of citizens which are broadly consistent with a preference for representative democracy as it currently operates, or for more participatory or direct models of democracy? And if the latter, then which variant seems more appropriate – some version of radical and egalitarian participationism, or populism? Methodologically, I would contend that such a demanding task is best approached through the triangulation of quantitative, qualitative and even quasi-experimental approaches with which Hibbings and Theiss-Morse conducted the *Stealth Democracy* study. Customised survey instruments should provide the means by which the (quantitative) explanatory power of these ideological categories can help us map the political orientations of today's citizens, but qualitative focus group research is a vital prelude to this, for it is only in the context of intimate open-ended small group discussions that the researcher can probe the full meanings of the subject's discourse. This sheds light on the mindset of various actors, and thereby helps to frame the exact hypotheses and models which can be more precisely tested in 'large n' surveys. In short, qualitative research can and should guide us in the design of quantitative survey instruments.

Identifying sources of popular disaffection with politics

If anything, this is an even more challenging task than the exploratory goal of understanding citizens' attitudes. However, it is important to comprehend which of

the explanations for the popular disaffection with politics is most persuasive. The potential causes may well vary from one category of citizen to another. For instance, for any citizens we identify as radical participationist democrats, an obvious explanation to test for would be the cognitive mobilisation thesis – i.e., essentially that they are highly educated and well informed about politics. For deliberative democrats, we could imagine that the adversarial and ‘negative’ nature of competitive party politics might be a particular turn-off. Those of a populist orientation might also find this a source of their disdain for political elites, but in addition, we might expect evidence that they are motivated by particular sources of anger, such as a concern over immigration or perceived loss of national sovereignty to the EU. Beyond these particular explanatory models for specific ideological types in the electorate, the brief review of themes in the literature provided in this pamphlet suggests a number of other more general hypotheses that merit attention, and could affect all types of voters, including the tendency for people to look at politics as ‘consumers’ rather than ‘citizens’, and the malign impact of media coverage of politics. Again, the challenge confronting researchers will be to design studies that draw imaginatively on quantitative, qualitative and experimental methods in order to test these and possibly other explanatory hypotheses once the appropriate data sets have been generated.

An evaluation of appropriate measures of reform

Clearly, this task depends in large measure on the answers generated by the previous stages of research. Do the findings convince us that a substantial percentage of citizens are frustrated at the shallow nature of contemporary representative democracy, and genuinely seek further opportunities for participation in decision-making? If so, the recommendations of the advocates of participatory democracy will have to be taken very seriously. Or do British (or for that matter any other country’s) citizens largely replicate the preference for inactivity and ‘Stealth Democracy’ reported in America? If so, then the implications would seem to be quite different. As Hibblings and Theiss-Morse suggest, more effective programmes of citizenship education may well be required – which of course begs questions about the impact of the Citizenship curriculum introduced in the UK in recent years, another research agenda which is already being implemented by scholars. Then again, if research demonstrates that the media have a negative and damaging impact on people’s understandings and perceptions of politics, Meg Russell’s call for a system of stronger regulation of the press and broadcasting industries will be hard to ignore. And what if the challenge is that of an emergent populism in the population? What would be the implications then? This is a complex subject in its own right, which tends to be overlooked in the debate about democratic disconnect and anti-party sentiment, and it is not a subject into which I have the space to digress here. However, we are fortunate in as much as there already exists a significant literature on the phenomenon and its likely institutional, social, political and economic causes (and constraints). This is a literature which is regularly updated and replenished, and it is a valuable resource on which we can call.

Conclusion

I am not tempted to prejudge the likely outcome of this call to research. Indeed, it is hard to read some of the contributions to the debate without suspecting that a few have allowed prior normative judgements to shape their interpretations of the evidence. However, I am convinced that it is important that political scientists take it seriously. I have observed the growing number of assertions of public disaffection with representative democracy and party politics with a mixture of bemusement and dismay. The profession of political science has helped to identify this phenomenon; the greater, but no less vital, challenge it now confronts is to take the lead in understanding and perhaps facilitating a resolution of this apparently unhappy state of affairs.

