

RULING THE VOID?

The Hollowing of Western Democracy

‘SEMI-SOVEREIGN PEOPLE’ was the term coined nearly half a century ago to suggest that control over political decision-making might lie beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen.¹ Schattschneider’s thesis was a familiar theme in the sixties, discussed by a variety of critical scholars in the so-called pluralist-elitist debate. It seems to me to remain highly relevant—albeit now in a stronger and less equivocal form. For today even semi-sovereignty appears to be slipping away, and the citizenry are becoming effectively *non-sovereign*. What we see emerging is a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component—democracy without a demos. In what follows I examine the twin processes of popular and elite withdrawal from mass electoral politics with particular focus on the transformation of political parties. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this process for Western liberal democracies.

When I first began to consider the notion of non-sovereignty, I associated it primarily with indifference—towards politics and, indeed, towards democracy. This had been one of the more neglected elements in the literature on political trust and mistrust that emerged in the late 1990s.² Arguably, however, the sense of hostility which some citizens clearly felt towards their political leaders was less important than the indifference with which many others viewed the political world more generally. Of course, the dividing line between indifference and hostility is not always very pronounced, and, as de Tocqueville once observed, the loss of function can easily breed contempt for those who continue to base their privileges on its exercise. But it seemed worth recognizing

that politics and politicians might simply be deemed irrelevant by many ordinary citizens.

By the late 1990s, however, popular indifference was being compounded by a new rhetoric from the politicians themselves. A salient case was Tony Blair, who claimed during his first term as Prime Minister that 'I was never really in politics . . . I don't feel myself a politician even now'.³ For Blair, the role of 'progressive' politics was not to provide solutions from above, by exercising the 'directive hand' of government, but to bring together 'dynamic markets' and strong communities so as 'to offer synergy and opportunity'.⁴ In Blair's ideal world, politics would eventually become redundant. As one of his close cabinet colleagues was later to remark, 'depoliticizing of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people'.⁵ At one level, this was a simple populist strategy—employing the rhetoric of 'the people' in order to suggest that there had been a radical break with past styles of government. At another, however, it gelled perfectly with the tenets of what were then seen as newly emerging schools of 'governance'—and with the idea that 'society is now sufficiently well organized through self-organizing networks that any attempts on the part of government to intervene will be ineffective and perhaps counterproductive'.⁶ In this perspective, government no longer seeks to wield power or even exercise authority. Its relevance declines, while that of non-governmental institutions and practices increases. In Ulrich Beck's terms, the dynamic moves from Politics, with a capital 'P', to politics with a lower-case one, or to what he has called 'subpolitics'.⁷

Anti-political sentiments were also becoming more evident in the policy-making literature of the late 1990s. In 1997, an influential article

¹ E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, Chicago 1960. An earlier version of this argument was rehearsed in 'Democracy Beyond Parties', Center for the Study of Democracy, UC Irvine 2005, available online: repositories.cdlib.org/csd.

² See, for example, Susan Pharr and Robert Putnam, eds, *Disaffected Democracies*, Princeton 2000; Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens*, Oxford 1999.

³ *Blair's Thousand Days*, BBC 2, 30 January 2000. For a discussion of New Labour's approach see my 'Partyless Democracy', NLR 2, March–April 2000.

⁴ Tony Blair, 'Third Way, Phase Two', *Prospect*, March 2001.

⁵ Lord Falconer, quoted by Matthew Flinders and Jim Buller, 'Depoliticisation, Democracy and Arena-Shifting', unpublished paper 2004.

⁶ Guy Peters, 'Governance: a Garbage-Can Perspective', ISA, Vienna 2002.

⁷ For example, Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, London 1992, pp. 183–236.

appeared in *Foreign Affairs* expressing the concern that government in the US was becoming 'too political'. Its author, Alan Blinder, a leading economist and deputy head of the Federal Reserve, suggested extending the model of independent Central Banks to other key policy areas, so that decisions on health, the welfare state and so on would be taken by non-partisan experts.⁸ The role of politicians in policy-making would be confined to those areas in which the judgement of experts would not suffice to legitimize outcomes. Similar arguments were emerging in the European context. In 1996, for example, Giandomenico Majone argued that the role of expert decision-making in the policy-making process was superior to that of political decision-making in that it could take better account of long-term interests. Politicians, by definition, worked only in the short-term; to allow decisions to be dominated by considerations of the electoral cycle was to risk less optimal outcomes: 'the segmentation of the democratic process into relatively short time periods has serious negative consequences when the problems faced by society require long-term solutions'. The solution, once again, was to delegate powers to what Majone defined as non-majoritarian institutions, 'which, by design, are not directly accountable to voters or to their elected representatives'.⁹ Experts were better able to deal with the technical complexities of modern law-making, which often confused elected politicians. As traditional forms of state control were replaced by more complex regulatory frameworks, specialist knowledge was likely to prove more effective than political judgement.¹⁰ Here too, then, politics was becoming devalued.

By the late 1990s, in short, it seemed that neither citizens nor policy-makers placed much value on the role of political or partisan decision-making. But while the evidence pointed to a widespread indifference to politics and politicians, it was less clear that it indicated indifference towards democracy as such. Indeed, if one looked at the debates about constitutional reform during the late 1990s, as well as at the more theoretical literature, the impression was of a large and burgeoning interest in democracy, with more attention being paid to how democratic systems worked, and to what they meant in reality, than probably at any stage in the previous twenty or thirty years. Far from being treated with indifference, democracy had

⁸ 'Is Government too Political?', *Foreign Affairs*, no. 6, vol. 76, 1997.

⁹ Giandomenico Majone, 'Temporal Consistency and Policy Credibility', European University Institute, Working Paper 96/57, 1996.

¹⁰ Majone, 'The Politics of Regulation and European Regulatory Institutions', in Jack Hayward and Anand Menon, eds, *Governing Europe*, Oxford 2003, p. 299.

become a research priority within both empirical political science and political theory. The catalogues of academic publishers brimmed with new titles on the subject. Oxford University Press, for example, posted as the lead publication in the 2002 political theory catalogue Robert Goodin's *Reflective Democracy*, closely followed by Iris Young's *Inclusion and Democracy*, John Dryzek's *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, and Henry Richardson's *Democratic Autonomy*. Democracy was also becoming more of an issue on the daily political agenda: debates on institutional reform took shape in many Western polities; emphases on 'participatory governance' began to emanate from the World Bank and other international organizations. Discussions of the reform of the European Union polity achieved a degree of salience that would have been almost unimaginable ten years before. By the end of the 1990s, democracy—whether associative, deliberative or reflective; global, transnational or inclusive; electoral, illiberal or even just Christian—had become a hot topic.

