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## Political Disenchantment

Politics, or so it seems, is not all that it was once cracked up to be. Despite its near global diffusion, democracy motivates a seemingly ever smaller proportion of the electorate to exercise its right to vote in the states in which that right has existed the longest. Levels of electoral participation amongst the young are particularly low, and, it appears, each successive cohort of new voters has a lower propensity to vote than the previous one. Moreover, despite the bitter, often bloody and almost always protracted struggle to acquire the right to vote in free, fair and open elections, levels of participation in the new democracies are scarcely less depressing. Nowhere, it seems, does politics animate electorates consistently and *en masse* to enthusiastic participation in the democratic process. It should come as no surprise, then, that membership of political parties and most other indices of participation in formal politics are down – in established democracies to unprecedented levels.

For most commentators, this is depressing enough in itself.<sup>1</sup> Yet, arguably, such trends are merely the symptoms of a more worrying and deep-seated condition. For each individual pathology might be seen as indicative of a more pervasive – indeed, near universal – disdain for ‘politics’ and the ‘political’. Once something of a *bon mot*, conjuring a series of broadly positive connotations – typically associating politics with public scrutiny and accountability – ‘politics’, has increasingly become a dirty word. Indeed, to attribute ‘political’ motives to an actor’s conduct is now invariably to question that actor’s honesty, integrity or capacity to deliver an outcome that reflects anything other than his or her material self-interest – often, all three simultaneously.

### Politics and the collective good

There is, of course, a certain irony about this, the more detailed analysis of which will concern us throughout much of this volume. Stated most simply, politics responds to the need in complex and differentiated societies

for collective and ultimately binding decision making. In the language of rational choice theory, contemporary societies are characterized by the proliferation of so-called collective action problems to which politics is, in some sense, a response. A collective action problem exists whenever the common or collective interest of a group or society is not best served by the narrow pursuit by individuals of their own (perceived) self-interest. Facing pervasive environmental degradation, the pursuit of material self-interest by profit-driven corporations will, in the absence of a collective and authoritative decision-making body, result in the continued exploitation of the natural world. No individual corporation can afford to impose upon itself unilaterally the costs of environmental sustainability unless it is entirely confident that others will do likewise. Rationality at the level of the individual unit (here the corporation) translates into collective irrationality – an outcome, environmental degradation, from which all suffer. Politics, here in the form of an authoritative environmental regulatory agency, is capable (in theory at least) of providing a solution to such collective action problems, negotiating and enforcing a set of binding environmental standards and, in so doing, imposing collective rationality where otherwise it would not prevail.<sup>2</sup>

As this perhaps suggests, politics is concerned, almost by definition, with the construction and, ideally, the realization of a sense of the collective good. The contemporary association of politics with the pursuit of the material self-interest of politicians is, then, oddly antithetical to its very *raison d'être*. The prevalence of such attitudes raises a whole host of questions. Together these frame a considerable part of the analysis and argument to follow.

Amongst the most important of these are the following.

- Are electorates right to discern in contemporary politics an increase in the prevalence of instrumental, self-interested behaviour on the part of those vested with political power?
- Whether they are right or wrong to do so, how have electorates come to conceive of politics in this way?
- To what extent is politics today less able than it once was to provide solutions to collective action problems?
- Is any failure to supply political solutions to contemporary societal problems attributable to the nature, prevalence and character of such problems, to the quality, capabilities, motivations or moral calibre of politicians, or to the ideas which inform contemporary political strategy?

This, to be fair, is a far from innocent set of questions. There are a variety of ways of approaching these issues, and the agenda mapped out above is by no means neutral with respect to such choices. Indeed, there are no doubt hints as to the analysis to be presented in subsequent chapters in the questions posed, the order in which they are presented, and the manner in which they are expressed. Nonetheless, were we able to furnish ourselves with a complete set of answers to these questions, we would know a great deal about the nature of our current political predicament, the disaffection and disengagement to which it has given rise, and the character of politics more broadly. My aim in this book is to provide some answers to these questions. In so doing, I restrict myself, quite consciously and explicitly, to a consideration of the contemporary condition of the advanced liberal democracies. Whilst some of the answers that I offer may potentially prove generalizable beyond Europe, North America, South-East Asia, Australia and New Zealand, it is with these cases that I am principally concerned.

## **Dissecting disaffection: an agenda for political analysis**

Tackling this list of questions, even for a limited number of cases, is no small task, however. And although political science has much to contribute to an analysis of each, as we shall see, it is a very long way from providing definitive answers to any of them. Moreover, despite a recent proliferation of literature concerned to identify the malaise afflicting the advanced liberal democracies, such questions remain rather further from the heart of contemporary political science than one might imagine. Indeed, part of the normative content of this book is the claim that political analysts should pay rather greater attention to this set of issues than they have tended to do to date. That is likely to prove contentious. It is justified in part by two potentially no less contentious claims.

The first is that political analysts should pay rather greater attention to the understandings of politics of 'real-world' political participants and non-participants. Such understandings change over time and are themselves highly consequential – becoming contributory factors in the development of the 'politics' they purportedly reflect. There is a danger, as with any specialist field of inquiry, that the analyst, whose inherent interest in the intricacies of the political is presumably not in doubt, simply takes for granted a similar level of innate interest on the part of political subjects more generally. As should now be clear, that would be a very grave mistake – and one

which can only distort the character of contemporary politics as it appears through the analyst's lens.

The second relates to the responsibilities of political analysts towards their chosen subject matter. It would, of course, be massively to overstate both the influence and the significance of contemporary political science to assume that it can bear any direct responsibility for whatever pathologies afflict the contemporary polity. Nonetheless, political analysts surely have some responsibility towards their subject matter – particularly, one might reasonably surmise, when it comes to diagnosing and seeking solutions to clearly articulated political pathologies. The contemporary condition of disengagement and disenchantment with politics itself is as clear an instance as one could conceivably imagine of such a situation. Yet it is a topic which has received somewhat less attention than this significance might lead one to expect (perhaps the most systematic treatment to date is that provided by Dalton 2004).

Moreover, as we shall see presently, political analysis is not, perhaps, as totally innocent as one might at first assume in the generation of this condition of disenchantment and disengagement. It is important not to overstate this role, but arguably the systematic questioning of the motives of political actors and public servants has its origins in the projection of instrumental assumptions on to such actors. This, in turn, can be traced to the development of public choice theory within political science in the 1960s and 1970s, and its growing influence on public policy from the 1980s. The extent to which such assumptions are true is an index of the degree to which it is irrational to trust politicians and public servants to act in the collective interest. Consequently, the extent to which such assumptions are believed is likely to be an index of the rational disengagement of the electorate from the political process. It would certainly seem as though public choice theory's cynicism with respect to the motivations of political actors is now deeply shared.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this is perhaps to get ahead of ourselves. Before we can diagnose the contemporary political condition, we need to know rather more about its symptoms. That is the principal task of this lengthy introductory chapter. In it, my aim is both to set out in some detail the problem to be explained in later chapters and to introduce the key themes of the volume as a whole. I do so by reflecting upon the associations and connotations of the term 'politics' in popular discourse. Such associations are suggestive of the complex and contested nature of the phenomena they serve to label. In recent years the term 'politics' has become synonymous, for many, with notions of duplicity, corruption, dogmatism, inefficiency, undue interference in

essentially private matters, and a lack of transparency in decision making. To label an activity or process 'political' is, it seems, invariably to deride and to distance oneself from it. This immediately raises a series of important questions about the nature and content of political processes and the place, purpose and value of political analysis today.

In this chapter I reflect upon the sense of political disenchantment that has arisen in recent years, seeking to trace its origins, gauge its extent, and assess the degree to which it might genuinely be seen as a recent phenomenon. I contrast the largely negative contemporary connotations of politics in popular discourse with the rather idealized depiction of politics as an arena of deliberation, public scrutiny, accountability and responsiveness which has tended to characterize the academic discourse about politics. If politics is, indeed, about holding power to account, how has it come to be associated with duplicity, corruption and undue interference? There are many reasons for this contemporary disenchantment with politics. However, two in particular are important in establishing the agenda for this volume. The first has already been alluded to – the rise of public choice theory and its natural affinities with neoliberalism. The second I have yet to mention – the challenges associated with globalizing tendencies. To the former's deep distrust of the inherent interventionism and inefficiency of political processes, the latter has added a plausible account of the ever diminishing capacity of political actors. The result is a profound crisis of both legitimacy and confidence in processes of political deliberation. Neoliberalism, informed by public choice theoretical assumptions, suggests the value of a tightly delimited political sphere which does not encroach upon the essentially private realms of economic and social exchange, encouraging a profoundly suspicious, sceptical and anti-political culture; the globalization thesis suggests the increasingly anachronistic nature of political intervention in an era of external economic constraint, inviting a fundamental reappraisal of the previously unquestioned capacity of political processes to shape societal trajectories. Both conspire to discredit the 'political' in contemporary societies, raising a series of questions about the nature of politics, the space for political deliberation in an era of globalization, and the role of political analysis in holding power to account. These issues frame the discussion of subsequent chapters.

## **Contextualizing political disenchantment**

I started by noting that, if current levels of political cynicism, disengagement and disaffection with the political are anything to go by, then politics

is not all that it was once cracked up to be. Yet, from the outset, it is important not to get this totally out of proportion. There is plenty to concern us in contemporary patterns of political participation and non-participation without having to exaggerate the extent to which current trends are unprecedented historically.

Stated most bluntly, ostensibly democratic political systems require at least a minimal level of participation if the democratic legitimacy they claim is to be anything other than a façade. As Carole Pateman suggests, 'for a democratic polity to exist it is necessary for a participatory society to exist' (1970: 43). Arguably, levels of participation in at least some established and new democracies alike are low enough to give considerable cause for concern on this count. The picture is bleaker still if we allow ourselves a differentiated view of the democratic polity. For it is certainly no exaggeration to suggest that certain sections of the electorate – typically, in the established democracies and most obviously in the US, the black urban poor – are effectively disenfranchised altogether. Democracy is, for them, a privilege enjoyed by others; politics, an essentially external yet life-course-shaping imposition.

The point is that in making such arguments we do not have to rely upon the nostalgic construction of a mythical past of near total participation and near perfect democratic political legitimacy. Such a world never existed, politics has always had its detractors, and there have been other times when disdain and cynicism for politics have proved dominant. Indeed, John Dunn is surely right to note in characteristically sombre tones that politics has proved 'consistently disappointing'. Yet what is remarkable here – for Dunn at least – is less that politics should disappoint than that, given its tendency to disappoint, it should 'repeatedly nourish such high hopes' (2000: p. xii). Whether it will continue to nourish such high hopes is an interesting question. But, in so far as it has and does still, there is arguably something rather positive, even endearing, about this. That politics might continue to generate expectations that it can seemingly only ever fail to realize is testimony to a certain triumph of the human will over human capabilities. It also suggests a degree of political animation and engagement that has arguably both served to elevate levels of political participation in the past and is now on the wane. For Dunn, however, this triumph of hope over experience is less endearing than irritating. If we understood politics rather better, we would expect less of it. Consequently, we would be surprised and dismayed rather less often by its repeated failures to live up to our over-inflated and unrealistic expectations. We would, in turn, be better placed to set for ourselves political ambitions that we had some

chance of achieving. This may well be true, but such a rational recalibration of our expectations might also lead us to lose our sense of political ambition, animation and engagement. Indeed, does that not describe the contemporary political condition rather well?

If politics is not all what it was once cracked up to be, then we should not lose sight of the fact that for many it has never lived up to its billing and has always been rather less than it was cracked up to be. Indeed, as we shall see, a crucial factor in the development of contemporary political disaffection has been the growing political influence of those for whom politics is, at best, a necessary evil. This kind of argument does not differentiate between a past – in which politics was a good in itself – and the present day – in which it has become an increasingly malevolent force. In a sense, it is timeless and, so its proponents would contend, of universal relevance. What varies is not so much the content of the argument as its ability to shape attitudinal dispositions towards politics – and it is no more likely to mould such dispositions than when, as today, it has direct access to political power.<sup>4</sup> And whilst there is a certain irony about this capture of the political system by those committed to an avowedly anti-political agenda, it hardly lessens the significance or pervasiveness of the effects.

We would be wrong, then, to attribute current political disaffection solely to the critique of *contemporary* political personnel, their conduct and their motivations; it is just as much a product of a more general and timeless critique of politics as a practice or vocation. Similarly, we would be wrong to assume that the predominantly negative associations and connotations of politics today are unprecedented historically. Politics has been seen as the problem rather than the solution at various historical junctures. We might note, for instance, that all references to ‘politics’ in the work of Shakespeare are distinctly and overtly negative in their connotations. Not unrepresentative is King Lear’s remark, ‘Get thee glass-eyes, and like a scurvy politician, seem to see things thou dost not’ (Act IV, scene 6). No less scathing is Hotspur’s contempt for ‘this vile politician Bolingbroke’ (*Henry IV Part I*, Act I, scene 3). What is more, the association between Bolingbroke’s vileness and his identification as a ‘politician’ is clearly not incidental – vileness is in the very nature of the ‘politician’. Mine Host of the Garter in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* adds a further and possibly more familiar dimension to the odiousness of the politician in asking, ‘Am I politic? Am I subtle? Am I a Machiavel?’ (Act III, scene 2, all cited in Sparks 1994: 76). The capacity for manipulation, duplicity and deception is here added to a growing list of objectionable traits which set political actors apart from their peers.