The challenge is to meld representation and participation

Geoff Mulgan

Paul Webb's paper addresses what are surely two of the central questions of modern politics and democracy. The first question concerns why it is that as representative democracy spreads around the world it appears flawed in the countries which have been democratic for longest. The second question concerns what can be done about it, and how the public's engagement and confidence can be restored.

Few would now deny the very familiar evidence of declining party affiliation, turnout and membership. But there is less agreement on the causes. Indeed it is striking how little convergence there has been in relation to the diagnosis. For some the problem is that power has been captured and jealously guarded by the elites (though the most self-consciously disaffected tend to be relatively well educated and affluent). For others it is the rise of consumerism (though this turns out to be very hard to prove), or diminishing ideological differences between the parties or the relative impotence of national governments. I have argued in the past that part of the reason may be a widening contrast between a democratic cultural ideal of sovereignty (which has spread in many domains of life, from the home and the bedroom to the workplace), and the democratic reality of structures of governance in which power remains highly concentrated and distant from the citizen. This interpretation fits some of the evidence – but like many of the other arguments it, too, is not easy to prove.

These debates show few signs of being resolved. In some cases it may be because causes and effects are so entwined; for example, are parties in decline because of broader policy failures or do these failures reflect the parties' own deficiencies (such as their subordination to vested interests)?

Getting the diagnosis right is obviously essential if the solutions are to pass muster. Here I tend to sympathise with some of the criticisms Paul Webb makes of the 'participationists'. A soft version of their arguments is surely right – that, in order to be legitimate, democratic institutions need multiple ways of engaging the public that go well beyond election time arguments. But the more maximal claims that active participation can bypass politics and representative institutions soon become incoherent. They claim too much of citizens, and underestimate the importance of the hard graft of making decisions, building consensus and setting priorities. Nor have many of the participationists adequately acknowledged that most of the newer forms of civic engagement are more elitist than traditional party politics. The real challenge is surely how to meld representation and participation. No one has yet been able to propose a plausible and desirable way of organising politics that would

avoid the need for representation and the synthetic role of parties. Yet it is equally clear that existing party and representative structures are less adequate for the tasks, or the public, or the early 21st century than they were 50 or 100 years ago.

That is why a twin track is needed: on the one hand to evolve better ways of engaging the public, and organised interests, in argument and decision-making, and on the other to help representative institutions to do their jobs better. The first track is an essentially practical one of designing and developing new methods and institutions. This is a task not only for civil society, which needs new ways to reach upwards into the centres of power, but also for elected politicians and officials who lack reliable tools for reaching out to the public. The urgency of this task is part of the rationale for establishing 'Involve', a charity launched last year which links the many hundreds of people working on new forms of participation. Its purpose is not to propose grand constitutional reforms but rather to build on the practical experience of engaging people in decisions – on everything from planning to nanotechnology – and draw conclusions. It has undertaken hard-headed assessments of such things as the costs and benefits of different models of engagement, or why some kinds of consultation leave people more alienated while others leave them with greater confidence in their governing institutions. As Paul Webb's argument shows, we badly need a more solid understanding of what works and why, and hopefully the pragmatic approach taken by Involve and others will complement the more detached analyses of academia.

The second track – revitalising existing representative institutions – is equally important. Many ideas have been floated for helping parliaments to become more porous to arguments and ideas. The Scottish Parliament has, for example, been particularly imaginative in opening itself up, and in some of the new democracies lively experiment is underway: Estonia, for example, has a direct democracy portal on its government website. The vital role that parties need to play in this opening up lay behind proposals that I have been involved in (published by the Young Foundation)¹ to use any reforms to party funding to reinforce their 'public benefit' roles – in policy formulation, developing leaders and determining strategic priorities. Our argument rested both on our assessment of the importance of parties to a healthy democracy, and on the messages which seemed to be coming from public opinion. A survey we commissioned showed that the public still ranks parties above any other set of civic organisations – voluntary organisations, campaign groups, trade unions – as a way of meeting their long term needs. Forty-nine per cent believe that political parties enable people to have a voice and 45 per cent feel political parties are good for the democratic system. Yet the British public are not satisfied with parties as they are. They see them as secretive, closed and no better than single-issue groups as a means of achieving change: sixty-two per cent see political parties in Britain as not open or transparent and only one in 10 could even contemplate joining a party.