Beyond mass participation?

Which leads to a puzzle: as we shall see, there is now quite consistent evidence of popular indifference to conventional politics and, more arguably, to democracy; and yet, at an intellectual level, and sometimes at the level of practical institutional reforms, there has been a distinct renewal of interest in democracy (if not necessarily in politics as such). How do we square these developments?

There are two possibilities. The first is that they are in fact related, and that the growing intellectual and institutional interest in democracy, its meanings and its renewal, is in part a response aimed at combating the expanding scale of popular indifference. Making democracy relevant, in other words, comes on to the agenda at the time when it otherwise risks becoming irrelevant. But while the timing suggests that this may be the case, the actual content of the discussion points to a different story. For, far from seeking to encourage greater participation, or trying to make democracy more meaningful for the ordinary citizen, many of the contributions on institutional reforms or democratic theory seem to concur in favouring options that actually discourage mass engagement. This can be seen in the emphasis on stake-holder involvement rather than electoral participation that is found in both 'associative democracy' and 'participatory governance', and in the emphasis on the sort of exclusive debate that is to be found in 'deliberative' and 'reflective' democracy. In neither case

is there real scope afforded to conventional modalities of mass democracy. The new stress on 'output-oriented legitimacy' in discussions of the European Union polity, and the related idea that democracy in the EU requires 'solutions that are "beyond the state" and, perhaps, also beyond the conventions of Western-style representative liberal democracy', are equally geared away from mass involvement.¹¹ In other words, while there may be concern with the problem of popular indifference, making democracy more mass-user friendly does not seem to be the favoured answer. For Philip Pettit, for example, who discusses the issue of democratic renewal in the context of deliberation and depoliticization, the issue comes on to the agenda because 'democracy is too important to be left to the politicians, or even to the people voting in referendums.' For Fareed Zakaria, in his more popular account, renewal is necessary because 'what we need in politics today is not more democracy but less.'¹²

Hence the second possibility: the renewal of intellectual and institutional interest in democracy is not intended to open up or reinvigorate the practice as such, but rather to redefine democracy in such a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty, so that it can cope more easily with the decline of popular involvement. At the extreme, it is an attempt to redefine democracy in the absence of the demos. Part of this process of redefinition lies in highlighting the distinction between what has been called 'constitutional democracy' and what we might call 'popular democracy', a division that overlaps with and echoes Robert Dahl's earlier distinction between 'Madisonian democracy' and 'populistic democracy'.¹³ The constitutional component emphasizes the need for checks and balances across institutions, and entails government *for* the people; the popular component emphasizes the role of the ordinary citizen and mass participation, and entails government *by* the people; the two elements co-exist and complement one another within a 'unified' sense of democracy. Today, however, we

¹¹ Jo Shaw, 'Constitutional Settlements and the Citizen', in Neunreither and Wiener, eds, *European Integration after Amsterdam*, Oxford 2000, p. 291.

¹² Philip Pettit, 'Deliberative Democracy and the case for Depoliticising Government', *University of NSW Law Journal*, no. 58, 2001, § 46; Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom*, New York 2003, p. 248.

¹³ Robert Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, New Haven 1956. See also Yves Mény and Yves Surel, eds, *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Basingstoke 2002; Dahl, 'The Past and Future of Democracy', Occasional Paper Number 5, CSPC, Siena 1999; Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Paradoxes of Democracy*, Washington, DC 1999.

see them being disaggregated and then contrasted, both in theory and practice. Hence the recent emergence of notions of 'illiberal' or 'electoral' democracy, and the attempt to distinguish those democracies that combine free elections—popular democracy—with restrictions on rights and the potential abuse of executive power.¹⁴ As many studies of 'Third Wave' democracies in particular seem to indicate, popular and constitutional elements are no longer necessarily bound together.

Not only is there a growing conceptual distinction between the two components, but also a widening disparity in practice—one in which the popular element is downgraded with respect to the constitutional. For Zakaria, for example, it is the presence of the constitutional rather than the popular component that is essential for the survival and well-being of democracy. As he puts it: 'For much of modern history, what characterized governments in Europe and North America, and differentiated them from those around the world, was not democracy but constitutional liberalism. The "Western model" is best symbolized not by the mass plebiscite but the impartial judge.'¹⁵ In this view it is not elections as such that make for democracy, but rather the courts, in combination with other modes of non-electoral participation. With respect to the developing countries, as much of the 'good governance' literature implies, the formula is very clear: NGOs + judges = democracy. That is, while an emphasis on 'civil society' is acceptable, and while a reliance on legal procedures is essential, elections as such need not be.¹⁶

A similar reasoning can be seen in many of the debates around constitutional reform, where democracy is again often redefined in ways that downgrade the importance of the popular pillar. As Michelle Everson has noted in her discussion of Majone's work, for example,

non-majoritarian thought . . . forcefully claims that its isolation of market governance from political forces serves the goal of democracy by safeguarding the democratically set goals of the polity from the predatory inclinations of a transitory political elite.¹⁷

¹⁴ Larry Diamond, 'Is the Third Wave Over?', *Journal of Democracy*, no. 3, vol. 7, 1996.

¹⁵ Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 76, no. 6, 1997, p. 27.

¹⁶ See also Amy Chua, *World on Fire*, New York 2003.

¹⁷ Michelle Everson, 'Beyond the Bundesverfassungsgericht', in Bankowski and Scott, eds, *The European Union and its Order*, Oxford 2000, p. 106.