It might, of course, be objected that, whatever its connotations, the term 'politics' was not employed in quite the same way in Elizabethan England as it is today. That is undoubtedly true, but it merely serves to demonstrate the timelessness of the critique of politics, however much the practice to which it refers may have changed over time. Thus Isaac D'Israeli's summary (cited in Crick 2000: 16), several centuries later, of what he took to be the pervasive misrepresentation of politics as 'the art of governing people by deceiving them' seems entirely in keeping with Shakespeare's attribution of Machiavellian motives to the political subject. That, of course, may be no coincidence. For the influence of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (*The Prince*), published in 1513 – both for what it says and for what it is assumed to say – on the pejorative connotations of the 'term politics' is considerable.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, for present purposes, what is perhaps both most interesting and most easily forgotten about Machiavelli's writings is the extent to which they were part of a far broader reconfiguration of societal attitudes towards politics that was occurring in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy. In a number of key respects this parallels more contemporary developments. As Maurizio Viroli suggests, 'having enjoyed for three centuries the status of the noblest human science, politics emerged . . . as an ignoble, depraved and sordid activity: it was no longer the most powerful means of fighting corruption, but that art of conforming to, and perpetuating it' (1992: 1). In fact, two rather different conceptions of politics were at work here. The first, dominant until the late sixteenth century but with its origins in Aristotle, conceived of politics as the noble art of preserving the republic, largely through the subordination of sectional interests to the common interest of the community as a whole. Politics, in this conception (or discourse), was very much about the resolution of collective action problems and the delivery of public goods – such as security, social cohesion and societal well-being more generally.<sup>6</sup> The second conception, which gradually came to replace and supplant it was, strictly speaking, not a discourse of politics at all – but of *raison d'état*, literally 'reason of state'. Where the discourse of politics had drawn attention to the authentically political art of managing the republic to satisfy the collective needs of the many against the parochial desires of the individual, that of *raison d'état* highlighted a rather different and darker art – that of preserving *l'état*, the 'state'. By this was meant the art of stabilizing, insulating and crystallizing the political power and authority of a person or group (for Machiavelli, 'the prince') through the strategic deployment of access to, and control over, public institutions. Whereas politics had been concerned with the defence of the collective interest of society through the development of public authority,

*raison d'état* was concerned to promote – invariably in the name of the public good – the self-interest of the ruling group or elite. In this sense it was *raison d'état* rather than politics that was the art of governing people by deceiving them.

This is an important point, for Machiavelli and other writers of the time sought to differentiate very clearly between politics and *raison d'état*. Indeed, though now invariably cast as a cynical and dispassionate advocate of the dark arts of government through duplicity, strategic deception and, where necessary, outright tyranny, Machiavelli was himself a staunch defender of politics as the art of the republic. Moreover, as Viroli again notes, 'by not using the word *politico* when he spoke about the art of the state, and by using it only for the art of the republic . . . [he] helped to preserve the conventional republican meaning of politics' (1992: 6). It was only later on that politics would become synonymous with the art of the state, the positive associations and connotations that it had derived from Aristotelian republicanism now largely overwritten with the decidedly bleaker and more instrumental assumptions of the latter. The transition took the best part of a century. Once complete, *raison d'état* had essentially replaced civic republicanism as the 'new politics'. In the process, the public discourse of politics and its popular connotations and associations had been totally reconfigured.

Though it is important not to exaggerate them, the parallels with the more contemporary demonization of the political in public discourse are striking. In late sixteenth-century Italy, just as today, the motivational assumptions we project on to political actors and public officials largely determine whether we see politics as a good, a necessary evil or an innately malevolent force. More specifically, the extent to which we project on to such actors instrumental and self-interested preferences is the extent to which we will find it hard to conceive of politics as a process capable of delivering public goods. Machiavelli's *The Prince* is, in essence, a thought experiment exploring the implications of conceiving of 'the prince' as an instrumental and self-serving rational actor keen to preserve the privileges and power bestowed by his status.<sup>7</sup> Then, as now, our conception of human nature itself underpins our judgement as to whether politicians can be trusted and whether politics can indeed serve the collective interest of the community. The largely implicit insight for which Machiavelli is famous is the idea that rational, self-interested, strategic 'princes' are, at best, erratic and dishonest guarantors of the public interest. As this suggests, in the end, whether politics is a good or a bad boils down to the simple question of whether we are optimists or pessimists about the human condition. Today, as in sixteenth-century Italy, it seems that we have been overcome with

pessimism. It is with elucidating the reasons for this that much of the present book is concerned.

There is, however, one potential objection to the above analysis. For it assumes that, whether optimists or pessimists, we can be confident about attributing motives and preferences to political actors. It is not at all clear that Machiavelli was so sure. For, as already suggested, *The Prince* is, as much as anything else, a thought experiment – an exploration of the consequences of assuming a particular type of (instrumental) rationality on the part of the prince. Machiavelli nowhere asserts, far less defends, the claim that all princes are so motivated. Instead, much like modern-day rational choice theorists, he explores (through a process of logical deduction) the consequences of adopting such an assumption – providing, in so doing, something of a lesson in the art of government to those prepared to act in such an instrumental fashion. The point is that we do not necessarily have to believe all political actors to be motivated in this way in order to think it prudent to protect ourselves from the scenario in which they are.

Here we come to a key point with considerable contemporary significance. Given that human nature hardly presents an open book to the political analyst, given that the motivations of political actors are likely to vary (over time and from one to the next), and given that at least some potential princes are likely to behave in something akin to the narrowly instrumental fashion depicted by Machiavelli, are we not right to assume the worst possible motives of those seeking political power? After all, why take any kind of risk with the motivations of political actors when we do not have to do so? Are we not right, in other words, to adopt a strong *precautionary principle*?

This is, in fact, a rather more difficult question to answer than it might at first appear. Presented in this way, it is certainly tempting to answer it in the affirmative. More to the point, it *has* been answered in the affirmative with very significant consequences. And this perhaps offers us a rather different perspective on things. For, arguably, the Madisonian and Jeffersonian tradition of liberal republicanism on which the US Constitution is constructed is predicated on precisely such an assumption.<sup>8</sup> As Madison himself stated in *The Federalist Papers*, ‘it is in vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust . . . clashing interests. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm’ (Hamilton, Jay, and Madison 1901: 47). No clearer statement of a precautionary principle could be imagined. And without this precautionary principle, the US Constitution would not be so codified, or so characterized by checks and balances; nor would elections to the House of Representatives be more frequent than in any other national legislative system (Birch 2001: 75–6). That may be fine and good – and there is certainly

nothing innately wrong with frequent elections. Yet designing one's political institutions to protect citizens from the presumed proclivity of politicians to 'corruption, plunder and waste', in Thomas Jefferson's terms, may have a series of unintended consequences. It is, for instance, hardly likely to breed trust in elected officials, whilst arguably limiting their capacity to earn trust. Nor is it conducive to building confidence in the ability of the state to resolve the collective action problems that complex societies invariably generate. Yet, such confidence may itself be a condition of – and is certainly likely to prove a contributory factor to – providing effective solutions to such collective action problems. If the state is not trusted to uphold and enforce the law in a fair, competent and effective way, for instance, because lawmakers and law-enforcers cannot be trusted, it is unlikely that such law will prove effective in regulating societal behaviour. Finally, as we shall see presently, assuming the worst of political actors and other public officials has something of a tendency to become a self-fulfilling prophecy – since it invariably involves incentivizing (and thereby rewarding) instrumental behaviour. A vicious circle is all too easily established. That the US is characterized by some of the lowest levels of formal political participation and has a Constitution and associated democratic culture that projects instrumental assumptions on to political actors may not be entirely unrelated.

Yet we need to be extremely careful here. As I have sought to indicate, there are potential dangers in simply assuming the worst of those seeking public office. By the same token, however, naïvety, deference to authority, and a willingness to accept at face value every political appeal to the rhetoric of the common good are certainly no more conducive to an effective and participatory democratic culture. As in most things, there is a balance to be struck.

## **Mapping political disaffection**

Thus far we have simply assumed that contemporary societies are characterized by low and declining levels of formal political participation and by a more pervasive and deep-seated sense of political disenchantment and disengagement. That, of course, is an empirical proposition. So, before turning to potential causes of this condition, it is first important to establish that the diagnosis is an accurate one.

Here there is a vast and growing body of work to draw upon, the merest surface of which we can only hope to scratch in the pages that follow. What helps is the relatively high degree of consensus amongst commentators, both as to the nature and extent of the current political condition and the

appropriate indices of political disaffection and disengagement. Attention has tended to focus on three separate but related sets of issues:

- The extent to which citizens avail themselves of opportunities to engage in the formal political process – through voting, membership of political parties, attendance at public meetings and so forth.
- The extent to which citizens engage in informal and/or extra-parliamentary forms of political conduct and the extent to which they consider themselves, in so doing, to be expressing themselves ‘politically’.
- The extent to which attitudes towards politics, democracy and government have changed and, more specifically, the extent to which recent decades have seen a significant decline in levels of trust and confidence in politicians and public officials.

Given the substantial empirical effort required to generate comparative time-series data on any one of these sets of issues, it is perhaps unremarkable that very little of the existing literature addresses all three sets of issues simultaneously. Yet, if we are to map the nature and extent of contemporary levels of political disaffection, it is necessary to engage in precisely such an exercise. Before doing so, however, it is important to consider both the evidence itself and the rather different inferences drawn from it in each relatively discrete body of literature. Accordingly, in the sections which follow, we consider, first, the evidence itself, then the various interpretations offered of it in the existing literature, before turning to some alternatives.

#### *Trends in formal political participation – voter turnout*

No single issue has prompted greater concern or received greater empirical scrutiny in the broad literature on political disaffection than the question of voter turnout. That should not surprise us. Elections lie at the heart of the liberal democratic conception of politics. Indeed, politics, as we know it, draws its legitimacy largely from this form of political participation. Consequently, levels of formal political participation are likely to be monitored closely. And in this respect what the empirical evidence shows is an alarming and consistent trend. This is summarized in figure 1.1, which shows average turnout levels in OECD member states (the advanced liberal democracies) plotted over time. The data series is constructed as an annual rolling average of the most recent election in each OECD member state, and shows turnout in national parliamentary elections as a proportion of

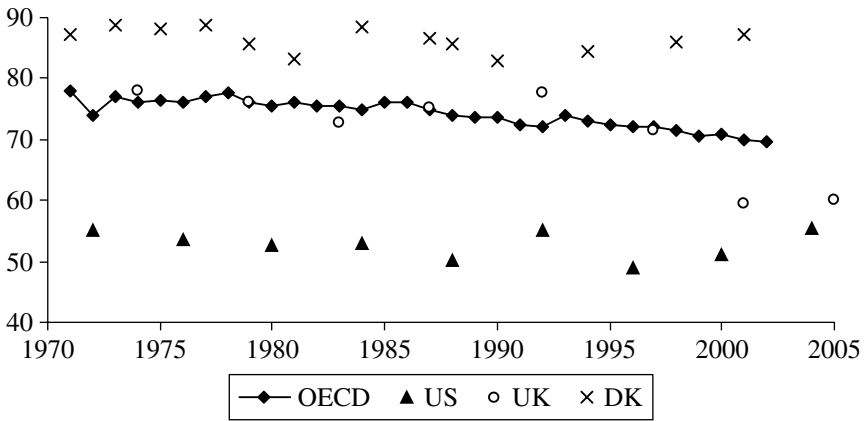


Figure 1.1 Trends in electoral turnout, OECD average and selected countries  
 Source: Calculated from *The International IDEA Database* (Stockholm, 2005)

total registered voters. The raw data for the US, the UK and Denmark are also plotted to offer some comparative perspective.

What the data series reveals is a consistent and long-standing trend for electoral turnout to fall over time. Though the graph shows only the period from the early 1970s, this decline is widely held to date from the 1960s. Yet the effect is not a massive one. Average turnout for the OECD states has fallen by only about 8 percentage points between 1970 and 2005 – a seemingly modest annual rate of decline of less than a quarter of a percentage point per year. This might make the apocalyptic pronouncements that have often accompanied the identification of this trend appear unwarranted. Should we really be that concerned about average turnout levels falling by less than 1 percentage point in an (OECD average) four-year electoral cycle? Yet what is most remarkable and potentially alarming about this trend is not the rate of decline itself. What worries commentators far more is the consistent and seemingly now accelerating nature of the trend and its cumulative consequences over a number of decades. If declining formal political participation threatens to destroy the legitimacy that liberal democracy has come both to enjoy and to rely upon, this will not prove a rapid death. But that does not make the process any less potentially pathological.

The graph also shows the significant variation in average turnout levels between cases, with average turnout levels in Denmark, for instance, some 30 percentage points higher than in the US over this period of time. There is no evidence of this gap being closed by turnout decline – in other

Table 1.1 Decline in electoral turnout, 1945–2005, selected OECD countries

	<b>Maximum (Year)</b>	<b>Minimum (Year)</b>	<b>Decline (% of maximum)</b>	<b>Annual rate of change</b>
Japan	74.7 (1980)	44.9 (1995)	29.8 (40)	−1.99
UK	83.6 (1950)	59.4 (2001)	24.2 (29)	−0.47
Canada	75.4 (1958)	54.6 (2000)	20.8 (28)	−0.50
France	82.7 (1956)	60.3 (2002)	22.4 (27)	−0.49
New Zealand	95.1 (1951)	72.5 (2002)	22.6 (24)	−0.44
Netherlands	95.5 (1956)	73.1 (1998)	22.3 (24)	−0.53
United States	62.8 (1960)	49.0 (1996)	13.8 (22)	−0.38
Ireland	76.9 (1969)	62.6 (2002)	14.3 (19)	−0.43
Austria	96.8 (1949)	80.4 (1999)	16.4 (17)	−0.33
Germany	91.1 (1972)	77.8 (1990)	13.3 (15)	−0.74
Italy	93.7 (1958)	81.4 (2001)	12.3 (13)	−0.29
Norway	85.4 (1965)	75.0 (2001)	10.4 (13)	−0.29
Denmark	89.3 (1968)	80.6 (1953)	−8.7 (−10)*	+0.58
Sweden	91.8 (1976)	77.4 (1958)	−14.5 (−16)*	+0.81

\* Note that turnout increased between these two dates.

Source: Calculated from *The International IDEA Database* (Stockholm, 2005)

words, turnout levels have not fallen more rapidly in those democracies characterized by the highest initial levels.