¹ Fiona Mactaggart MP, Geoff Mulgan and Rushanara Ali, *Parties for the Public Good* (London: Young Foundation, 2006).

Paul Webb is right that survey results such as this raise as many questions as they answer – and it is appropriate that the well-resourced politics departments of universities should be trying to dig deeper. But I suspect he, and many of the authors he cites, is overly pessimistic about the public's ability to cope with the messy compromises of politics. There is now abundant evidence that people are more likely to support decisions that go against their views and interests so long as they have had a chance to engage in the process. And they are often very realistic about what governments can and cannot do.

More research might help. However I am not wholly convinced that this is necessarily the priority, and I am not convinced that more research would be likely to provide more definitive answers. I cannot help but think of what happened to e-democracy earlier in this decade when at one point a flourishing academic industry seemed to be growing up far ahead of any real world activity. What the world needed then were innovations and experiments – not articles and books which logically needed to come later. In relation to engagement more generally we may be in a similar position. I suspect that the highest priority is to try out and test out new methods that can bridge the world of representation and decision making and the worlds of civil society and public argument. There are a few in circulation – from deliberative polls to participative budgeting – but not enough, and the evidence and analysis of which ones work and why is weak. Many more need to be tested out to clarify exactly what people will contribute their time to, and what kinds of decision they will see as legitimate.

Some of these will make full use of the web – like the imaginative innovations of the MySociety group. But I suspect that one paradox of an increasingly mediated political culture may be that face-to-face interaction is also becoming more important. Over the last few decades, people's trust in the institutions they talk to day-to-day and face-to-face – doctors, post offices, police – has remained strong. Yet public trust in big, distant organisations – big business, big government, big media – has declined. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that as parties have replaced their conversations on the doorstep with megaphone campaigning, and as some figures at the top of the big parties have appeared contemptuous of the foot soldiers who slog away during elections, trust in parties has ebbed. A better understanding, grounded in empirical analysis, of which kinds of engagement and interaction make people feel engaged might be an ideal point of connection between the academic world and the practitioners, and a good place to advance a series of arguments which risk becoming stuck.

The evidence is on the doorstep

Baroness Shephard

In his paper, Paul Webb calls for more accurate and focused research on an issue which concerns governments and politicians in democracies across the world: why are voters in so many countries apparently alienated from the democratic process?

His analysis of the relevant literature identifies many of the commonly cited reasons for voter alienation, not only by academics, but also by those actively engaged in politics: those who actually knock on doors asking for votes. Admittedly evidence from the doorstep may be less than objective, and it is certainly not systematic; it nevertheless has something to offer to the debate.

The reason most frequently given for not voting is that there is no point. Further questioning produces a number of arguments which include the following:

- All you politicians are the same.
- It doesn't matter what I say, no one takes any notice.
- We are ruled from Europe in any case.
- What difference will one vote make?
- What can anyone do about big business, because that is what rules the world?
- I am supposed to vote for councillors, MPs, MEPs, MSPs, AMs, and none of it makes any difference to my circumstances.
- No one's ever to blame.
- Everything is spin anyway.

Other arguments quite often reveal a lack of understanding of the difference between the functions of an MP, local councillors, the police, social services, *et al.* This in turn means that people do not know who, among those for whom they could vote, is responsible for what. Self-evidently, the casualty is accountability.

These doorstep reactions have led me to mount a modest research exercise, investigating voter attitudes in England and France. With collaborators in France, I have devised a questionnaire, which has been given to twin groups in each country. The groups chosen include local councillors, political activists, students, Rotarians, and members of twinning groups. Those participating are asked to give their age and occupation. The questions are designed to probe the circumstances in which people are motivated to vote, and those in which they are not. They also attempt to find out if there is any level of government where they think voting might make a difference.