In this case the opposition is unequivocal: in one corner, the goals of the polity, objectively defined; in the other, the claims of a transitory—because elected—and hence predatory elite. The one is sustained by the networks of good governance, the other by the crude power and ambition of electoral politics. Similarly, a recent review of new modes of delegation underlines the growing importance of ‘procedural legitimacy’, which ‘relies on a process of decision making by NMIs [non-majoritarian institutions] being better than the insular, often secret, deliberations of cabinets and executives.’ Here the benefits of transparency, legality and the provision of access to stakeholders are held up against the limits and distortions induced by partisan politics, and are seen to lead to a process which can offer ‘a fair and democratic substitute for electoral accountability.’¹⁸

Role of parties

What impact has this downgrading of the popular component of democracy had upon political parties—and what role have the parties themselves played in this process? Some twenty years before publishing *The Semi-Sovereign People*, Schattschneider famously proposed that, without parties, democracy was unthinkable. The phrase itself comes from the opening paragraph of his *Party Government*, and is worth citing in its context:

The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as *makers* of governments, more especially they have been the makers of democratic government. It should be stated flatly at the outset that this volume is devoted to the thesis that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. As a matter of fact, the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime. The most important distinction in modern political philosophy, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, can be made best in terms of party politics. The parties are not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are in the centre of it and play a determinative and creative role in it.¹⁹

As always in the writings of this period, democracy was both popular and constitutional; it was the democracy of elections, mandates, popular

¹⁸ Mark Thatcher and Alec Sweet, ‘Theory and Practice of Delegation to Non-Majoritarian Institutions’, *West European Politics*, no. 1, vol. 25, 2002, p. 19.

¹⁹ Elmer Schattschneider, *Party Government*, New York 1942, p. 1.

accountability and representative government as well as of checks and balances. This was the democracy that Schattschneider found unthinkable except in terms of parties, and the sheer force of his conviction has led to his proposition being cited by party scholars, especially in their own defence, ever since. It is usually taken to mean that, since the survival of democracy is guaranteed, this means that parties will be, too. But we can also read it the other way around, to suggest that the failure of parties might indeed imply the failure of democracy, or at least of representative government.

Without parties (still following Schattschneider), we would then be left with something that might still be called democracy, but which has been redefined so as to downgrade or even exclude the popular component—since it is this which depends so closely on party. Without parties, in other words, we are left with a stripped-down version of constitutional democracy, or with some system of modern governance that seeks to combine ‘stakeholder participation’ with ‘problem-solving efficiency’.²⁰ These are not unthinkable forms, but they are ones in which conventional popular democracy plays little or no significant role, and in which neither elections nor parties remain privileged. When democracy in Schattschneider’s terms becomes unthinkable, in short, other modes of democracy move to the fore. Hence the contemporary intellectual interest in the theory of democratic renewal, and the more practical interest in proposing new forms of institutional politics. All of these approaches aim to find or define a notion of democracy that (a) works (b) is seen to be legitimate and yet (c) no longer places at its centre the notion of popular control or electoral accountability.

Western trends

But in what sense are parties failing? First, as has been well attested, parties are no longer managing to engage the ordinary citizen. Not only are citizens voting in fewer numbers and with less sense of partisan consistency, they are also increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to parties, whether in terms of identification or membership. In this sense, citizens are withdrawing from conventional political involvement. Second, the party can no longer adequately serve as a base for the activities and status of its own leaders, who increasingly direct their ambitions

²⁰ Beate Kohler-Koch, ‘European Government and System Integration’, *European Governance Papers*, no. C-05-01, 2005.

towards, and draw their resources from, external public institutions. Parties may provide a necessary platform for political leaders, but this increasingly serves as a sort of springboard from which to reach other locations. In sum, parties are failing as a result of a *mutual* withdrawal, whereby citizens retreat into private life or more specialized and often ad hoc forms of representation, while party leaderships retreat into institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. The traditional world of party democracy—as a zone of engagement in which citizens interacted with their political leaders—is being evacuated.

On the question of citizens' disengagement from conventional politics, two qualifying remarks should be emphasized from the beginning. First, this process of withdrawal is far from complete: indeed, in some respects, but not all, it is not much more than a trickle, and I am therefore dealing with something that is ongoing rather than fully realized. Second, although in some respects this is a familiar development, which has already been dealt with in great detail in the scholarly literature as well as in more popular commentary, the whole gamut of features of this pervasive and wide-ranging process has not been brought together in one overall and accessible assessment. Here I will attempt to do just that, and to indicate the breadth and variety of modes of disengagement, even if some of these are less substantial than others.

In fact, what we see here are two features that are not normally applicable to cross-national changes at the level of mass politics. The first of these is that virtually all of the separate trends that are treated here point in the same direction. This in itself is very unusual. Analysts of data relating to mass politics almost invariably expect to find mutually opposing trends within the different streams of indicators, some pointing in one direction, some in another. Mass politics rarely moves *en bloc*, as it were, but in this case it is precisely the uniformity of the trends that is striking. Second, virtually all of these movements are consistent across the advanced OECD democracies. This again is most unusual. The normal expectation in comparative political research is that, while particular trends may well be noted in some countries, they are almost never universal. Some countries may shift together, but it is only very rarely that all, or even most, shift in the same way and at the same time. What we see now, however, is a much clearer indication of cross-national convergence in the trends that matter. In other words,

not only are these now pointing in the same direction, they are also doing so almost everywhere. It is in this sense that the trends, though often small, are very significant.

Electoral entropy

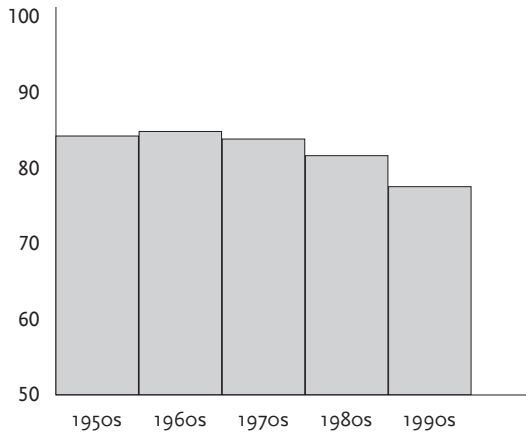
To begin with the most obvious and immediate indicator: the levels of participation in national elections. Given what has been said about citizen withdrawal, it is here that we might expect some of the most striking trends to be identified; yet while expectations regarding the possible decline in levels of electoral turnout have been current for some years, they have often been found to have little backing in the aggregate empirical data. Although long-term stability in levels of participation has been followed by a slight decline, this is usually not seen to be sharp enough to cause concern for the healthy functioning of modern democratic life.