Table 1.1 offers a little more comparative detail, showing maximum and minimum levels of turnout in national elections during the post-war years for a number of advanced liberal democracies. The figures again express turnout as a percentage of the total number of registered voters. The table also displays both the extent and the annual rate of the decline in voter turnout between the maximum (peak) and minimum (trough). The states are listed in rank order of decline in turnout between peak and trough.

We need, of course, to be extremely cautious in the inferences we draw from data such as these. Maximum levels of turnout, for instance, may well be the product of one-off factors quite specific to the national context in which an election takes place and to the lie of the political landscape at a particular moment in time. Such factors are likely to include the closeness of the competition between the principal parties and the perceived stakes of the contest. Indeed, concentrating on turnout maxima and minima arguably magnifies the significance of such case- and time-specific factors. This should make us wary of extrapolating too easily from such data to discern more general patterns and trends. Nonetheless, a number of observations can tentatively be made.

First, turnout has indeed declined in most cases over the post-war period. With only a couple of exceptions, peaks in electoral participation occurred relatively early in the period (the average date is 1962) and troughs relatively late in the period (the average date is 1993). Indeed, in precisely half the cases the minimum turnout level was recorded in elections held in 2000 or later. Again, however, we see significant variations between cases – in maxima and minima, in the extent of decline and in the rate of decline. Thus, whilst Japan has seen a recent precipitous decline in turnout from a peak as late as 1980, New Zealand has seen a rather more steady and protracted process of decline dating from the early 1950s, and Denmark and Sweden have actually seen turnout increase from minima in the 1950s to maxima in the late 1960s and 1970s respectively, only for turnout to fall again in the 1980s and 1990s. As this suggests, if the norm is for a lengthy process of decline over several decades, then there are exceptions. The most obvious and perhaps most significant of these are the Nordic/Scandinavian countries – Norway, Denmark and Sweden – clustered at the bottom of the table. Although they, too, have suffered some decline in turnout in recent decades, it has been less pronounced, generally later in its onset and from a higher initial level. As a consequence, the Nordic countries enjoy some of the highest – and most stable – levels of turnout amongst advanced liberal democracies. We might well ask ourselves what these archetypally social democratic regimes are doing right. A clue is perhaps contained in the marked contrast between their experience and that of the rather more market-oriented regimes of the Anglophone world – Canada, New Zealand, the US, the UK and Ireland. This group of so-called liberal market economies (see Hall and Soskice 2001) is characterized by a low and comparatively early peak in levels of turnout (their average maximum is 78.8 per cent in 1957), amongst the highest levels of decline in turnout (with the exception of Ireland, they are all in the top half of the table), and, as a consequence, some of the lowest current levels of electoral participation (with an average minimum of 59.6 per cent in 2000). Though the evidence of figure 1.1 is hardly decisive in adjudicating such a proposition, it might well be that the contrasting political cultures characteristic of liberal and social democratic regimes has something to do with it. The greater willingness, for instance, to see politics as an effective means of delivering public goods in a social democratic polity might plausibly be reflected in higher levels of political engagement – especially when contrasted to liberalism’s characteristic cynicism about the motivations of political actors. Yet, for now, this is little more than an untested proposition, though one to which we will return.

Thus far we have looked at trends in electoral participation exclusively in aggregate terms. Yet a significant body of literature now exists that dissects this general picture, thereby sharpening our analytical purchase on the factors driving falling electoral turnout. Two issues emerge from this literature. The first relates to the role of demographic factors in declining electoral participation, the second to the uneven nature of electoral participation and to the significance in this of a range of socio-economic and educational factors.

### *Demographic factors*

The demographic picture is in fact very clear, and highly conserved between cases. It can be summarized in two simple and widely noted trends.

- 1 Groups (or 'cohorts') of potential voters eligible to vote for the first time at a particular election display a remarkable consistency in their patterns of electoral participation at subsequent elections – as if a potential voter's very first decision whether to vote or not exerted a powerful influence on each subsequent decision.
- 2 Levels of electoral participation amongst successive cohorts of first-time voters tend to fall from one election to the next, with each successive cohort carrying that lower propensity to vote forward into subsequent elections.

Put slightly differently, one of the very best predictors of a potential voter's propensity to vote at the next election is whether or not she decided to vote when first eligible to do so. And the longer ago that was, the more likely she was to have decided to cast a vote then, and the more likely she is to cast a vote when next given the opportunity to do so. Both of these important findings are displayed for the British case in figure 1.2.

This at first rather complex-looking graph, compiled from data assembled by Mark Franklin (2004), shows the level of turnout for each British general election between 1964 and 1997. Turnout levels are shown for each age cohort and for each election. Each voter is placed in an age cohort corresponding to the election at which he or she was first eligible to vote.

The graph suggests a strong and positive correlation between the number of elections for which voters have been registered to vote and their levels of electoral participation – a finding reinforced by Franklin's analysis of the five other countries for which data are available (2004: 71–4). In the 1997 British general election, for instance, nearly nine out of ten of those

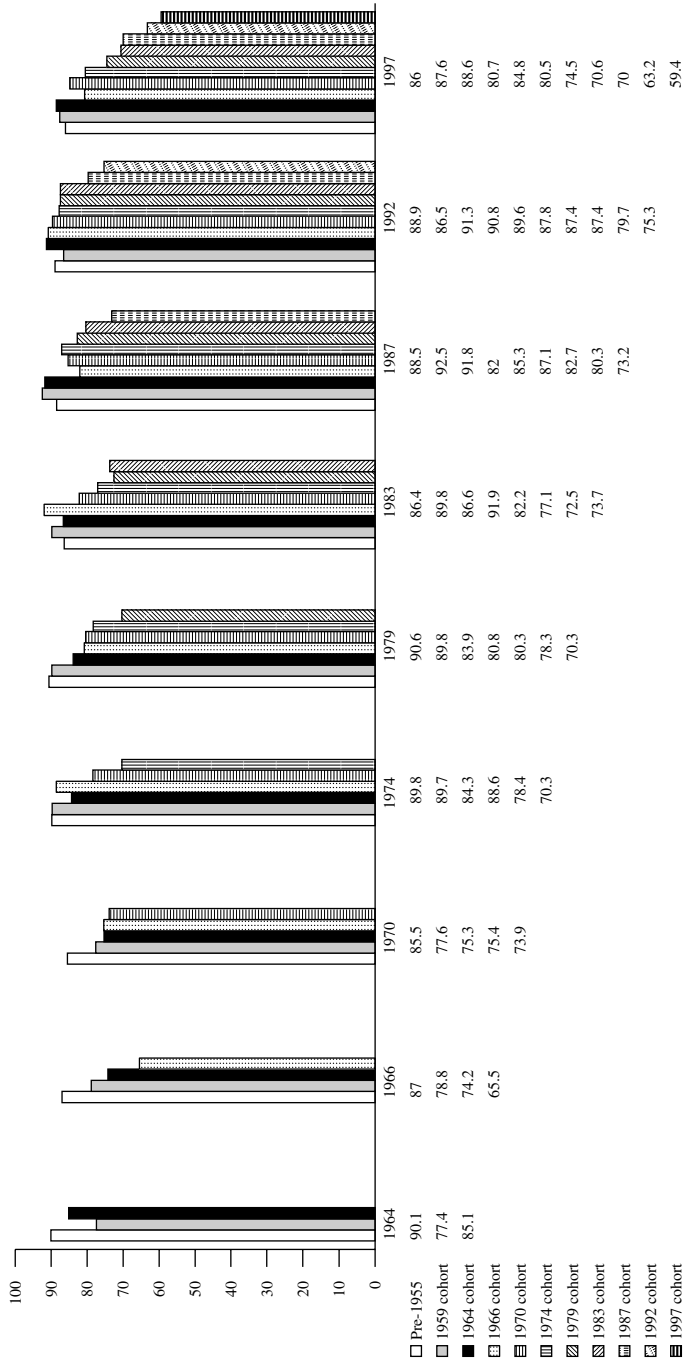


Figure 1.2 Average British voter turnout by age cohort and year, 1964–97  
 Source: Compiled from Franklin 2004: 69, table 3.1, with permission of the author and Cambridge University Press

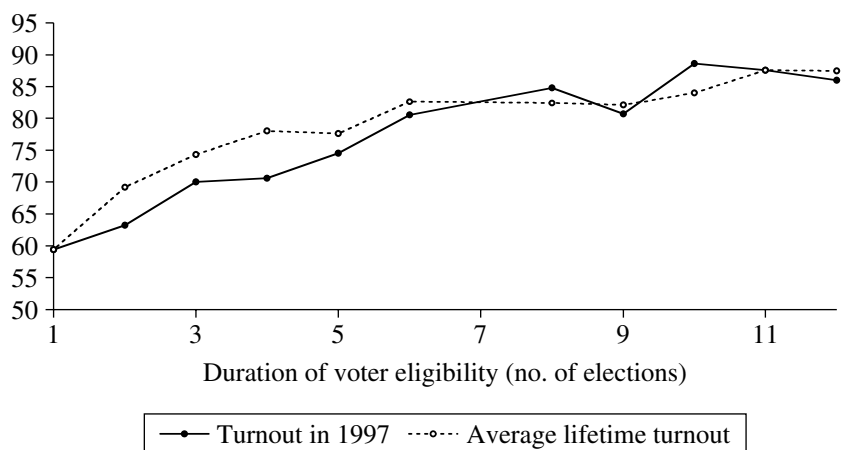


Figure 1.3 Electoral participation and duration of voter eligibility, UK 1997. For voters eligible to vote prior to 1964, average turnout between 1964 and 1997 is given instead of average lifetime turnout; average lifetime turnout here refers to average turnout in all elections for which the citizen was registered to vote up to and including the 1997 general election

Source: Calculated from Franklin 2004: 69, table 3.1

citizens first eligible to vote before 1964 exercised their right to vote, compared to fewer than six out of ten of those newly eligible to vote. This is shown even more clearly in figure 1.3, in which, again for the 1997 general election, turnout levels are plotted against the number of elections since the voter was first entitled to vote. A very clear positive association between levels of electoral participation and the number of electoral cycles for which the citizen has been eligible to vote is revealed.

There are, of course, two potential and rather different explanations for such a trend: (i) that as voters age, or acquire greater political experience, they become more and more likely to vote; (ii) that voting is a habit established early and that, as a consequence, voters carry with them the legacy of their very first decision whether or not to participate electorally. To help adjudicate between these contending explanations, the graph also shows, on the same axis, the propensity of voters to exercise their right to electoral participation averaged over all (national parliamentary) elections in which they were eligible to vote.

What is particularly interesting, then, about figure 1.3 is the closeness of the two plots; the figures for average lifetime turnout and for turnout in 1997 do not differ markedly for any age cohort. This indicates a quite remarkable degree of consistency in turnout levels from one election to the

next for cohorts of voters first eligible to vote at the same election. On the basis of this evidence, it would seem, we should reject the first hypothesis in favour of the second. The initial decision to vote or not to vote would indeed appear highly consequential. Voting and, indeed, non-voting would appear to be habits established early that prove difficult to shake.

This is a most important finding when it comes to understanding the decline in electoral participation in advanced liberal democracies in recent decades, offering us a rather richer and more nuanced description of the phenomenon. If Franklin is right, and age cohorts acquire a propensity to vote or not to vote that proves 'sticky' over time, then the burden of accounting for declining electoral participation must fall disproportionately on explaining the disaffection of first-time voters with politics. It also suggests that we should expect to see turnout continue to decline for some time to come, since with each passing election a young cohort of citizens with a low propensity to vote effectively replaces the most elderly cohort of citizens with the greatest propensity to vote. Until the turnout level of first-time voters exceeds that of those they replace, aggregate electoral participation will continue to fall.<sup>9</sup> This 'generational replacement' effect also helps to account for the generally slow but cumulative nature of shifts in levels of electoral participation over time. It should perhaps lead us to be sceptical of any quick fix to the problem of declining turnout.

At the same time, however, we should be wary of the fatalism that the above analysis might be seen to imply. Identifying the sources of youth political disaffection is clearly crucial to understanding decline in electoral participation over time, but this does not mean that solutions to the problem of low electoral participation should be confined to efforts to engage the first-time voter politically, important though these clearly are. Patterns of electoral participation amongst seasoned citizens may well have proved sticky during periods in which, for the most part, turnout has received very little political attention. But this does not mean that they must necessarily continue to prove so sticky during times when turnout is identified as a problem requiring a political solution. Indeed, it would be rather perverse if the more accurate diagnosis of the problem of voter disaffection offered by this demographic perspective served only to increase its perceived intractability.

#### *Socio-economic and educational factors*

A second theme of the existing literature is the influence of socio-economic and educational factors as determinants of levels of electoral participation. Here, again, there is a fair degree of consensus. By and large, levels of educational attainment are associated positively with political participation of all

kinds, including voting (Parry et al. 1992; Franklin 2002: 152; 2004: 154). Though the effect is not as strong as it once was, this remains the case despite the mounting evidence that the most educated are also the most cynical with respect to politics in general and the most critical of politicians' motivations (van Deth and Scarborough 1995; Dalton 2004: 86–91, 95; cf. Almond and Verba 1963; Stokes 1962). Important though these more recent findings are, however, they should not lead us to lose sight of the still strong correlation between educational experience/attainment, on the one hand, and formal political participation, on the other. Given this persistent relationship, and the significant increase in average levels of both educational experience and attainment in the advanced liberal democracies over recent decades, we would expect to have seen a marked increase in levels of formal political participation. That we have not merely emphasizes the extent of the contemporary disaffection and disengagement of citizens with formal politics.

The picture is very similar with respect to socio-economic factors. As is long established, the most marginalized from society are also the least likely to participate in formal politics (Pattie et al. 2004). The unemployed black urban poor remain the least likely of all to vote in US elections, for instance. They are effectively disenfranchised as a consequence – since both major political parties can essentially discount their participation. Again, though, the more recent trend is for voter cynicism to be growing most rapidly amongst sections of the population previously characterized by the highest levels of political engagement, party identification and participation. This has led some to identify the rise of a new group of often young, well-educated and affluent 'critical citizens' (Norris 1999a).