Very early, and as yet inconclusive, findings indicate that in England the reasons for voter alienation are very much those outlined by Paul Webb. Generational differences

do emerge, in that many older people feel it their duty to vote, no matter what. Tribal voters do still exist in this generation.

In France however, the research is already showing that people behave differently if they are voting locally, as opposed to nationally and, in particular, if they are voting for the local mayor. The reasons given are that they understand the system, they are familiar with the powers of the mayor, and they *do* think that mayoral candidates have different qualities to offer the local community. Also, the mayor, once elected, is identifiable and in a position to be judged on his promises. In other words, he is accountable.¹

These very early findings indicate to me the importance of Paul Webb's proposals for further and more focused research, avoiding if possible the apparent, if not entirely real, dichotomy proposed by the participatory and representative democratic schools of thought. It seems to me that what we need to know is whether and why people think it is worth voting, and in what circumstances.

That research may also serve to remind us that in this country we have a parliamentary democracy. It is different in kind and organisation from democracies, for example, in France and the United States. The function of a political party is indeed to enable those elected to represent it to form a government, through the parliamentary process. This function of political parties is the point of their existence, and is all too often ignored or traduced by sloppy thinkers in the media. If we believe in democracy, then we have to accept and respect the fact that in our particular form of democracy it is the political parties that deliver it, through the parliamentary process. The importance of Parliament is paramount.

Paul Webb is right to highlight some of the shortcomings of the Power Report, enthusiastic and committed though the members of its Commission were. Indeed, some of its recommendations make good sense. However, the Commission's point that 'our system of electing our parliamentary representatives is widely regarded as a positive obstacle to meaningful political involvement'² should surely lead them to a conclusion that Britain should abandon its parliamentary democratic system, not to such proposals as 'democracy hubs' and the like.

Paul Webb points out that 'there is survey evidence of apparently significant levels of disaffection with and distrust for parties, politicians and the process of politics'. This contradicts other survey evidence that most people when questioned believe that their own MP 'does a good job'. As he says, 'This leaves us confronting a need for

¹ It is perhaps worth mentioning that there is no exact translation in French of 'accountable', although *responsable* and *comptable* are both used.

² *Power to the People: The Report of Power, an Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy* (London: Power Inquiry, 2006), p. 29.

research that clarifies the present ambiguity in much of the evidence and which rests on a deeper understanding of citizen attitudes towards democratic institutions and processes’.

I would suggest that most people understand the concept of accountability. At work, within the family and the community, who should be held accountable is on the whole clear. If the treasurer of the darts club absconds with the funds, the saloon bar will know who to blame. It is because accountability is not clear within the governmental process that people lose patience with it. The problem has been compounded by the growth in the number of unaccountable quangos, created by government, but somehow unidentifiable, by the deliberate blurring of responsibility, for example, for education, between national and local government, or in the case of health, between Health Care Trusts and those who dictate their policies (i.e. ministers). The list is a long one, and the public know it. Not for nothing do they say on the doorstep, ‘no one’s ever to blame, no one ever resigns’.

The solution to the accountability problem is certainly not to create yet more elected bodies; people are confused enough by the number that already exist. Politicians must understand that, once elected to government, they are accountable, and that the buck stops with them.

Greater clarity about the areas of responsibility within local and national government would help illuminate accountability. This clarity should not be blurred when things get awkward for ministers. People are quite simply, not fooled; they are alienated.

But above all, given that ours is a parliamentary democracy, politicians and political parties themselves should respect the institution of Parliament. Governments should not be tempted to govern by press release. They should lose no opportunity, ever, to emphasise the importance of Parliament. The Hansard Society, in its 2001 Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny, stated:

Parliament performs a number of roles in British democracy. Parliament makes the law and decides on how much the government can raise through taxation. Crucially, it also creates and sustains the government. Parliament provides the vital link between the electorate and government. Governments are accountable to the people through general elections. Between general elections, Parliament is the principal means by which the government can be held to account for its activities.³

In recent years governments have acquired an unenviable reputation for spin. They should now turn that skill to honourable account, by using every means at their disposal to emphasise the vital importance of the institution of Parliament.