Is this a reasonable conclusion? On the face of it, and especially with regard to the European data, the interpretation seems plausible.²¹ Thus through each of the four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, average turnout levels in Western Europe scarcely altered, increasing marginally from 84.3 per cent in the 1950s to 84.9 per cent in the 1960s, and then falling slightly to 83.9 per cent in the 1970s and to 81.7 per cent in the 1980s. This was essentially the steady-state period.²² That said, the decline from the 1970s to the 1980s, while small, was remarkably consistent across the long-established European democracies, with just three (Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands) of the fifteen countries countering an otherwise general trend. The decline may have been marginal when looked at cross-nationally, but it was almost universal, and therefore might well have justified a sense of concern.

But what is even more important to note is that this very marginal shift accelerated in the 1990s, with average turnout across Western Europe falling from 81.7 to 77.6 per cent in the last decade of the century. To be

²¹ For details see Mair, 'In the Aggregate: Mass Electoral Behaviour in Western Europe, 1950–2000', in Keman, ed., *Comparative Democratic Politics*, London 2002.

²² Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 54–5; Mark Franklin, 'The Dynamics of Electoral Participation', in LeDuc, Niemi and Norris, eds, *Comparing Democracies 2*, London 2002.

FIGURE 1. *Turnout levels in Western Europe, 1950s–1990s (per cent)*

sure, even at this level, which is the lowest recorded in any of the post-war decades, turnout remains relatively high, with an average of slightly more than three-quarters of national electorates casting a ballot in the elections held during the 1990s, a figure that remains substantially higher than that recorded in nationwide elections in the United States, for example. Nevertheless, even allowing for the fact that this drop from the 1980s to the 1990s is less than 5 per cent, it is striking to see the overall European figure now dipping below the 80 per cent mark for the first time in five decades. Moreover, there is a striking consistency across countries, in that eleven of the fifteen democracies involved also recorded their lowest ever decade averages in the 1990s. The exceptions to this pattern again include Belgium, where the lowest turnout came in the 1960s, and Denmark and Sweden, where it was in the 1950s. Even in these three cases, however, it should be noted that the average level of turnout in the 1990s was lower than in the 1980s. The fourth exception is the United Kingdom, which was unusual in recording its trough in participation in the 1980s. Indeed, Britain is the only one of these fifteen countries that had a marginally higher level of turnout in the 1990s than in the 1980s, although it plunged to an all-time low of just 59 per cent in 2001.

This trend has continued into the 21st century. In addition to the UK, the 2001 elections in Italy and Norway, and the 2002 elections in Portugal, France and Ireland were also marked by all-time low turnouts, as was the 2000 election in Spain. Levels close to historic lows were recorded in Greece in 2000, Austria in 2002, and Finland and Switzerland in 2003 (the last year included in this survey). In short, the trend towards ever lower levels of participation has persisted. Both unidirectional and pervasive, it offers a striking indicator of the growing enfeeblement of the electoral process.

Before leaving these crude turnout figures, it is worth noting one other telling feature. Indicators here are somewhat like those of climate change: the shifts do not necessarily occur in great leaps or bounds, and are not always linear. For these reasons, the importance of what is often just a slight or uneven trend may be underestimated. Climatologists have responded to this problem by laying less stress on the trends as such, but instead noting patterns in the timing and frequency of the peak values in their indicators. Thus, for example, evidence of global warming is derived by noting that the warmest decade on record was the most recent, the 1990s, while 1998 emerges as the warmest single year, followed by 2001. Further evidence is adduced from the fact that the eight warmest years on record have all occurred since 1990, even though in that same period air temperatures were also recorded (e.g. in 1992, 1993 and 1994) which were little more than those reached in the late 1970s.²³ In other words, the pattern is evident, even if the trend is not wholly uniform. This is also more or less true of turnout levels, and indeed of many other indicators of mass political behaviour, and for this reason the extent of change at this level is also often underestimated. Although there is no undisturbed downward trend in levels of participation, for example, record lows now come with greater frequency, and in a greater number of polities.

As can be seen from Table 1, which lists the three elections with the lowest levels of turnout in each of the 15 long-established European democracies, more than three-quarters of these 45 elections have taken place since 1990. Not only do the 1990s hold the record for the lowest turnout of any postwar decade in Western Europe, but within the

²³ P. D. Jones and A. Moberg, 'Hemispheric and large-scale surface air temperature variations', *Journal of Climate*, no. 16, 2003.

TABLE 1: *Low Turnout Elections*

(a) Record low levels of turnout, 1950–2003		(b) Frequency of record low turnouts		
	<i>Years of lowest turnout</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Austria	1994, 1999, 2002	1950–59	6	13.3
Belgium	1968, 1974, 1999	1960–69	1	2.2
Denmark	1950, 1953 (i), 1953 (ii)	1970–79	2	4.4
Finland	1991, 1995, 1999	1980–89	2	4.4
France	1988, 1997, 2002	1990–2003	34	75.6
Germany	1990, 1994, 2002	<i>All</i>	45	100.0
Iceland	1995, 1999, 2003			
Ireland	1992, 1997, 2002			
Italy	1994, 1996, 2001			
Luxembourg	1989, 1994, 1999			
Netherlands	1994, 1998, 2002			
Norway	1993, 1997, 2001			
Sweden	1952, 1956, 1958			
Switzerland	1995, 1999, 2003			
UK	1970, 1997, 2001			

great majority of West European democracies, most, and sometimes even all of the individual national elections that are marked by record low turnout have occurred since 1990. The two clearest exceptions are Denmark and Sweden, where, seemingly for contingent reasons, the lowest turnouts came in the 1950s. Beyond these cases, the only exceptions are one low-turnout election in the 1960s (in Belgium), two in the 1970s (in Belgium and the UK) and two in the 1980s (in France and Luxembourg). The remaining 34 cases all date from 1990 or later. However small the overall shifts might be, they are nevertheless clustering together in a remarkable fashion. Indeed, this pattern also extends to the newer southern European democracies: the three lowest levels of turnout recorded in post-authoritarian Greece were in 1974, which was the first free election, 1996 and 2000; in Portugal, the lowest levels were recorded in 1995, 1999 and 2002; and in Spain in 1979, 1989 and 2000. Here, as in the longer-established democracies, the more recent

the election, the higher the odds that it will record a trough in participation. There is no certainty; like the pattern evinced by climate change, turnout also sometimes bucks the overall trend, even today. In the long term, however, the overall direction of the change is unmistakable, and offers the first strong indicator of increasing popular withdrawal from conventional politics.²⁴

Voter volatility

A second key aggregate indicator relates to those citizens who do participate, and measures the consistency of partisan preferences. Those who continue to vote are clearly still engaged with conventional politics, even if at the most minimal level.²⁵ As popular involvement fades, however, we may anticipate that even those who do take part will prove more volatile in their preferences; not only the readiness to vote, but the sense of partisan commitment will start to fade; choices are likely to prove more susceptible to short-term factors. In practice, this means that election outcomes will become less predictable; new parties and candidates may prove more successful and traditional alignments come under pressure. Inconsistency goes hand in hand with indifference.