#### *Trends in formal political participation – party membership*

Voting is, of course, not the only form that political participation of a formal kind may take, though understandably perhaps, it has tended to receive the most attention from analysts, commentators and professional politicians alike. But if we are to assess accurately trends in formal political participation, it is important that we consider the numerous other forms it may take – most notably membership of political parties and attendance at political meetings. Here the empirical evidence reveals effects that are both substantial in their magnitude, certainly when compared to trends in levels of electoral participation, and just as persistent.

Figure 1.4 presents standardized data for both turnout levels and party membership for the OECD countries from the mid-1950s. The data are those of Robert D. Putnam, who has perhaps done more to draw our atten-

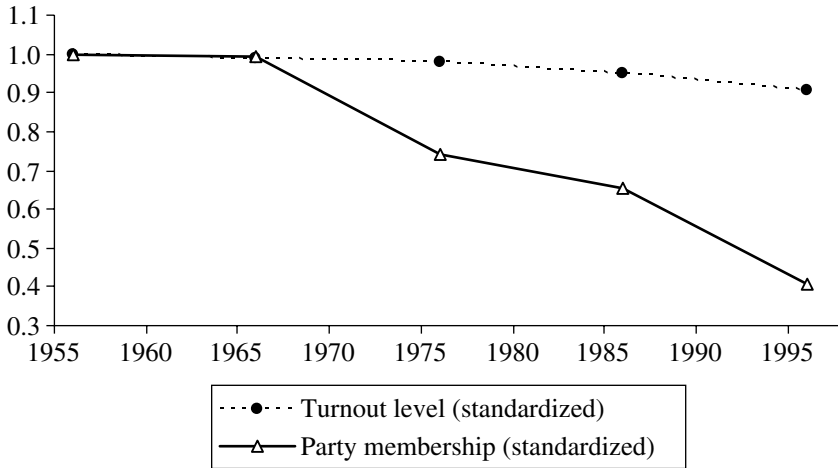


Figure 1.4 Decline in turnout and party membership, OECD countries  
 Source: Calculated from Putnam 2002: 405–6

tion to these trends than anyone else. His data points are constructed as rolling averages of turnout levels. They have been standardized such that all other data points are expressed as a proportion of turnout level in the first two elections of the 1950s.

A number of important observations can be made from this graph:

- Party membership has fallen precipitously throughout the OECD countries.
- It has fallen at a far greater rate than levels of electoral participation.
- Like decline in turnout, this would appear to be an accelerating trend.
- Both trends seem to exhibit a similar temporality – having their origins in the 1960s and accelerating since then in a seemingly unchecked manner.

Of course, party membership has always been something of a minority pursuit, but what is clear is that only a small and ever declining section of the population is now animated sufficiently by political competition to become party members. When the (ageing) demographics of party membership are taken into consideration, and when it is noted that according to the World Values Survey, only some 40 per cent of party members in the Anglophone democracies would claim to be activists (Scarrow 2000: 96), the picture looks bleak indeed. It is perhaps unsurprising that a number of commentators have been led to suggest the death of the political party as an effective campaigning organization altogether (e.g. Lawson and Merkl 1988). This is

almost certainly premature, and something of an exaggeration (for a collection of rather more sanguine alternative views see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). But the trends in the data are nonetheless alarming. For, when turnout decline is considered alongside these figures, we see unequivocal evidence that formal politics today is capable of consistently animating *neither* those with a moderate interest in politics to electoral participation *nor* those most engaged politically to party membership. To return to an earlier theme, politics (or at least formal politics) would seem not to be all that it was once cracked up to be. Moreover, the decline in party membership, whether it entails the death of the party as an effective campaigning organization or not, does have consequences for the ability of political parties to mobilize citizens to participate electorally. In 1964 the combined membership of the British Labour and Conservative parties stood at 3.4 million; today it stands at less than 500,000. Even on the most optimistic of estimates, that leaves Britain's two principal parties with fewer than 200,000 party activists between them. That level of activism is simply insufficient to maintain constituency campaigning in national elections in all but a limited number of target seats. Yet, as a growing body of recent evidence demonstrates, constituency campaigning is highly effective, both in raising turnout and in improving party performance (Denver et al. 2004; Whiteley and Seyd 2003). As this suggests, the rapidly diminishing capacity of political parties in most advanced liberal democracies to mount co-ordinated local campaigns may be a further mechanism contributing to ever lower electoral participation. Indeed, it may serve further to entrench a spiral of diminishing mobilization, participation and engagement at all levels.

If figures for party membership are likely to make fairly depressing reading for political elites, then the figures for a range of other indices of political participation are unlikely to lighten the mood. Table 1.2 summa-

Table 1.2 Trends in political participation in the US and the UK

	US (1974)	US (1994)	UK (1984)*	UK (2000)
Signed petition	36	26	63	42
Attended political meeting	32	18	9	6
Written to politician	16	12	30	13
Boycotted products	–	–	4	31
Contacted media	–	–	4	9
Engaged in illegal protest	–	–	1	2

\* Respondents asked to itemize participation over five years; in all other surveys they were asked to do so over twelve months.

Source: Assembled from Parry et al. 1992: 44; Pattie et al. 2003b: 631; Wuthnow 2002: 74

rizs the findings of attitudinal surveys in the US and the UK in which respondents were asked to itemize their participation, indicating whether or not they had engaged in a variety of political acts in the preceding twelve-month or five-year periods.

Given the tenor of the discussion thus far, this evidence will come as no great surprise. In the US (where the data for 1974 and 1994 are directly comparable) and even for the UK (where they are not), there is clear evidence of decline in most indices of conventional political participation. It should also be noted that since these data are based on respondents' self-reporting of political participation, and since respondents have something of a tendency to over-report what they take to be positive attributes in survey responses, these figures almost certainly exaggerate actual levels of participation.<sup>10</sup> The key point, however, is not the levels of participation these surveys report but the downward trend in levels of formal political participation that they indicate.

Yet this is not the whole picture. For the UK data show, in addition to this now rather familiar tendency, something new and different. This is not simply a story of declining levels of political engagement and participation. Such a decline is undoubtedly under way, but it would seem to be accompanied by a simultaneous rise in other forms of political expression – notably, those which bypass conventional/formal political channels. This, it seems, may take a variety of forms, from contacting the media, rather than writing to politicians, to boycotting products and engaging in (often illegal) forms of public protest, rather than lobbying public authorities. It is perhaps indicative less of a decline in political participation than a change in its form. This, as we shall now see, is precisely the argument of those who have not restricted their analysis of contemporary trends to formal/conventional modes of political participation.

#### *From formal to informal political participation?*

Though the subject has, perhaps understandably, received far less attention from political analysts, changes in patterns of informal political participation are a crucial aspect of the contemporary reorientation of political conduct in the advanced liberal democracies. By and large, those with the most restrictive and conventional conceptions of political participation identify a strong and consistent pattern of declining political participation and engagement over time, whilst those with a more inclusive conception discern instead a change in the *mode* of political participation. These may sound like mutually incompatible descriptions of current trends, and in a

sense they are. But, odd though it may seem, they are both consistent with the empirical evidence. On the face of it, the dispute would appear to be almost entirely semantic – for what counts as declining political participation in the first place depends on what political participation is taken to mean. Yet such semantic disputes are far from innocent theoretically – reflecting prior normative concerns about the nature of ‘good’ political participation. And this, in turn, raises the question of what politics *is* and how it should be defined. That is the subject of the next chapter, and cannot concern us further at this point. Suffice it to note for now that much is at stake in resolving the semantics of this debate, and the normative and theoretical issues which lie just below its surface.

To illustrate this, consider the highly influential thesis that (formal) political disaffection and disengagement are a product of political apathy on the part of (largely contented) citizens. Such a description is perfectly compatible with a narrow and formal definition of politics and, it might be noted, is rather convenient for political elites. For it suggests that the problem is one of demand rather than supply. As a consequence, if there is any culpability to apportion for declining levels of political participation, the lion’s share must surely rest with feckless citizens rather than with those responsible for their government. This is an issue to which we will return in some detail presently. The key point for now is that if politics is understood solely in such formal terms, then evidence of declining political participation is unequivocal; it is but a short step to accounting for this in terms of mounting political apathy (see also O’Toole et al. 2003a: 350). Yet, if politics is understood in a rather more inclusive way, it becomes far more difficult to explain the exhibited decline in formal political participation in terms of voter apathy – since there is plenty of other evidence that citizens continue to behave politically whilst bypassing conventional/ formal channels of political expression. It is to that body of evidence that we now turn.

The picture that emerges of informal/extra-parliamentary political participation is by no means simple. Indeed, such political conduct is multi-dimensional. Yet one of the clearest trends that emerges is the development of a new repertoire of non-collective political conduct and communication centred on the individual (Pattie et al. 2004). Much of this seems to be associated with the rise of politicized consumption in a more or less conspicuous form. As the results of the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s Citizen Audit show, when contrasted to Parry et al.’s earlier findings, the use of consumption to indicate political preferences has increased markedly since the mid-1980s. Only 4 per cent of survey respondents in 1984 reported that they had boycotted products in the previous five-year period (Parry

et al. 1992: 44). This compares with 31 per cent in 2000 who reported that they had done so in the previous twelve months. In the same survey, 28 per cent of respondents indicated that, again during the last year, they had 'bought products for political, ethical or environmental reasons', whilst 22 per cent reported that they had 'worn or displayed a campaign badge or sticker' (Pattie et al. 2003a, 2003b). What this certainly suggests is the rise of a new individuated lifestyle politics in which ethically informed consumer choices are the key to a form of atomized yet mass political expression. As Pattie et al. note, 'well-publicised examples of companies modifying their policies, apparently in response to consumer behaviour . . . no doubt encourage this type of political engagement' (2003b: 622). Whatever inferences we might draw from this about democratic governance, it is clear that formal and conventional political channels are being bypassed altogether by such strategies. And, if Pattie et al. are correct, such strategies would appear no less effective in influencing outcomes because they have bypassed formal political channels – quite the opposite.

The examples of such outcomes that they list are interesting, however, and indicate something of the complexity of this kind of ethical consumption-based identity politics. They are 'the supermarkets' increased stocks of organic and fair-trade products, Nestlé's modification of its policy towards Ethiopian debt', and 'Shell Oil's reversal of its policy regarding the disposal of its Brent Spar oil-drilling platform' (Pattie et al. 2003b: 622). What is particularly interesting about this list is that it is only really with the first of these examples that the desired outcome could be achieved in the absence of a co-ordinated campaign. It would be wrong, then, to see this new mode of political expression as totally atomistic and individualized. Indeed, it is here that one of the distinguishing features of such new modes of political protest becomes especially significant – namely, the use of new digital technologies (notably the Internet) to facilitate the loose co-ordination of otherwise individuated protest often over considerable distances. Small numbers of activists may here play a crucial role in identifying, promoting and channelling appropriate consumer choices to maximize their symbolic and political significance. Here non-governmental organizations (both international and domestic) come to play an increasingly crucial role, acting as intermediaries between citizens whose atomized choices they seek to co-ordinate and corporations whose behaviour they seek to tame or influence.

Not all forms of alternative politics are so atomistic, however. A mounting body of recent research suggests that, far from being apathetic politically, a significant proportion of those who regard themselves as having disengaged entirely from formal politics are actively engaged in other

modes of informal yet collective political conduct (Margetts 2000; O'Toole et al. 2003a). Such political actors typically feel let down or even betrayed by the formal political system, which they perceive as alienating, uninterested in the issues which motivate them to behave politically, and unresponsive. Bypassing conventional channels of political influence, they are far more prone to take matters into their own hands, contributing significantly to the exhibited recent rise in levels of direct, sometimes even illegal, political protest in most advanced liberal democracies. These protests should perhaps be seen less as an attempt to lobby public authorities for specific concessions than as an expression of political exasperation at the seeming failure of existing political institutions both domestically and internationally to deal effectively with issues such as climate change, poverty and Third World debt. Recent high-profile examples in the British context include the Poll Tax 'riots' of 1990, Greenpeace's direct action campaign against the disposal of the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea in 1995, protests against the export for slaughter of veal calves in 1995, the Snowdrop Appeal (following the Dunblane massacre) which led to the abolition of hand-guns in 1996, the campaign against the second runway at Manchester airport in 1997, opposition to the proposed ban on fox hunting in 1998 and 2004, protests against fuel price rises in 2000, the mass demonstrations against the Iraq War in 2003, and the protests around the G8 summit of 2005 (Maloney, W. 2006).

Recent research shows that those who have largely disengaged from conventional politics to engage in these alternative forms of political expression regard their own decision not to participate in formal politics as itself a highly political act. Their non-participation is itself a form of politics, and, as those who have drawn our attention to this mode of political expression argue, one that should be acknowledged as such (O'Toole et al. 2003a, 2003b).

Conventionally, it has simply been assumed that participation in formal politics is linked – in many accounts, causally – with other forms of civic/extra-political participation. This assumption, for instance, lies at the heart of Robert D. Putnam's highly influential 'social capital' thesis, which explains declining levels of political participation in the US by reference to declining levels of civic engagement more generally (Putnam 2000).

Table 1.3 Arenas of political participation and non-participation

	<b>Formal politics</b>	<b>Informal politics</b>
Participation	1	2
Non-participation	3	4

Arguably, such a view underpins the convenient myth that political disaffection is a product of voter apathy. It would suggest that those who inhabit arena 3 in table 1.3 are also likely to be found in arena 4. Yet, recent findings, like those reviewed above, suggest otherwise. Many, especially young, citizens who have chosen either to disengage, or never to engage in the first place, in formal politics are active in informal politics – they inhabit arenas 2 and 3 in table 1.3. Whatever they are, they are not apathetic politically.