³ *The Challenge for Parliament: Making Government Accountable*, Report of the Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny (London: Vacher Dod, 2001).

Research is helpful – but action is essential

John Healey MP

Professor Paul Webb does our politics a service in his paper. It is a useful exploration of the evidence on public perceptions and criticisms of our current political system, and the role of politicians and political parties within it.

He is right to argue for a better and wider understanding of the strengths of our representative democracy and a clearer recognition of the limitations of direct democracy, which cannot serve as any real substitute when reconciliation, arbitration or decision between competing interests is required.

And Paul Webb is also right to point out that measuring public opinion towards political parties is complex and to call for research into many of the areas we need to understand better.

There is indeed a malaise in our political parties, which is part of the perceived disillusion with and disengagement in politics more generally. Membership is low and falling, they are the least trusted of civil institutions¹ and the established parties are subject to increasingly active antagonism. In the 1997 general election, 15 per cent of the public urged people to vote *for* a particular party; 19 per cent, on the other hand, urged people to vote *against* a particular party. By 2001, however, there was a 1:2 negative ratio (9 per cent urging a vote for a party and 19 per cent urging a vote against a party) and by 2005 it had increased to 1:3 (12 per cent urging a vote for and 36 per cent urging a vote against).²

However, we need to be careful not to assume there was ever a Golden Age of political engagement. During the 1950s, when voter turnout and party membership were at their peak, one in five people were nevertheless non-voters and still only a small minority were party members. Even during the war, with a national coalition government in 1944, the public were strongly sceptical of political parties, with only a third believing MPs put the interests of the country ahead of their own or their party's interests.³

In order to understand and search for ways to deal with the 'democratic disconnect', we must first answer this central question: do people see political parties as an important part of our democratic system or as a barrier to democracy and good government?

¹ See the European Commission Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm.

² According to research conducted by MORI, www.ipsos-mori.com.

³ According to research conducted by Gallup.

Research consistently shows a large majority of people accept that it is reasonable for MPs to take into account what the party's manifesto promised when they vote on important national issues. We can take heart also from recent research published by the Young Foundation, to which Paul Webb refers, which suggests that people understand in principle the need for political parties, though in practice they are very critical of how they perceive parties to operate.⁴ When asked if they believed political parties are good, bad or make no difference for a democratic system, a third said parties make no difference, but those saying 'good' outnumbered 'bad' by 7:1. Half of those questioned thought that political parties in Britain 'enable people to have a voice'; 29 per cent disagreed. Research by Seyd and Whiteley shows a stronger belief in the role of parties among their members, with 66 per cent of Labour members and 57 per cent of Conservative members agreeing that people can have a real influence in politics if they are prepared to get involved, although more than two fifths of members in both parties think the party leadership does not pay a lot of attention to party members.⁵

Paul Webb, however, approaches the subject as a political scientist. For the politician or political activist, more research would certainly be helpful, but action is essential. And here the essay is thinner. Paul Webb himself acknowledges that political scientists are good at identifying the problems but are less strong on solutions.

Some might say the opposite is true of politicians – that we're often too quick with solutions for problems we may not have fully understood. But here goes: a six point action plan for renewal.

Labour's membership has been dropping in recent years and Conservative membership figures have also fallen, even after David Cameron's first high-profile year as leader.

As the locus and focus of mainstream political parties has become more centralised, parties have moved away from the community and civil society, creating a vacuum which single-issue campaigns or sectional interest groups are filling. This is a particular characteristic of political parties in power, when the imperative to support the Government inevitably moves them towards the state and further away from being a voice or channel for wider viewpoints. Many in the Labour Party would recognise this description of our present position and Conservatives might accept that their party is only now emerging from the long shadow of their 18 years in government.

Point 1: The key for any leader lies less in reform of the party and more in reform of the party role in the wider community; renewing party activism means renewing party connections to the community.

⁴ Fiona Mactaggart MP, Geoff Mulgan and Rushanara Ali, *Parties for the Public Good* (London: Young Foundation, 2006).

⁵ Patrick Seyd, Paul Whiteley and Jon Parry, *Labour and Conservative Party Members 1990-92: Social Characteristics, Political Attitudes and Activities* (Dartmouth, 1996).