As with turnout patterns, predictions of volatility growth have been current for a number of years. Here too, however, the empirical record at the aggregate level usually failed to meet expectations. While some countries experienced a substantial increase in electoral flux through the 1970s and 1980s, others appeared to become more stable, resulting in a relatively subdued level of aggregate change across Western Europe as a whole.²⁶ But here again we see the picture changing in the 1990s, the peak decade for electoral volatility, with a score of 12.6 per cent, almost 4 points higher than that recorded in the 1970s and 1980s. Not too much should be made of this; on a scale with a theoretical range from 0 to 100, and decade averages that run in practice from 2.5 (1950s Switzerland) to 22.9 (1990s Italy), a mean value of 12.6 still reflects more (short-term)

²⁴ This is also the conclusion drawn by Thomas Paterson in his valuable study of the American case, *The Vanishing Voter*, New York 2002; see also Mair, 'Voting Alone', *European Political Science*, no. 4, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 421–9, which incorporates parts of the present discussion.

²⁵ For example, Geraint Parry, George Moyser and Neil Day, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*, Cambridge 1992.

²⁶ Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*, Cambridge 1990.

stability than change. On the other hand, the 1990s is the first of the five postwar decades in which the overall mean of instability breaches the 10 per cent threshold; it is also the first to record such a major shift from the previous mean.

The significance of the 1990s is underscored by individual national experience. Thus, in all but four of the countries (the exceptions are Denmark, France, Germany and Luxembourg), the 1990s constitute a peak in volatility levels, which, in the majority of cases, easily exceeds 10 per cent. This confluence is also unprecedented, and again signals that end-of-century patterns are markedly different from those of the earlier postwar years.²⁷

As with turnout data, there is no sign that these peaks are abating in the 21st century. In 2002, both Austria and the Netherlands experienced record levels of aggregate instability, as did Italy in 2001. France, Norway and Sweden also saw remarkably high levels of volatility in these years, although no absolute records were broken. More generally, as can be seen in Table 2 (overleaf), a clear majority of the most unstable national elections since 1950 have occurred after 1990. In this case the pattern is not so one-sided: volatility data inevitably prove more erratic than turnout data, being responsive to political crises as well as to institutional and social-structural change. Nevertheless, the period since 1990 seems exceptional: not only do more than half the record highs fall in this period, but no other decade comes close to this clustering. With the marginal exceptions of Denmark and Luxembourg, it seems that the more recent the election, the less likely it is to yield a predictable outcome.

Since 1990, then, it seems that ever fewer voters are ready to participate in elections, although turnout levels still remain reasonably high; while among those who do participate, there is a greater likelihood that they will switch preferences from one election to the next.²⁸ The exceptions have been Luxembourg, which had very low turnout but only moderate volatility;

²⁷ The 1990s rise in volatility outside Western Europe—Japan, Mexico, India, for example—though noteworthy, lies outside the scope of this paper.

²⁸ This counters an earlier observation based on US data by Lance Bennett, who suggested that even though conventional political participation may be in decline, 'those who continue to participate in traditional politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation and policy deliberation.' Bennett, 'The Uncivic Culture', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, December 1998, p. 745.

TABLE 2: *High Volatility Elections*

(a) Record Levels of Volatility, 1950–2003		(b) Frequency of record high volatility		
	<i>Years of Highest Volatility</i>	<i>Period</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Austria	1990, 1994, 2002	1950–59	5	11.1
Belgium	1965, 1981, 2003	1960–69	2	4.4
Denmark	1973, 1975, 1977	1970–79	7	15.6
Finland	1970, 1991, 1995	1980–89	6	13.3
France	1955, 1958, 2002	1990–03	25	55.6
Germany	1953, 1961, 1990	<i>All</i>	45	100.0
Iceland	1978, 1991, 1999			
Ireland	1951, 1987, 1992			
Italy	1992, 1994, 2001			
Luxembourg	1954, 1984, 1989			
Netherlands	1994, 1998, 2002			
Norway	1989, 1997, 2001			
Sweden	1991, 1998, 2002			
Switzerland	1987, 1991, 1999			
UK	1974 (i), 1978, 1997			

Sweden, which recorded high volatility but not exceptionally low turnout; and Denmark, which proved extreme on neither indicator. Beyond these cases, the evidence of unusual patterns since 1990 is both striking and consistent. Across Western Europe, electorates are not only voting less, but they are also slackening in terms of partisan commitment.

Partisan attachment

This is also the message from survey data, the evidence of individual experiences collected by election studies and commercial polling projects, which now corresponds closely to the aggregates on turnout and volatility. Many of the former have been collated by Dalton and Wattenberg in their comprehensive *Parties without Partisans*, and again both the consistency and the ubiquity are striking. One key indicator is the degree to which individual voters feel a sense of belonging or commitment to

particular political parties. In seventeen of the nineteen countries for which relevant data are available (the two exceptions are Belgium and Denmark) the percentage of voters claiming a sense of identification with parties has fallen over the past two decades or so. Even more strikingly, the smaller numbers of voters who report a strong sense of belonging or identification has also decidedly fallen, and this time in every single one of the countries concerned. As Dalton notes, it is not just the scale of the decline that is important here, but more the fact that it occurs in each of the cases for which figures are available. 'The similarity in trends for so many nations forces us to look beyond specific and idiosyncratic explanations . . . For public opinion trends to be so consistent across so many nations, something broader and deeper must be occurring'.²⁹