This provides an important corrective to much of the conventional wisdom about political participation. But such findings need to be interpreted cautiously. They certainly problematize the ease with which we might identify an aggregate decline in levels of political participation, but they do not do so by challenging the view that levels of formal political participation have fallen. Instead, they contextualize such an observation within a broader and richer understanding of contemporary patterns of political participation. We may well be right to redefine political participation to include activities beyond the formal political arena. But we cannot afford, in so doing, to forget that levels of formal political participation have declined and continue to decline. This matters. That those most disaffected and disengaged from formal politics have found alternative modes of political expression is certainly important, but it is as much a symptom of the condition we are seeking to diagnose as is declining formal participation itself.

Put slightly differently, alternative modes of political participation are neither a substitute for, nor incompatible with, formal political participation. But they are most definitely an indication that we cannot simply read disaffection and disengagement from formal politics as an index either of political apathy or of the demise of politics itself.

### *Democracy, legitimacy and trust in political actors*

The third distinct source of evidence that needs to be considered in mapping the form and character of contemporary political disaffection and disengagement is attitudinal. Relatively high-quality survey data are now available for most advanced liberal democracies, in many cases going back several decades. These data are often assembled as part of official national election studies, and they offer an important window on citizens' attitudes towards political institutions, politicians and politics in general. Though they are not always comparable between cases, since the need to ask the same or equivalent questions in national surveys has only been recognized relatively recently, they still provide the most reliable basis from which to

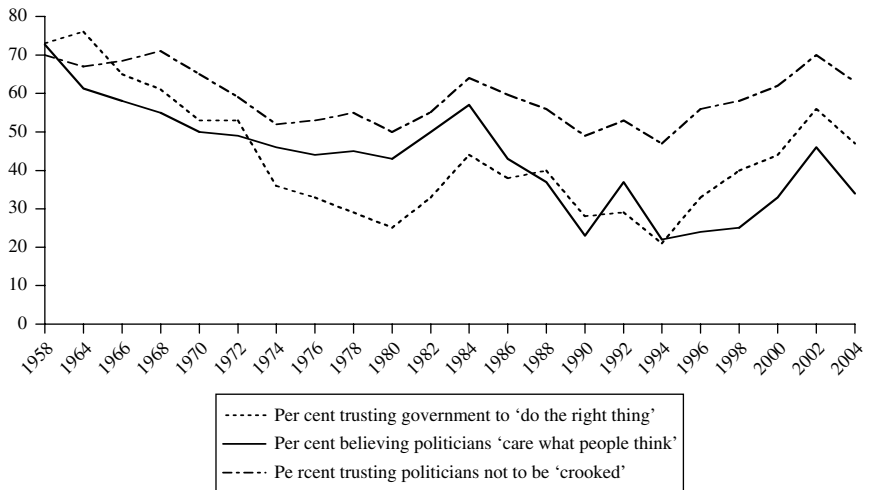


Figure 1.5 Levels of trust in politicians and government in the US, 1958–2004  
*Source:* Compiled from American National Election Studies (University of Michigan, various years)

gauge comparatively changing attitudes towards politics, democracy and government. In particular, they allow us to assess the extent to which recent decades have seen a trend decline in levels of trust and confidence in politicians and public officials.

In keeping with the tenor of the analysis thus far presented, none of these data make very attractive reading to politicians or public officials. Figure 1.5 displays time-series data on levels of trust in politicians and government amongst American citizens of voting age. The data are drawn from consecutive American National Election Studies between 1958 and 2004, and show attitudinal changes in three separate, if clearly related, aspects of political trust. Respondents were asked to indicate how much of the time they thought ‘they could trust government in Washington to do the right thing – just about all of the time, most of the time, or only some of the time’. The graph shows the proportion responding ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’. Similarly, they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘Public officials don’t care much what people like me think’. The graph shows the percentage expressing disagreement with the statement. Finally, they were asked what proportion of ‘the people running the government are crooked’. The graph shows the share of respondents answering ‘not many’ or ‘hardly any’.

Each data series shows a consistent and, until the early 1980s, an uninterrupted decline. Thereafter the data fluctuate rather more, with three

clear periods in which levels of trust are temporarily restored (in the early 1980s, briefly from 1990, and again between 1994 and 2002). It is notable, however, that each of these episodic recoveries in levels of political trust is followed by an equally precipitous decline. Indeed, in the first two cases, this decline takes levels of political trust to an all-time low. In 2004, despite the significant recovery in each measure of political trust to a twenty-year high following the events of September 11, only a third of US citizens believed politicians cared what they thought, an equivalent proportion believed that ‘many’ of their politicians were ‘crooked’, whilst fewer than half believed that government could be trusted to ‘do the right thing’ more often than not. This is hardly an edifying image of the institutions of American democracy, especially when it is noted that commercial polls do not show the same recovery in levels of political trust between 1994 and 2000 (though September 11 did bring a temporary boost in 2001–2, albeit one which has long since subsided).<sup>11</sup>

Given what we know about levels of formal political participation in the US, and the concern it has generated, it may well be tempting to question the broader relevance of such findings, dismissing them as another case of American exceptionalism. Alternatively, and rather more pessimistically, we might see US trends as offering advanced warning of the path down which most other advanced liberal democracies are now heading. In fact, neither reaction is appropriate, as a look at the evidence makes alarmingly clear. Sadly, few national election studies ask their respondents so directly to indicate their levels of political trust. And even those that do have not done so as consistently, in such depth, or for so long. This leaves us with only one dimension of political trust for which comparative time-series data are available, and even then, only for a handful of countries and for a limited period of time. Figure 1.6 presents the proportion of respondents in the US, France and Sweden expressing disagreement with the statement, ‘Public officials don’t care much what people like me think’ (suitably translated).

As figure 1.6 suggests, the US is very far from being the exception. The strong and persistent downward trend in levels of political trust is clearly exhibited in all three cases. Moreover, the rate and timing of the decline and, perhaps more surprisingly, the levels of trust/distrust recorded are remarkably similar between these (very different) cases. The Swedish data are perhaps the most difficult to explain here. Sweden, like other Nordic/Scandinavian countries, has amongst the highest and most consistent levels of formal political participation of any advanced liberal democracy. Yet 70 per cent or so of respondents in 1994 found themselves agreeing with the statement that ‘Public officials don’t care much what people like me think’.

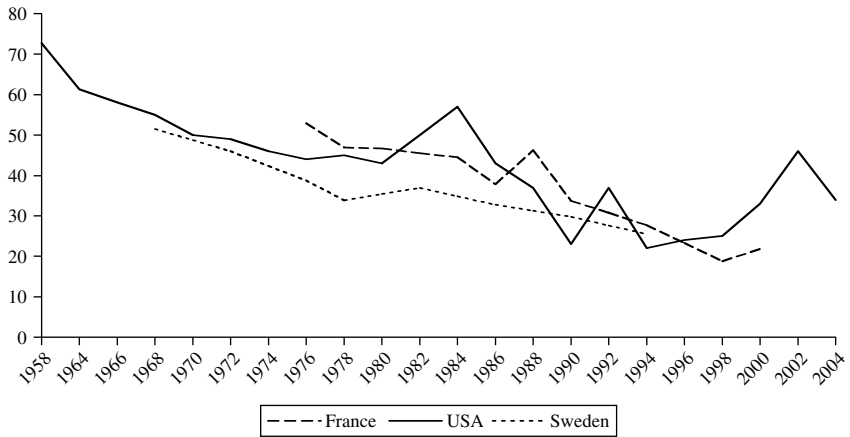


Figure 1.6 Do politicians care? Comparative attitudinal trends  
 Source: Compiled from National Election Studies (various years)

That this figure was recorded in a year in which close to 90 per cent of them voted in the national parliamentary election makes it all the more remarkable; indeed, it might lead one to ask why they bothered. Of course, it might well be suggested that the legitimacy of the social democratic tradition of government rests rather less than that of its liberal counterpart on the claimed responsiveness to societal opinion. Indeed, in placing far greater emphasis on the state's role in safeguarding the collective interest of society as a whole, it might even be argued that social democracy entails a willingness to tolerate a certain indifference to public opinion on the part of government.<sup>12</sup> That is all very well, but it remains unlikely that many of those expressing what they saw as the consistent failure of government to respond to their wishes did so approvingly.

If anything, the point works the other way around. For if the American liberal democratic system of governance cannot deliver or, more importantly, *be seen to deliver*, representativeness and responsiveness, then what can it deliver? These are, after all, its self-declared defining traits and its *raison d'être* – this is, quite simply, what it is *for*. If it can no longer deliver, or be seen to deliver, that which it values above all else, then one might imagine that its very legitimacy would be seriously in doubt. Yet that is not what the evidence shows. Whatever its exhibited failings in the minds of those it claims to represent, American citizens do not blame liberal democracy itself. And, once again, they are by no means alone in absolving the democratic system of responsibility for their lack of trust in political institutions.

This is the message of table 1.4, which shows current levels of satisfac-

Table 1.4 Satisfaction with democracy

Country	Democracy as good system of government	Democracy as best form of government
Canada	87	87
Denmark	98	99
Finland	88	90
France	89	93
Germany (West)	95	97
Great Britain	87	78
Ireland	92	93
Italy	97	94
Japan	92	92
Luxemburg	92	95
Netherlands	97	86
Sweden	97	94
United States	89	87

Source: World Values Survey (2000–2)

tion with democracy for a number of OECD member states. The data come from the most recent iteration of the World Values Survey conducted between 2000 and 2002. Respondents in each country were asked whether ‘having a democratic system’ was ‘a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing’ their country. The first column of the table shows the proportion answering ‘very good’ or ‘fairly good’. Respondents were also asked whether they ‘agreed strongly, agreed, disagreed or disagreed strongly’ with the statement ‘Democracy may have problems, but it’s still better than any other form of government’. The second column of the table shows the proportion expressing agreement or strong agreement.

What these attitudinal data show very clearly is the very considerable support for democracy, both as an abstract ideal and as the most appropriate system of government in the countries in which each set of respondents reside. Sadly, there is little by way of good time-series data available on trends over time in levels of satisfaction with democracy. Yet, what limited evidence there is has generally been taken to indicate that, if anything, support for democracy has increased in recent years. Russell J. Dalton summarizes the consensus well when he writes, ‘even though contemporary publics express decreasing confidence in democratic politicians, parties and parliaments, these sentiments have not been carried over to the democratic principles of these regimes’ (2004: 47; see also Klingemann 1999; Norris 1999a). The conclusion is not unfounded, but it does not do full justice to the complexity of the issues involved, as I now hope to show.

Table 1.5 Trends in the evaluation of democracy

Country	Democracy as good system of government			Democracy as best form of government		
	1994–7	2000–2	Change	1994–7	2000–2	Change
Denmark	98	98	0	93	99	+6
Finland	–	88	–	75	90	+15
France	95	89	–6	78	93	+15
Germany (W)	96	95	–1	82	97	+15
Great Britain	93	87	–6	76	78	+2
Ireland	93	92	–1	65	93	+28
Italy	93	97	+4	74	94	+20
Japan	–	92	–	88	92	+4
Luxemburg	98	92	–6	83	95	+12
Netherlands	98	87	–1	85	86	+1
Sweden	–	97	–	93	94	+1
United States	–	89	–	88	87	–1
Average (N)	95.5 (8)	92.7 (12)	–2.1 (8)	81.6 (12)	91.4 (12)	+9.8 (12)

Sources: Calculated from World Values Survey (1994–7, 2000–2); European Values Survey (1999)

Table 1.5 compares levels of support for democracy, both as an ideal and as a practical system of government, in consecutive World Values Surveys (the only two to ask comparable questions). The table shows the proportion of respondents in 1994–7 and 2000–2 regarding democracy as a good system of government; a third column shows the change in response between these two surveys. Similarly, it shows the proportion of respondents in 1994–7 and 2000–2 identifying democracy as the best system of government; again, a third column shows the change in response between the two surveys. On the face of it, this would appear to show a significant strengthening in support for democracy as the *best* available form of government, yet a certain waning in support for the abstract ideal of democracy as an innately *good* system of government. This may sound somewhat contradictory – how, after all, can democracy be the best system of government if it is not regarded as a good system of government? Yet this seeming paradox is perhaps not as difficult to explain as might at first appear. Indeed, it may well reveal something very interesting about contemporary attitudes towards democracy.

To start with, however, it is important to note that the interpretation of these data is made rather more difficult by subtle changes in the wording of the questions posed to respondents in the 1994–7 and 2000–2 surveys. In the earlier survey respondents were asked whether ‘in principle’ they were ‘for

or against the idea of democracy'; in the later survey they were asked whether democracy was a good or bad system of government. Similarly, in the earlier survey respondents were asked to pick between one of three options – (1) 'Democracy is the best form of government, whatever the circumstances may be'; (2) 'In certain cases a dictatorship can be positive'; and (3) 'It doesn't make any difference whether we have a democracy or a dictatorship' – whereas in the later survey they were asked merely to agree or disagree with the statement that whatever its problems, democracy is better than any other form of government. Whilst it would be remarkable if these changes in the construction of the survey did not affect respondents' answers, it seems unlikely that they can account fully for the significant changes in the evaluation of democracy between the two surveys. That is presumably also the view taken by Dalton, who uses precisely the same data to draw the conclusion cited above. Indeed, what is perhaps remarkable is that more than a quarter of respondents in Britain, Italy, Ireland and Finland in the earlier survey thought either that dictatorship could be preferable to democracy or that there was little to choose between them.