In the modern age, the main political parties, reflecting contemporary society, no longer set out as they did last century to champion one set of class or sectional interest over others, but rather to build a broad base and reconcile or strike a balance between competing interests, driven by their political values and vision.

This is the indispensable, if inadequately understood, function of political parties in a modern representative democracy that Paul Webb terms ‘interest articulation and aggregation’. If political parties didn’t exist, we’d have to create them because of the requirement to balance often competing and conflicting specific interests for the common good and governance.

Point 2: Renewing parties entails a more confident assertion of this essential function – which is, incidentally, the main principled basis on which it is credible to advocate state funding for political parties.

At a local level political parties must renew this role too, but backed by concerted action in two areas to create the context in which the relevance of parties can be convincingly reasserted.

Point 3: A much more determined devolution of power from central to local government is required to bring decisions directly affecting people more within their reach and influence, alongside fresh opportunities for information, public dialogue, active consultation, involvement in decision-making and methods of holding local government to account.

Point 4: Alongside this, we need to work to promote a wider definition of politics. Research shows that the vast majority of people are actively interested in the issues that affect them, their family and the wider world, and want to have a say in the way the country is run.⁶ This suggests there is significant potential for greater participation if the restricted perception of politics as something that is done by politicians in formal institutions with little link to people’s own activities and experiences can be overcome. A redefinition of ‘politics’ and parties is required so that people can come to appreciate that the broad political process is simply individuals seeing things they want to change, making allies, organising to press the case and secure the necessary decisions to bring about change. This should be actively fostered by political parties and elected MPs and councillors, so that civic activism is better connected with political activism in a broader understanding of politics which is not limited to the party political activities of professional politicians.

Traditionally, membership has been the route through which parties involve citizens locally. And in the past, a combination of overlapping membership, active community links and stable populations meant that parties, without trying, could act as a local forum through which a range of other sectional interests – churches, sports

⁶ Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 3* (London: Electoral Commission and Hansard Society, 2006).

associations, hobby clubs, chambers of trade, trades unions, youth groups, charities – could be heard. Parties had a role in social mixing, topical discussion and political influence. Nowadays, any mediation or articulation of community interests tends to be increasingly left to elected politicians, with councillors, MEPs and MPs less supported than ever in this role by their political parties.

Point 5: At the local level, political parties must do more to renew their role as institutions which contribute and mediate for the common good. This means: developing more active forums for debate and deliberation; being more pluralist in culture and composition; acting as a sharper voice and stronger bridge between local concerns and national policies; and, critically, being seen and strongly supported by the party leaderships to play an essential role between, and not just during, elections.

Such a new style of political parties would appear to hit the mark for the public who are clear about the reforms they wish to see. A recent survey asked people what changes would help to make political parties more appealing. The top three responses were: involving people more in local decision-making; listening more to the public; and taking the time to talk to people about their organisation and explaining their values.⁷

This will not be achieved through the singular mechanism of party membership. With the general decline in collective institutions and identities, the traditional form of political party association – pay to have your say – is too limited to meet these challenges.

Point 6: Parties must therefore look at extending their reach and encouraging wider connections through supporter status, online networks, consultative forums, and more joint meetings, training and campaigns. New technologies and electronic communications can help but there is no techno-fix. What parties and politicians do, and crucially how they respond to public interest and views, is the key.

I do not underestimate the challenge in making political parties more appealing – too often one of the last places anyone with an appetite for political discussion or action would want to go is to a local Labour Party branch meeting. Yet, the one word Paul Webb does not use in his analysis of the political disconnect for parties is ‘boring’.

The stakes are high. If the major parties fail to meet these challenges of renewal, then the recently increasing appeal of BNP anti-politics and ‘none of the above’ will strengthen.

In the end, however, this means going back to basics. Most people don’t spend their time assessing political parties according to abstract theories of modern political engagement or democracy. Their perceptions and judgments are formed by whether parties do what they say and deliver what people expect.

⁷ See *Parties for the Public Good*, p.25.

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