Split-ticket voting, whereby voters opt for one party in one electoral arena, and a different one in another, is also on the rise across all those cases where it has been measured over time (Australia, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United States). A committed and engaged voter, with a strong partisan loyalty, will undoubtedly vote for the same party regardless of the arena involved—for example, voting Democrat in US Presidential and Congressional elections, as well as local state and county ones. Lesser partisan commitment is more likely to be associated with a greater willingness to split the ticket. Voters are also less ready or less able to tell pollsters how they will vote. Here too, with a single Danish exception, almost every election study has reported an increase in the proportion of voters who decide how to vote during the campaign or shortly before polling day. Again, 'the trend is clear: contemporary voters are less likely to enter elections with standing partisan predispositions'. Hardly surprising then, that these voters are also unlikely to engage in more demanding campaign activities, such as attending political meetings, working for a party, persuading others to vote for a particular candidate or donating money. On almost all of these measures, and in almost all countries for which data are available, the survey evidence once again points to decline: voters are less willing to participate; for many, at least as far as conventional politics is concerned, it is enough to be simply spectators.³⁰

²⁹ Russell Dalton, 'The Decline of Party Identification', in Dalton and Wattenberg, eds, *Parties without Partisans*, Oxford 2000, p. 29.

³⁰ Dalton, McAllister and Wattenberg, 'The Consequences of Partisan Dealignment', in Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties without Partisans*, pp. 49, 58.

Voters are also less willing to take on the obligations associated with party membership. Again, it is striking to note not only the sheer decline in the number of party members, but also the pervasiveness of the phenomenon across all long-established democracies. Although the pattern here is more pronounced than in turnout or electoral instability, until the 1980s the evidence of decline tended to be somewhat equivocal. The first major study based on aggregate—often official party—data in 1992 found that, although the party membership ratio had fallen in most of the relevant European polities (the only exceptions were Belgium and West Germany), absolute levels of membership had often held up.³¹ It offered little support for the idea that these countries were experiencing ‘a spreading disillusionment with partisan politics’.³²

By the end of the 1990s, however, the patterns in the aggregate data had become unequivocal. As Table 3 reveals, the ratio of party membership to the electorate across a range of West European democracies had fallen markedly between 1980 and the end of the 1990s.³³ In 1980, an average of 9.8 per cent of the electorates were party members; by the end of the 1990s, this had fallen to just 5.7 per cent. Still more strikingly, for the ten European democracies in which it is possible to trace reliable membership figures from 1960, the average membership ratio was 14 per cent; in a majority—six of the ten—more than one in every ten eligible voters were members of political parties. At the end of the 1990s, by contrast, there were twenty democracies for which it was possible to find reliable membership data. Across all twenty, the average membership ratio was just 5 per cent, and only one—Austria—recorded a ratio that exceeded 10 per cent.³⁴

³¹ See Katz, Mair et al., ‘The Membership of Political Parties in European Democracies, 1960–90’, *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1992, pp. 329–45.

³² Norris, *Democratic Phoenix*, pp. 134, 135.

³³ The table is adapted from data in Mair and Ingrid van Biezen, ‘Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies, 1980–2000’, *Party Politics*, no. 1, vol. 7, 2001, where they are discussed in more detail; see also Susan Scarrow, ‘Parties without Members’ in Dalton and Wattenberg, *Parties without Partisans*, pp. 86–95.

³⁴ The pattern is comparable in the advanced democracies outside Europe. In Australia in 1967 there were 251,000 members, 4.1 per cent of the electorate; by 1997, the number had fallen to 231,000, just 1.9 per cent of a much larger electorate. Canada went from 462,000 members in 1987 to 372,000 in 1994: 2.6 to 1.9 per cent. In New Zealand, the decline was from 272,000 in 1981, or 12.5 per cent, then the peak of a growing wave, to 133,000 in 1999, or 4.8 per cent. Webb et al., *Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Oxford 2002, pp. 355, 389–90, 416–9.

TABLE 3: *Change in party membership, 1980–2000*

Country	Period	Party membership as % of electorate		Change in numbers of party members	Change as % of original membership
		Start of period	End of period		
France	1978–99	5.05	1.57	–1,122,128	–64.59
Italy	1980–98	9.66	4.05	–2,091,887	–51.54
UK	1980–98	4.12	1.92	–853,156	–50.39
Norway	1980–97	15.35	7.31	–218,891	–47.49
Finland	1980–98	15.74	9.65	–206,646	–34.03
Netherlands	1980–2000	4.29	2.51	–136,459	–31.67
Austria	1980–99	28.48	17.66	–446,209	–30.21
Switzerland	1977–97	10.66	6.38	–118,800	–28.85
Sweden	1980–98	8.41	5.54	–142,533	–28.05
Denmark	1980–98	7.30	5.14	–70,385	–25.52
Ireland	1980–98	5.00	3.14	–27,856	–24.47
Belgium	1980–99	8.97	6.55	–136,382	–22.10
Germany	1980–99	4.52	2.93	–174,967	–8.95
Portugal	1980–2000	4.28	3.99	50,381	17.01
Greece	1980–98	3.19	6.77	375,000	166.67
Spain	1980–2000	1.20	3.42	808,705	250.73

This was reinforced by the fall-off in the absolute numbers of party members, in marked contrast to the pattern noted in 1992. In every one of the long-established democracies the number of party members had fallen, sometimes by as much as 50 per cent of 1980 levels. In no country had there been an increase. This was exit on a grand scale—both in terms of reach and direction. Throughout the old democracies, as the analysis concluded, parties were simply haemorrhaging members.³⁵

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief review of the evidence? Clearly, it supports the contention that citizens are disengaging from the arena of conventional politics. Even when they vote—and this is less often than before, or in smaller proportions—their preferences

³⁵ Mair and Biezen, 'Party Membership in Twenty European Democracies'.

are determined closer to polling day and are less guided by partisan attachments. Electorates in this sense are becoming progressively de-structured, affording more scope to the media to set the agenda, and requiring a much greater campaign effort from parties and candidates. What we see here, in short, is a form of voting behaviour that is increasingly contingent. Much of this change has only become really apparent since the end of the 1980s.