The crucial point, however, is that if the differences summarized in figure 1.5 cannot simply be dismissed as methodological artefacts, then they would seem to suggest a rather different interpretation to that placed upon them by Dalton. For what they appear to show is that citizens may well regard democracy as the best available system of government – indeed, they may well do so in increasing numbers – but that they do so at a time when they are increasingly pessimistic about what it can deliver. What the evidence would suggest is a rising tide of cynicism and fatalism about the capacity of even the best – democratic – system of government to provide good outcomes. It is certainly true that, as Hans-Dieter Klingemann notes, 'persons dissatisfied with the current performance of the regime . . . do not necessarily constitute a reservoir of anti-democratic sentiment' (1999: 43). But this is arguably because they perceive no alternative, and are simply resigned to a form of government they no longer associate with the satisfaction of their most basic political desires.

Another rich vein of attitudinal evidence comes in the form of public opinion poll data. Particularly interesting here are polls which seek to gauge comparatively the public's perception of a variety of key professions and institutions. Data such as these allow us to assess the extent to which perceptions of politicians are broadly representative of attitudes towards citizens in general and the extent to which such perceptions are shifting over time. Table 1.6 presents the latest snapshot picture (from 2004) of levels of trust in political and other institutions in the US and the European Union.

Table 1.6 Trust in public institutions in the US and the EU, 2004

	US	EU (25)	UK	France	Germany
Political parties	-69	-63	-68	-66	-70
National government	-28	-35	-50	-34	-45
Congress/parliament	-34	-25	-36	-18	-31
United Nations	-14	+15	+12	+2	+7
Legal system	-11	-2	-14	-9	-20
Police	+44	+28	+20	+14	+55
Military	+40	+37	+47	+25	+36
Church	+14	-3	-8	-19	-11
Trade unions	-32	-16	-8	-19	-30
Large corporations	-58	-34	-45	-32	-45
Voluntary sector	+37	+31	+43	+44	+19
Press	-40	+1	-53	-24	-5

Sources: Calculated from Harris Poll (2004); Eurobarometer (2004)

Respondents (more than 27,000 in total) were asked to indicate whether they tended to trust or not to trust a range of public institutions. The table shows net levels of trust – the proportion of respondents indicating a tendency to trust minus those indicating a tendency not to trust – for each type of institution.

Such data offer a fascinating glimpse into the relative standing of various public institutions in the US and the EU. They show, as one might expect, a very wide variation in levels of trust between different public institutions – political parties being almost universally distrusted, whilst the police are almost universally trusted. With a few interesting exceptions, they also show that variations between institutions are rather more important than variations between national publics. The police, the military and the voluntary sector receive strong net positive evaluations, and would appear to be trusted by a significant proportion of the public throughout the EU and the US. Evaluations of the United Nations and the press are rather more mixed. The former receives a modest endorsement in EU public opinion, but a rather more negative judgement from the US public. The evaluation of the press varies the most between countries, being trusted and distrusted in almost equal measure in the EU taken as a whole, yet attracting almost universal distrust in the US and the UK. Yet the public's greatest and most consistent contempt is left, predictably perhaps, for domestic-level political institutions, large corporations and, if to a somewhat lesser extent, trade unions and the legal system. The most consistent and the most negative evaluations are received by political parties. Those expressing distrust out-

Table 1.7 Changing UK public trust in the professions, 1983–2005

	1983	1993	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	Change (1983– 2005)
Doctors	+68	+73	+76	+84	+82	+85	+85	+17*
Teachers	+65	+75	+72	+82	+76	+79	+80	+15
Judges	+59	+47	+53	+61	+63	+53	+60	-1
Clergy/priests	+74	+67	+57	+66	+63	+51	+55	-19*
Scientists	-	-	+41	+36	+43	+43	+52	+11*†
Police	+29	+37	+31	+30	+36	+38	+26	-3
Ordinary people	+30	+43	+28	+32	+18	+21	+25	-5
Civil servants	-38	-13	-14	+6	-2	+5	+1	+39*
Trade union officials	-53	-22	-29	-8	-7	-20	-9	+44*
Business leaders	-40	-25	-31	-32	-34	-32	-39	+1
Government ministers	-58	-70	-68	-47	-53	-53	-51	+7
Politicians, generally	-57	-65	-63	-49	-57	-57	-51	+3
Journalists	-54	-74	-61	-64	-57	-57	-51	+3

\* Significant at the 0.05 level, † Change 1997–2005.

Source: Calculated from BMA/MORI, various years

number those expressing trust for political parties by a staggering ten to one in the US and a scarcely less appalling six to one in the EU as a whole. The figures for national governments and parliaments are somewhat better, though even here the equivalent ratios for the former range from four to one in the UK to two to one in the US. Once again, a very depressing picture presents itself of levels of trust and confidence in political institutions in the supposed cradle of democracy.

Given the trend decline in levels of political participation and, indeed, other indices of confidence in politicians in recent years, one might be forgiven for thinking that the widespread lack of trust in political institutions is a relatively recent phenomenon. Table 1.7, however, suggests otherwise. This shows trends in public attitudes towards the professions in the UK from 1983 to the present day. The data was assembled by the MORI polling agency in a series of surveys largely funded by the British Medical Association (BMA). As in the data previously considered, respondents were asked to indicate whether they tended to trust or not trust a range of professionals. Once again, the table shows net levels of trust (the proportion indicating trust minus that indicating distrust). Changes in such net approval ratings over time are also shown, as are indications of the statistical significance of any exhibited trend in the data.

It is not difficult to see why it is the BMA rather than the government or the British Association of Journalists that funds this series of polls. For

doctors emerge as the most trusted profession in all but two of the polls conducted, being narrowly relegated to second place by clergy and priests in 1983 and by teachers in 1993. Since then, the very high levels of public confidence that they command as a profession have merely been consolidated. At the other end of the spectrum, journalists, politicians in general, and government ministers in particular continue to fight it out for the dubious honour of being the least trusted profession in the UK – in 2005 achieving a (presumably dishonourable) draw. Yet what is most interesting about these data for our present concerns is that they show no significant decline in trust for politicians in general or government ministers in particular since the early 1980s. If anything, there has been a modest recovery in levels of trust (though this is not statistically significant). This suggests either that levels of trust in politicians and government ministers have always been low or, perhaps more plausibly, that the decline in levels of trust to their present (parlous) level occurred rather earlier.

This latter proposition is rendered all the more plausible by the findings of the classic Civic Culture study conducted in 1959. This showed very high levels of pride amongst British citizens in their political institutions and practices. As its authors concluded, 'the attachment to the [political] system is a balanced one: there is general system pride as well as satisfaction with specific governmental performance' (Almond and Verba 1963: 455). The same could most definitely not be said today, nor at any point since at least the early 1980s.

That is an important point. For it suggests that although low levels of trust in politicians and political institutions may be a significant contributory factor to the decline in political participation that we have witnessed in recent years, they are by no means the only factor, nor arguably the most important. It is, after all, the period since the early 1990s that has witnessed the most precipitous decline in political participation. Yet levels of trust in politicians have been relatively static since the early 1980s.

Thus far we have concentrated largely on the substantial and ever growing body of evidence to suggest that levels of trust and confidence in politicians and political institutions are low. What we have only touched upon are the reasons for this. Sadly, there is surprisingly little attitudinal data on which we might draw in approaching this question inductively. Pollsters have mapped, often in great depth, levels of dissatisfaction with politics, but for the most part they have not probed the reasons for this to anything like the same extent. To be fair, political scientists and commentators have not been short of answers to this important question, and it is to these that we turn in the next section. But before doing so, it is import-

Table 1.8 Primary interests served by MPs

	1994 (per cent)	1996 (per cent)
Own interests	52	56
Party's interests	26	27
Constituents' interests	11	7
Country's interests	5	5
Other interests	1	1
No opinion	5	1

Sources: MORI (1994, 1996)

ant first to consider those few rare insights into the reasons for contemporary disaffection with formal politics offered in public opinion polling data.

In fact, there are but two pieces of evidence that would seem to be relevant here. Moreover, the absence of reliable comparative time-series data in each case means that we have to be extremely cautious in the inferences we might draw from this attitudinal evidence. The first source of data is a question posed by MORI in two surveys of public attitudes towards sleaze and corruption conducted in the UK in 1994 and 1996. Respondents were asked whose interests Members of Parliament (MPs), in general, put first: their own, those of the country, those of their party, or those of their constituents. The findings are summarized in table 1.8.

Whilst we should be cautious not to over-interpret the answers to one question in an opinion poll conducted over a decade ago, this is a potentially significant piece in the jigsaw. It is strongly suggestive of a thesis introduced earlier – that citizens do not trust politicians and political parties, since they project on to them instrumental motives. That 88 per cent of respondents in 1996 (and 84 per cent in 1994) should feel unable to attribute to their elected representative a primary interest in pursuing collective as distinct from sectional interests reveals a quite staggering breakdown in political trust. For presumably almost 100 per cent of MPs would profess to putting the collective interests of the country or their constituents above narrow party or self-interest. The finding also stands in marked contrast to Almond and Verba's (1963) description of British political culture as one of mutual respect and deference on the part of citizens towards those they elected. This was based on extensive research conducted in the late 1950s. Yet what is perhaps most interesting about these more recent data is not so much the proportion of respondents failing to see MPs as motivated by collective interests, as the distribution of those responses attributing more instrumental motives to MPs. That more than 50 per cent of respondents in both surveys should identify not party interest but self-interest as MPs' primary

Table 1.9 US perceptions of the interests that government serves

	1964	1974	1984	1994	2004
Few big interests	29	66	55	76	56
Benefit of all	64	24	39	19	40
Don't know	7	10	6	5	4

*Source:* Compiled from American National Election Studies (various years)

Table 1.10 US perceptions of wastage of taxpayers' money by government

	1964	1974	1984	1994	2004
A lot	47	74	65	70	61
Some	44	22	29	27	37
Not very much	7	1	4	2	2
Don't know	2	2	2	1	1

*Source:* Compiled from American National Election Studies (various years)

motivation is remarkable. Indeed, were the majority of respondents correct in their attribution of motives to MPs – and it is of course impossible to assess the accuracy of such judgements – it is difficult to see how democratic government could function at all. For, as argued earlier, politics is about the capacity to deliver collective/public goods; were politicians motivated solely by self-interest, it is difficult to see how they could do anything other than subvert that capacity.

The second piece of evidence comes from consecutive American National Election Studies. Since the mid-1960s, in some cases earlier, these have asked respondents for a variety of evaluations of government. Some of the resulting data we have already considered (see figures 1.5 and 1.6). But two further questions merit closer inspection at this point, supplementing in a way the evidence presented above. Table 1.9 shows responses, at ten-year intervals between 1964 and 2004, to the question 'Is government run for the benefit of all or for the benefit of a few big interests?'

Table 1.10 shows responses, again at ten-year intervals from 1964 to 2004, to the question 'Do people in government waste taxpayers' money?' As is often the case with opinion polls, these questions are hardly posed innocently. Indeed, they may well prompt respondents not especially enamoured of government to pick the first and most critical answer. Nonetheless, whilst we should perhaps be cautious about inferring too much from the precise distribution of answers between the options available, the trend over time cannot readily be dismissed as a methodological

artefact. Some time between 1964 and 1974, a period seeing both the débâcle of the Vietnam War and the Watergate affair, the American public's perceptions of government seem to have changed decisively. Prior to that point, a significant majority of respondents saw government as for the benefit of all; after that point, a significant majority come to see government as principally for the benefit of a few large interests. Similarly, whilst it seems that the US public has always been fairly cynical or sanguine (depending on one's view) about government wastage of tax revenue, levels of concern rose significantly in the 1970s and stabilized thereafter. From this point onwards, virtually all of the US public perceive of some significant wastage of tax revenue by government, with a very significant majority seeing that wastage as substantial. They may well be right to do so, though it seems unlikely that levels of inefficiency in government increased as rapidly in the 1970s as the opinion poll data would suggest. The key point, however, is the insight into the determinants of voter dissatisfaction and distrust that such data offer us.

Taken together, the UK and US data suggest three key sources of voter dissatisfaction and distrust of politicians. These are: (1) the (perceived) tendency of political elites to subvert the collective public interest in the narrow pursuit of party or self-interest whilst proclaiming themselves disingenuously to be guardians of the former; (2) the (perceived) tendency for political elites, in pursuit of such narrow party or self-interest, to be captured by large (often corporate) interests; and (3) the (perceived) tendency of government to the inefficient use of public resources.

## **Accounting for political disenchantment – the demand side**

Having now mapped in some detail contemporary levels of political disaffection, disenchantment and disengagement, we are rather better placed to evaluate the contending explanations of such trends offered in the existing literature. There are many. Yet, surprisingly perhaps, what most of these share is a common emphasis on what might be termed the *demand side* rather than the *supply side* of the problem. By and large, those political scientists and commentators who have sought to map and diagnose the contemporary condition of disaffection and disengagement with the political have tended to see its origins as resting not with changes in the supply of political goods so much as with changes in the responsiveness to, and desire for, such goods by their potential consumers. One might even discern a tendency to assume that the content of politics – the supply of

political goods, as it were – has remained constant or can essentially be discounted, leaving the lion's share of the explanatory work to be done by demand-side factors. With respect to political participation, the suggestion would appear to be that if there is any blame to apportion for falling electoral turnout, it must lie with potential voters rather than with the purveyors of political goods.

This almost exclusive emphasis on the demand side I reject for three reasons. First, as I will seek to demonstrate in the pages that follow, the theories to which it has led are in fact quite difficult to reconcile with the empirical evidence set out in the preceding section, certainly when taken as a whole. Second, there is something of a tendency in conventional accounts to shoot the messenger without heeding the message. It is exceptionally convenient for political elites to be able to pass off voter disaffection and disengagement as a product of the moral fecklessness or simple contentedness of those citizens who failed to participate in their election. For, in so doing, they can detract attention from any failure on their part to provide something capable of animating voters to higher levels of participation. That demand-side explanations are politically expedient is, of course, not in itself a reason to reject them. Yet it does suggest that we cannot afford to provide political elites with such a convenient alibi until such time as the supply-side alternatives have been rather more exhaustively considered and dismissed. And as we shall see presently, they cannot easily be dismissed. Finally, many such demand-side explanations are dangerously circular (or tautological) in character. In effect, they often merely re-describe the phenomena to be explained by, for instance, accounting for voter turnout by appeal to voter apathy – where apathy is understood as little more than the propensity of potential voters not to vote. Labelling those who fail to participate apathetic is certainly to pass a moral judgement on their conduct, but it should not be mistaken for an explanation of that conduct.