To be sure, we are dealing with some quite small pieces of evidence, and the changes noted are sometimes relatively marginal: this is in some instances a trickle rather than a flood. But when all the disparate pieces of evidence are summed together, they offer a clear indication of a marked shift in the prevailing patterns of mass politics, consistent not only in terms of its focus—all of these indicators now point in a common direction—but across the different European polities. The conclusion is unambiguous: all over Western Europe, and in all likelihood all over the advanced democracies, citizens are heading for the exits of the national political arena.

In early 2002, Anthony Giddens pointed to the watershed that had been passed in mass media entertainment through the growing popularity of reality TV. 'Previously television was something that reflected an external world which people watched. Now television is much more a medium in which you can participate.'³⁶ In conventional politics, by contrast, the shift has been the other way around. Previously, and probably through to at least the 1970s, conventional politics was seen to belong to the citizen, and something in which the citizen could, and often did, participate. Now, it has become part of an external world which people watch from outside: a world of political leaders, separate from that of the citizenry. It is the transformation of party democracy into 'audience democracy'.³⁷ Whether the increasing disengagement of voters is responsible for the emergence of this new mode of politics, or whether it is an emerging form of politics that is encouraging voter withdrawal is, at least for now, a moot point. What is beyond dispute is that each feeds the other. As citizens exit the national political arena, they inevitably weaken the major actors who survive there—the parties. And this, in turn, is part of, and

³⁶ Interview with Henk Jansen in *Facta*, no. 1, vol. 11, February 2003, p. 4 (my translation).

³⁷ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, Cambridge 1997, pp. 218–35.

promotes, audience democracy, or, in another formulation, 'video politics'; for these grow stronger when parties are weak. Strong parties are difficult to sustain when politics turns into a spectator sport.

From civil society to state

Given how difficult it has become to engage citizens in the conventional political arena, it might be expected that political leaders would devote considerable effort to keeping politics alive and meaningful. As noted above, there has rarely been such widespread discussion of institutional reform. But beneath the beating of official breasts and the apparent distress at the hollowing out of mass politics, in practice there exists a clear tendency for political elites to match citizen disengagement with a withdrawal of their own. Just as voters retreat to their own particularized spheres of interest, so too have political and party leaders withdrawn into the closed world of the governing institutions. Both sides are cutting loose.

Contemporary changes in the form of party politics may be specified under two broad headings: the *location* of the parties, and their *political identity*. As far as location is concerned, the past few decades have witnessed a gradual but inexorable withdrawal of the party leaderships from the realm of civil society into that of government and the state. The same period has also seen the steady erosion of the parties' political identities, and the blurring of inter-party boundaries. Together, these parallel developments have led to a situation in which each party tends to become more distant from the voters that it purports to represent, while at the same time becoming more closely associated with the various protagonists against whom it purports to compete. Party-voter distances have been stretched, while party-party differences have lessened; both processes combine to reinforce a growing popular indifference and distrust of parties, and of political institutions more generally.

If we conceive of the role and location of parties within a democratic polity as standing somewhere on a spectrum between society and the state, then we can suggest that they have shifted along this continuum from a position in which they were primarily defined as social actors—as in the classic mass-party model—to one where they might now be reasonably defined as state actors. As we have seen, the strength of electoral identification with parties is now almost universally in

decline. At the same time, the former privileges of membership have also tended to disappear, as party leaders look beyond their shrinking membership to the electorate at large. The voice of the ordinary voter is seen to be at least as relevant to the party organization as that of the active party member, and the views of focus groups often count more than those of conference delegates.³⁸

In addition, a sense of dispersal and atomization marks the broader organizational environment within which the traditional parties used to nest. As workers' parties, or as religious parties, the mass parties in Europe rarely stood on their own, but constituted the core element within a wider and more complex network of trade unions, churches, business associations, mutual societies and social clubs. These helped to root the old mass parties in society and to stabilize and distinguish their electorates. Over the past thirty years, however, these broader networks have largely disintegrated. In part, this is because of a weakening of the sister organizations themselves, with churches, trade unions and other traditional forms of association losing both members and a sense of engagement. With the increasing individualization of society, traditional collective identities and organizational affiliations have become enfeebled.

Party leaderships have also sought to reduce the weight of their ties to associated groups, and to downgrade the privileged access once accorded to affiliated organizations.³⁹ Increasingly, parties tend to think of themselves as self-sufficient and specialized organizations, willing to listen to particular social actors but avoiding any close formalized links with them. Leaders have distanced themselves from civil society and its social institutions, while at the same time becoming more firmly entrenched in the world of government and the state. We may summarize the key developments of this process as follows.

³⁸ As, for example, when British Labour leaders shrugged off their defeat when the Labour Annual Conference voted to restore the link between pensions and average earnings. The vote had gone 60/40 against the leadership, and Gordon Brown responded: 'I'm not going to give in to the proposal that came from the union leaders today . . . It is for the country to judge, it is not for a few composite motions to decide the policy of this government and this country. It is for the whole community, and I'm listening to the whole community.' *Guardian*, 28 September 2000.

³⁹ A trend already noted *in nuce* by Otto Kirchheimer in his then highly prescient analysis, 'The Transformation of West European Party Systems', in LaPalombara and Weiner, eds, *Political Parties and Political Development*, Princeton 1966, pp. 177–200.

Firstly, as is now widely recognized, parties in most Western democracies have moved from being principally dependent for their organizational survival on the resources provided by members, donors and affiliated organizations to being increasingly reliant on public funds and state support. In most countries today, and in particular in almost all newly-established democracies, the preferred source of party funding has become the public purse.⁴⁰

Second, parties are now increasingly subject to new laws and regulations, which sometimes even determine their internal organizational functioning. Many of these regulations were introduced in the wake of public funding for parties, with the distribution of state subventions inevitably demanding a more codified system of party registration and control. Controlling party access to the public broadcasting media has also required a new system of regulations, which again acts to codify the status of parties and their activities. From having been largely 'private' and voluntary associations, parties have increasingly become subject to a regulatory framework which has the effect of according them a (quasi-) official status. As the internal life and the external activities of parties become regulated by public law, the parties themselves become transformed into public-service agencies, with a corresponding weakening of their own organizational autonomy.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, parties have cemented their linkage to the state by according increasing priority to their role as governing (as opposed to representative) agencies. In political-science terms, they have become more 'office-seeking', with a place in government not only a standard expectation, but also an end in itself. Some forty years ago, a now classic review of political developments in Western democracies was organized around the theme of 'oppositions'.⁴¹ Today opposition, when structurally constituted, increasingly comes from outside conventional party politics, whether in the form of social movements, street politics or popular protests. The parties, on the other hand, are either governing or waiting to govern. With this new status has come a downgrading of the role of the 'party on the ground', and a shift in the party's organizational centre of gravity towards those elements that serve its needs

⁴⁰ Ingrid van Biezen, *Financing Political Parties and Election Campaigns*, Strasburg 2003.

⁴¹ Robert Dahl, ed., *Political Oppositions in Western Democracies*, New Haven 1966.

in parliament and government. This move might also be seen as a final manifestation of the classic Downsian or Schumpeterian notion of parties as ‘competing teams of leaders’, in which the party organization outside the institutions of the polity gradually withers away. What remains is a governing class.

Passive and privatized masses

All of this has had major implications for the functions that parties perform within the wider polity. Conventionally, parties are understood to integrate and, if necessary, to mobilize the citizenry; to articulate and aggregate interests, and translate these into public policy; to recruit and promote political leaders; and to organize parliament, the government and the key institutions of the state. That is, just as parties aimed to combine government for the people with government by the people, so too they combined key representative functions with key procedural ones—all within the same agency. As parties have changed, however, and as the mass-party model has passed away, the functions they perform in contemporary polities have also shifted, and now focus much more on procedural ones. This development goes hand in hand with their move from society to the state, and is part of the process by which parties and their leaders separate themselves from the arena of popular democracy. Parties have become agencies that govern—in the widest sense of the term—rather than represent; they bring order rather than give voice. It is in this sense that we can also speak of the disengagement or withdrawal of the elites, although while exiting citizens are often headed towards more privatized worlds, the exiting political leadership is retreating into an institutional one—a world of public offices.

The process, then, is mutually reinforcing.⁴² Citizens turn from being participants into spectators, while the elites gain more space in which to pursue their own shared interests. As one commentator put it:

Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules—or rather, administers—passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them . . . They are professionals, entrenched in office and in party structures. Immersed in a distinct culture of their own, surrounded by other specialists and insulated

⁴² See also John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy*, Cambridge 2002.

from the ordinary realities of constituents' lives, they live not just physically but also mentally 'inside the beltway'.⁴³

Two outcomes of this mutual disengagement may briefly be noted. In the first place, the resulting gap has sometimes helped to fuel a populist mobilization usually, but not exclusively, on the right. In other words, partly as a result of this withdrawal, the political class has itself become an issue of contention in a large number of democratic polities. Second, and as noted above, the growing distance between citizens and their political leaders has also helped to fuel elite demands for more 'non-majoritarian' decision-making, and a greater role for non-partisan and non-political agencies—judges, regulatory bodies, central banks and international organizations.

In addition, with the separation of representative and procedural party functions, and the shift from society to state, the distinction between popular and constitutional democracy becomes more salient. Through the party, one and the same institution within mass democracy gave voice to the citizenry and governed on their behalf. In such a context, popular and constitutional democracy were more or less inseparable. With the growing gulf between the citizenry and the political leaderships, it becomes increasingly difficult to effect this sort of symbiosis. A space is created in which the features of popular democracy, taken more or less on its own, can be weighed against those of constitutional democracy; government 'by the people' comes to be judged against government 'for the people'. In this assessment, it is usually popular democracy that is found wanting.

The difficulty runs deeper. Elsewhere, I have argued that, with the separation of parties' representative and procedural roles, the increasing emphasis on the latter was part of a more or less necessary process of adaptation: precisely because they no longer functioned so effectively as representatives, parties sought to compensate by building up their role within the institutions. These were not therefore parties in decline, I then argued, but instead had adapted to a new set of circumstances, seeking to survive in the context of a new organizational equilibrium.⁴⁴

⁴³ Hanna Pitkin, 'Representation and Democracy', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, no. 3, vol. 27, 2004, p. 339.

⁴⁴ Mair, 'Political Parties and Democracy: What Sort of Future?', *Central European Political Science Review*, vol. 4, no. 13, 2003.

This now seems far too sanguine an interpretation. Parties might well seek to compensate for diminished capacities in one direction by enhancing those in another, but there is no guarantee that they will succeed. On the contrary: parties may be able to fill public office, but having abandoned their representative role, they may no longer be able to justify doing so. In other words, if parties as governors are to be trusted, and if party government more generally is to be legitimate, it is likely that the parties must also be seen to be representative. For an elected politician, it is not enough to be just a good governor; without some degree of representative legitimacy neither the parties themselves, nor their leaders, nor even the electoral process that allows them to be chosen, will be seen to carry sufficient weight or authority. The result will be to encourage distrust and scepticism.

Scepticism towards elected politicians is nothing new, of course. Nearly sixty years ago, Schumpeter warned against relying too heavily on those who were emerging from the electoral process, and suggested that 'the qualities of intellect and character that make a good candidate are not necessarily those that make a good administrator, and selection by means of success at the polls may work against people who would be successes at the head of affairs.'⁴⁵ The argument has been reiterated many times since. But while the skepticism may not be new, it does acquire a more robust foundation when articulated within a context in which popular democracy has become distanced from constitutional democracy.

In fact, what we see here is a largely self-reinforcing process. As political and party competition are hollowed out even further, they offer even more encouragement to the politics of the spectacle and the horse-race. And this becomes more likely to produce the sort of candidates and elected politicians whose qualities, following Schumpeter, are even less likely to be those of the good administrator.

What are the implications of these processes for the future of Western democracies? I have suggested that the transformation in the role of parties, as they have shifted away from expressive and representative functions and moved closer to becoming appendages of the state, has played a central part in the disaggregation of democracy's popular and constitutional components. Any broader reckoning as to why this is

⁴⁵ Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 2nd edn, New York 1947, p. 288.

happening—and why now, barely one decade after the much heralded ‘triumph of democracy’, attempts are being made to downgrade its popular pillar and limit its scope—must take into account a number of themes that fall outside the purview of this essay: the impact of the end of the Cold War, the decline of ‘embedded liberalism’, the declining purchase of party government, and the more general fallout from processes of globalization and Europeanization. But the focus on parties makes one further irony impossible to ignore: the victory of democracy, in this form, poses stark problems of representative legitimacy for the new governing class.