At the risk of some inevitable simplification, the plethora of explanations of contemporary political disenchantment and disengagement can be distilled down to three core theories. Of these, the 'social capital' thesis, associated in particular with Robert D. Putnam, has proved by far the most influential amongst political analysts and, indeed, amongst those with a more professional interest in voter disaffection. Its defining statement is Putnam's best-selling work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). It is this account of the problem of political participation that is arguably responsible for the moralizing tone of much of the popular literature on the subject. The latter tends to associate declining

voter participation with a diminished sense of civic/public duty on the part of citizens. It is nonetheless important to note that Putnam's thesis is itself rather more subtle than this. The term 'political apathy', though it is often attributed to him, appears nowhere in his work.

The second core theory to account for voter disaffection and disengagement is rather more optimistic in tone. It has found considerable support amongst more empirically minded political scientists, and charts the rise of what Pippa Norris terms 'critical citizens', who are generally better informed, less deferential and more realistic in their expectations of government and politics than their parents and grandparents (Norris 1999a, 1999b; see also Klingemann 1999; Klingemann and Fuchs 1995). Though the thesis takes a variety of different forms, its advocates tend to be united in discerning nothing particularly sinister in what others would see as the rise of political apathy. Indeed, for the most part, it seems, declining political participation is simply a product of a more educated and more savvy electorate passing an appropriately critical judgement on institutions of representative government invented in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and now long in need of reform. Though this might appear to bring a range of supply-side variables into consideration, the explanatory emphasis continues to stress the socio-economic, cultural, educational and demographic factors which might account for the growing prevalence of critical citizens. Rather less analytical and empirical attention is lavished upon the focus of such citizens' increasingly critical concerns. It is the *disposition to be critical*, rather than the appropriateness of that critique, in other words, that is emphasized.

A third perspective also emphasizes demographic change. In a bold, original and meticulously researched study, Mark N. Franklin (2004) suggests that, taken together, the lowering of the voting age (to 18) in most advanced liberal democracies and what we know about the habit-forming nature of early decisions about voting participation, can account almost entirely for exhibited trends in turnout decline. It is tempting to dismiss this as another, albeit highly sophisticated and significant, re-description of the phenomenon of declining electoral turnout. But that won't quite do. For Franklin offers an imaginative and compelling explanation of why it is that the new electoral cohorts generated by the lowering of the voting age should be less inclined to vote than earlier cohorts of first-time voters. This is, in effect, a variant of Putnam's social capital thesis. Franklin suggests that lowering the voting age to 18 has the effect of enfranchising precisely that group within society which is the most atomized socially – the least well integrated into established social networks and, as a consequence, the least rich in social capital. As a consequence, he suggests, it is

the most likely to behave in an atomistic way. Atomized voters are, in turn, less likely to vote, since, he suggests, they are less likely to perceive themselves as members of potentially winning coalitions of like-minded voters.

Each of these theses can draw support from some aspects of the empirical evidence summarized in the previous section. Yet none is easily reconciled with it all; indeed, each draws rather selectively on certain aspects of the evidential base to the exclusion of others. Consequently, before considering each thesis in turn, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves of the stylized facts about contemporary political disaffection and disengagement. These are summarized in the list below. They provide a benchmark against which to judge the contending theories of political participation described in this section.

- 1 Turnout levels in established democracies have seen a near universal long-term decline since the 1960s, with some acceleration since the 1990s.
- 2 Turnout levels vary considerably between established democracies, being invariably highest in co-ordinated market economies and lowest in liberal market economies; there is no evidence of convergence between turnout levels.
- 3 Generational cohorts of voters display a remarkable consistency in their propensity to vote over time; newly enfranchised voters display a lower propensity to vote than any other age cohort.
- 4 Educational attainment is positively correlated with all forms of political participation, including voting, yet it is negatively correlated with deference to political authority.
- 5 Voter cynicism is growing, and is most prevalent amongst the young, the more educated and the affluent ('critical citizens').
- 6 Party membership has suffered a precipitous long-term decline in all established democracies since the 1960s, the pace of which is accelerating.
- 7 Formal politics is less able than ever before to mobilize the most politically engaged to political activism and the least politically engaged to electoral participation.
- 8 Party membership levels are so low in most established democracies as to threaten the capacity to engage in local/constituency campaigning.
- 9 There has been a decline in all indices of conventional political participation.
- 10 There has been a parallel increase in levels of unconventional political participation which bypass government, political parties and other formal channels of political expression and protest.

- 11 Non-voters are often the most active in such unconventional forms of political participation; such activists are likely to see their electoral non-participation as a political statement.
- 12 Levels of political trust in almost all established democracies have suffered a significant long-term decline that is ongoing, and in many cases accelerating.
- 13 High levels of support for the ideals and institutions of democracy persist, though there has been some decline in support for the idea that democracy is an innately good form of government.
- 14 Contempt for politicians and political institutions is high, and has been relatively stable since at least the 1980s; it is significantly higher, however, than it was in the 1950s and 1960s.
- 15 Attitudinal surveys in the US and the UK indicate that a majority of respondents see politicians as motivated primarily by self-interest, and government as serving a handful of corporate interests and as wasting a significant proportion of taxpayers' money.

*The social capital thesis: a problem of supply or demand?*

For Putnam, alarmingly low levels of electoral participation are part of a much broader societal malaise. Extrapolating from the US experience, he diagnoses in the advanced liberal democracies more generally a profound disintegration of the social bonds which previously knit society together. A society which once 'bowed together' in extensive networks of community leagues now 'bowl[s] alone' if it can summon the energy to put down the remote control and lift its bloated carcass from the sofa. Social capital, civic engagement and respect for the obligations and duties of citizens in a democratic polity are all largely gone, casualties of the pervasive atomism that comes with the disintegration of community (1993, 1995; see also 2000, 2002).

This exceptionally bleak depiction of the contemporary condition of civic and moral decay has proved either extremely resonant or extremely persuasive. For it has rapidly established itself as the primary lens through which the *problem* of political disengagement is viewed (for, seen through this lens, that is precisely what it is – a problem). Nonetheless, there may well be something of a generational divide in the reception of Putnam's thesis. It is perhaps unremarkable that it has proved quite so attractive to the contemporary generation of political leaders and their peers, who were socialized politically in the era of heightened civic and political participation to which the thesis refers. Indeed, part of its appeal surely lies in

the nostalgic reconstruction of a mythic past of pristine social cohesion and extensive civic, social and political engagement. Yet nostalgia does not necessarily make for good political analysis. In particular, we might note that levels of political participation in Putnam's privileged case, the US, have always been low in comparative terms. Indeed, as we saw in figure 1.1, minimum post-war levels of electoral turnout in the majority of advanced liberal democracies were significantly higher than the maximum attained in the US over the same period. It may well be that civic and political engagement in the US has tracked parallel trajectories of decline. Yet it is wrong to counterpose a historical state of near total participation to the present condition of societal and political decay. Furthermore, as is now well documented, there is little evidence of a decline in *civic* engagement in advanced liberal democracies other than the US. Again, it would seem, Putnam's acolytes are in danger of extrapolating too readily from the US experience. If anything, the more general trend runs in the other direction – with levels of social capital in countries as diverse as Japan, the UK, Germany and Sweden proving either stable or even increasing whilst political participation has declined (see for instance Dalton 2004: 69–71; Hall 1999, 2002; Inoguchi 2002; Offe and Fuchs 2002; Rothstein 2002).<sup>13</sup> The key point is that, at least as it applies to political participation, the core proposition of the social capital thesis – namely, the co-variance of social capital and political engagement – does not seem to hold beyond the US case.<sup>14</sup>

Though Putnam is philosophical in conceding the point (see, especially, Putnam 2002), he is less clear about the consequences of so doing for the social capital thesis more generally. What is clear, however, is that its rather shaky empirical foundations do not seem to have weakened its hold over contemporary political elites. Nor do they exhaust the problems with the social capital thesis. A number of additional points might here be noted.

First, Putnam's disposition, it would seem, is to consider the problem from the demand side – examining in detail the receptiveness of citizens to political appeals and their responsiveness to invitations to civic and political participation. This is most definitely an important part of the picture; *but it is only part of the picture*. The problem is that Putnam's demand-side emphasis is an exclusive one.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, he simply fails to consider the possibility that it is not the receptiveness and responsiveness of citizens that have changed so much as the character of the appeals and invitations to participate that they receive. To extend the economic analogy, it may well be that consumers' preferences have changed rather less than the quality of

the goods on offer. It is perhaps more likely to be some combination of the two. The point is, though, that Putnam's demand-side emphasis has tended to preclude a consideration of the supply side. And, as we shall see in the next section, there are a number of plausible supply-side factors which might be considered. Moreover, as we shall see even more immediately, this blindness to the supply side has proved contagious – shaping decisively the development of the literature on political participation even amongst critics of the social capital orthodoxy.

Second, much of the literature inspired by the social capital thesis is dangerously tautological in character. Presented as an explanation of declining political participation, it is in fact little more than a (partial) re-description of the phenomenon. To account for an exhibited decline in political participation by reference to a broader decline in civic virtue or respect for the duties and obligations of citizens in a democratic polity is rather like blaming the seasonal cull of turkeys on the latter's tendency to put on weight in the run-up to Christmas. As this would further suggest, it is potentially to confuse correlation and causation. For even if it could be shown definitively that levels of social capital and political trust were correlated – and, as we have seen, that may be more difficult to demonstrate than is conventionally assumed – why should we see the relationship as causal, and why should we see the lines of causation running one way rather than the other? Put slightly differently, to settle for an explanation of changing patterns in political participation in terms of variations in the level of social capital begs as many questions as it answers – most notably how we might account for the latter. And in the absence of a clear and definitive answer to this question, to what extent can we really claim to have explained patterns in political participation?

To explain changes in political participation in terms of variations in levels of social capital is, then, as much as anything else, to re-describe the phenomenon to be explained. Yet this is not a neutral or innocent re-description. For, to consider declining electoral participation as an index of declining civic virtue, for instance, is to engage in a normative judgement (in this case, a condemnation) of that conduct. It is, moreover, to attribute certain characteristics (here passivity, even apathy) to those exhibiting such conduct. This is an important point. For to appeal to the existence of such characteristics amongst non-voters is to make an empirical claim of sorts – one on which the normative judgement of their conduct rests. If non-voters are active politically, then they cannot be so easily seen as lacking in civic virtue, and if they cannot be seen as lacking in civic virtue, they may not be so deserving of condemnation for their conduct. The point is that

the available empirical evidence, as discussed in the previous section, does not substantiate the assumption that non-voters are politically passive or apathetic. As is now well demonstrated, those who are the most disaffected and disengaged from formal politics are amongst the most active in alternative/extra-parliamentary political arenas. They are also extremely likely to view their electoral non-participation as an acutely political decision. They are politically aware and politically engaged; moreover, their electoral non-participation is a key facet of that political engagement (see e.g. O'Toole et al. 2003a, 2003b).

As the above paragraphs perhaps suggest, unassailable though it may well be amongst the political elites whose (short-term) interest (in displacing responsibility for declining voter participation) it serves rather well, the social capital thesis is far from unproblematic theoretically or empirically.

#### *The 'critical citizens' thesis*

Rather better supported by the empirical evidence is the 'critical citizens' thesis developed by Pippa Norris (1999a, 2002) and the related 'dissatisfied democrats' thesis associated with the work of Hans-Dieter Klingemann (1999). Though these theses take a variety of different forms, some purely analytical, others more unapologetically normative, they share a common optimism – certainly in comparison with the social capital thesis – about the sources and consequences of contemporary political disaffection.

At their most normative, proponents of such views detect in contemporary disaffection and disengagement with formal politics a welcome antidote to what are seen as the worrying levels of deference to political authority exhibited throughout much of the post-war period (e.g. Citrin 1974). The argument has an unmistakably North American ring to it; indeed, it would seem very much in keeping with the Madisonian and Jeffersonian tradition of the US Constitution. It goes something like this. Animated, as we must presume them to be, by ulterior and self-interested motives, we cannot afford to trust politicians too much. Thus, in so far as the naïve idealism of the post-war period has been replaced by a rather more sanguine, realistic and cynical political culture, this is a tendency that we should welcome. It is, just as much as institutional/constitutional checks and balances, a guarantor of our political freedoms.

Yet it is in its rather more dispassionate and empirical incarnations that the thesis has proved most influential. In the work of Pippa Norris, in particular,

it provides a persuasively argued alternative to the social capital thesis drawing on similar sources of data. The thesis acknowledges that democratic polities draw legitimacy from political participation and that, as a consequence, there are levels of participation below which it is dangerous to fall. Yet, beyond this, it does not regard participation as a necessary good in itself. Indeed, reassured by attitudinal data which seem to suggest continued confidence, if not in the political system itself, then in the democratic values on which it is predicated, it discerns in contemporary trends the growth of a healthy critical orientation amongst citizens towards the political goods they are offered. Such critical citizens are more difficult to please than their parents' or grandparents' generations, and are more ready to display that dissatisfaction, through either electoral non-participation or alternative channels of political protest. They are found in the greatest concentration in younger cohorts of voters, and tend to be better educated and better informed politically. Finally, they pose an additional challenge to political parties, in that their political preferences are more nuanced, more differentiated, more ephemeral and correspondingly more difficult to satisfy. They are, moreover, increasingly *post-material* in their political values and orientations, motivated more by 'quality of life' concerns and individual freedoms than by traditional *materialist* concerns such as financial well-being and economic security (Inglehart 1990, 1997, 1999; Dalton 2000, 2004: 97–110).

This is clearly a very different picture of the contemporary condition of political disaffection and disengagement from that offered by Putnam and his followers. Indeed, it is one that, at times, challenges the very description of the present in terms of disaffection and disengagement (see, most notably, Norris 2002). It is supported by a considerable body of corroborating evidence; indeed, this is hardly surprising, since, in contrast to Putnam's rather more deductive approach, it emerges inductively from an analysis of such evidence. Yet it is arguably no less problematic for this. Again, a number of points might be made.

First, this is once again a largely demand-side perspective. Understandably perhaps, given its behaviouralist methodology (its preference for the inductive analysis of quantitative data), it is also one which tends to focus narrowly on those variables that are readily quantified. As a consequence, it too fails to consider the many plausible supply-side factors which might account for the greater propensity of citizens to express themselves critically. This is nowhere clearer than in its treatment of post-materialism. For, rather than trace the origins of post-material values and the role of politics itself in establishing or reinforcing such trends, authors from this perspective content themselves with mapping such values and

calculating their statistical correlates. Having established, in so doing, the complexity of the post-material value set, they then infer the increased difficulty that political parties are likely to face in galvanizing support for themselves. The result is, in effect, to excuse political parties for their failure to find and construct resonant political appeals. No consideration is given to the nature of the political appeals to the electorate they actually present. Nor is there any acknowledgement that the proliferation of voters' preferences may reflect the prior failure of political parties to engage citizens politically, thereby shaping the very preferences they might seek to satisfy.

Second, as in the social capital thesis, there is a related tendency to tautology. To point to the rise of 'disaffected democrats' or 'critical citizens' – groups defined to a significant extent in terms of their lower propensity to vote – is hardly to explain declining voter participation. It is, at best, to re-describe the phenomenon in terms which might make it easier to explain. The same applies to the ascription of post-material values to critical citizens. Such labels may well help us to achieve a better understanding, in the form of a richer description, of the contemporary condition of voter disaffection, but they should not be mistaken for an explanation. If it can be demonstrated that rising voter disaffection and disengagement are a product of a younger, better-educated cohort of politically astute citizens with post-material values, then we now know what needs to be explained if we are to account, say, for aggregate trends in electoral participation. But being one step closer to an explanation is not the same thing as having explained the exhibited outcome.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there is perhaps a certain complacency about this approach to the question of declining formal political participation and engagement. Understood as a corrective to the apocalyptic pronouncements of the death of civic community associated with the social capital thesis, this may be fair enough – though there is clearly a danger in tilting the stick too far in the opposite direction. Yet, seen less as a corrective to the social capital thesis and more as a theory in its own right, as perhaps it should be, this is a more significant point. Consider the US, for instance. As we have seen, turnout levels in Presidential elections are currently little over 50 per cent (those in all other elections far less); those who distrust political parties outnumber those who trust political parties by ten to one; 98 per cent of citizens of voting age believe that government wastes a significant proportion of taxpayers' money; more than 50 per cent believe that government serves merely a handful of large (generally corporate) interests; over 60 per cent believe that politicians do not care what people think; and over 50 per cent

that government cannot generally be trusted to do the right thing. Yes, citizens may well be more critical than they once were; but should we not also consider the possibility that they may have more to be critical about? The attitudinal data in particular show unprecedented levels of contempt for politics, politicians and political institutions – and not just in the US. Surely this suggests something altogether more significant and altogether less benign than the development of a healthy dose of realism amongst a previously all too deferential electorate. Either there is something terribly wrong with contemporary politics – in which case we need a diagnosis of this affliction – or an unprecedentedly vast chasm has opened up between public perceptions and contemporary political realities – in which case we need an explanation. Either way, demand-side theses which concentrate on the changing receptiveness and responsiveness of the electorate to political appeals will not suffice.

#### *The consequences of lowering the voting age*

A third, and altogether more technical, solution to the problem of declining voter turnout is offered by Mark N. Franklin (2004). His thesis is perhaps the most compelling empirically, though, as we shall see, it is also by far the most limited, in that it concentrates solely and exclusively on declining electoral participation.

Franklin starts with the so-called rational voter paradox, about which we will have more to say in chapter 3. The paradox is relatively simply stated. If we assume, as rational choice theory does, that political subjects are instrumental actors seeking to maximize personal benefits net of the costs they incur in so doing, it is not difficult to see that it is irrational in almost all situations for them to vote. For, even if they believe themselves to have a significant stake in the outcome of an election, the probability of their vote proving decisive in determining that outcome is very close to zero. For instance, since the abolition of ‘rotten boroughs’ in 1867, no seat in a British general election has been decided by a single vote. As a consequence, even the cost in shoe leather in walking to the polling station is sufficient to ensure that the benefits net of cost to the voter are negative.

Put in algebraic terms, a rational voter will vote if her stake in the outcome of the election multiplied by the probability of her vote proving decisive ( $p$ ) is greater than the costs she incurs in voting ( $C_{\text{voting}}$ ). Her stake in the outcome of a two-party contest is equal to the anticipated utility she will receive if her chosen party wins ( $U_{\text{chosen}}$ ) minus that if the other party

wins ( $U_{\text{other}}$ ). In other words, she will vote if, and only if, the following condition pertains:

$$[U_{\text{chosen}} - U_{\text{other}}] \rho > C_{\text{voting}}$$

But since we know that  $\rho$  and hence the term  $([U_{\text{chosen}} - U_{\text{other}}] \rho)$ , both approximate to zero,  $C_{\text{voting}}$  will always be larger than  $([U_{\text{chosen}} - U_{\text{other}}] \rho)$ . Our voter will stay at home (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Ordeshook 1996). Of course, if all voters did as the model predicted, there would be no paradox. The paradox is that, however more inclined potential voters may now be to stay at home, a significant proportion of them (in many cases the majority) do not do as the model would predict.

The rational voter paradox has plagued rational choice theory for decades, prompting a series of often highly imaginative, if ultimately unconvincing, solutions (for useful reviews of the literature, see Dowding 2005; Geys 2006). Moreover, as turnout has declined, so interest in the paradox has grown. Indeed, it is presumably the somewhat closer correspondence between the predictions of the rational voter model and exhibited electoral trends that has led Franklin to revisit the question once more. His solution is in fact compelling, but arguably it violates the core tenets of rational choice itself.

Franklin suggests that the problem with the rational voter model is that it looks at the tendency or otherwise of political subjects to vote in narrowly individualistic terms. As he explains, the paradox arises from misperceiving 'the potential voter as an individual divorced from any social context that would give her vote meaning other than its unitary contribution to the pool of votes needed to elect a party or candidate'. If, instead, we perceive individuals as members of potentially winning coalitions of like-minded voters,<sup>17</sup> then the circumstances under which it may be rational for them to vote are greatly increased. Indeed, as Franklin continues, 'for the member of a potentially winning coalition who believes that her coalition could win if every member voted, uncertainty about the true balance of political forces leaves her with no excuse for not voting' (2004: 202). This is an elegant solution to the problem, but it is true only to the extent that the collective rationality of the group as a whole replaces individual rationality as the primary motivation for electoral participation or non-participation. It is certainly rational, from the vantage point of the potentially winning coalition, for each and every member of that group to vote. Yet that hardly guarantees such an outcome. Indeed, such a scenario is instantly recognizable by a rational choice theorist as a classic collective

action problem. For it remains the case that individuals within the group can free-ride on the actions of others. From the vantage point of the individual, whether the coalition is successful or not depends not on her actions but on those of other members of the group. This makes an individually rational, yet collectively irrational, decision not to vote all the more likely, since (a) it is most unlikely that her non-voting will be detected, and (b) she will know that the probability that her vote will itself prove decisive is negligible. In other words, the problem is resolved only if we abandon rational choice theory's (defining) commitment to individual rationality and substitute in its place collective rationality.

Yet for present purposes, whether this is a genuine solution to the rational voter paradox, or not, is not the issue. Far more important is the theory of voter participation and non-participation to which it gives rise. Before developing such a theory, and testing it, Franklin adds one further assumption drawn from exhibited regularities in voting behaviour. The assumption is that of inertia.<sup>18</sup> As Franklin himself puts it, 'turnout changes only gradually because most people have adopted a "standing decision" to vote or not to vote, based on their early experiences of elections in their country' (2004: 22–3).

These assumptions together form the basis of Franklin's highly distinctive explanation for declining levels of voter turnout in recent decades. His work draws attention to a factor mentioned nowhere in the pre-existing literature – namely, the lowering of the voting age (to 18) in most established democracies. Franklin effectively divides the voting population into a succession of generational cohorts on the basis of the national parliamentary election at which they were first eligible to vote. Such generational cohorts, he suggests, will develop a propensity to electoral participation or non-participation that will last their entire political lives. It will, moreover, be shaped to a significant extent by their initial decision whether to vote or not at the election at which they first receive the mandate. That decision will, in turn, reflect the extensiveness of the social networks to which they belong at the time (their levels of social capital in Putnam's terms). For it is this that will determine the likelihood that they will conceive of themselves as members of a potentially winning coalition, with a correspondingly higher propensity to vote.

Lowering the voting age to 18 has had the effect of enfranchising, one election earlier than would otherwise have been the case, all subsequent generational cohorts. It has also had the effect, Franklin argues, of lowering the propensity of first-time voters to exercise their democratic mandate, since it has served to enfranchise that age group within society

which is the most atomized socially. It has served, in other words, to enfranchise those most likely to correspond to the assumptions, and hence also the predictions, of the rational voter model. As a consequence, it has reduced aggregate levels of voter turnout. Yet that immediate effect is not as significant as its longer-term cumulative impact. For electoral participation and non-participation are inertial or habit forming. Consequently, enfranchising voters at the point at which they have yet to acquire an extensive network of social contacts may inadvertently serve to suppress their propensity to vote throughout their entire political lives. With each new generational cohort to acquire the vote, the problem is compounded, until some fifty years or so later on, the full impact of lowering the voting age on turnout is eventually realized. As this would suggest, we are at present in the midst of a decline in turnout anticipated to last several decades.

Franklin does not, of course, see the differential propensity of generational cohorts to vote as the only factor determining aggregate levels of electoral participation. His model contains a range of other, more ostensibly political variables, such as the closeness of the contest between the principal parties. Yet these are invariably election-specific, and are, as a consequence, incapable of accounting for any secular trend in levels of turnout. The lowering of the voting age is thus the principal explanatory variable.

Franklin's thesis is innovative, compelling and persuasive in equal measure. It has also been rigorously tested empirically. Perhaps most impressive of all is his ability to use the statistical model he constructs to predict, albeit retrospectively, turnout levels to within a few percentage points for most of the countries he considers.<sup>19</sup> Yet none of this makes his attempt to explain away the problem of turnout decline in terms of the lowering of the voting age unproblematic.

As already suggested, Franklin's remit is, quite consciously and explicitly, a limited one. His concern is to explain – and *only* to explain – declining voter turnout. As a consequence, he does not consider the wider condition of political disaffection and disenchantment of which, arguably, declining voter turnout is a symptom. That is, of course, a perfectly legitimate analytical choice on his part. But it is one with significant consequences for the ease with which we might incorporate the findings of his research within the broader picture of political disenchantment that we are seeking to develop in this chapter.

For if declining electoral participation is seen as part of a wider condition of political disaffection and disengagement, as I have argued that it should be, then there is a danger of inferring too much from the statistical corre-

lates of one symptom alone. It would, for instance, be decidedly strange to see the lowering of the voting age to 18 as responsible in any way for the wider condition of political disaffection and disenchantment that now seems to pervade the established democracies. Indeed, it seems inherently unlikely that changes in the formal rules by which the electorate's preferences are aggregated (such as the lowering of the voting age) can account for any long-term decline in levels of political trust. Yet we know that levels of political trust display precisely such a trend. Of course, one could argue that precisely because declining voter participation can seemingly be explained without reference to political disaffection and disengagement, we should cease regarding it as a symptom of the latter condition. But that, too, is an invalid inference, since levels of political disaffection and electoral non-participation are very strongly correlated until generational cohort effects are taken into consideration. What Franklin's data do draw our attention to is the importance of youth political participation in shaping long-term aggregate trends. They reinforce the point that if we are to understand political disaffection and disengagement, we must account for the particularly low levels of formal political participation amongst the young.

This brings us to a second point. Franklin's explanation for declining voter participation rests on one undisputed fact – the lowering of the voting age to 18 in most established democracies – and three core claims: (1) the inertial character of each generational cohorts' propensity to vote; (2) the importance of social capital to initial voter participation; and (3) the comparative lack of social capital of those enfranchised by the lowering of the voting age. Of these claims, only the first is adequately defended by Franklin. The second and third are in fact core analytical assumptions on which the abstract model of voting behaviour that he constructs is predicated; yet they are never in fact tested directly. And although the model itself is both plausible and largely consistent with his empirical findings, there are grounds in the broader literature on participation to question both assumptions. First, as we have seen, with the exception of the US, there is no consistent correlation between levels of social capital and levels of political participation. The absence of such a correlation certainly doesn't refute Franklin's assumption – it may well be, for instance, that social capital does influence *initial* voter participation but not *subsequent* levels of participation.<sup>20</sup> But it does suggest that the burden of proof still rests with the author. More problematic still is the third assumption, on which much of the persuasive power of the thesis rests. It may well be that those newly enfranchised by the lowering of the voting age are, indeed, amongst the most atomistic within society.<sup>21</sup> Yet, as research on youth

political participation has made very clear, it is wrong to see this generational cohort as politically apathetic. Indeed, though the least engaged in formal politics, they are amongst the most active in informal/extra-parliamentary politics (e.g. O'Toole et al. 2003a, 2003b). This suggests either that this generational cohort is rather richer in social capital than we have tended to assume, but is still characterized by the lowest propensity to vote, or that it is able to overcome its comparative lack of social capital to engage in alternative/non-conventional political activism, but not to participate in formal politics. Either way, there is a conundrum still to be solved.

Finally, there is a certain fatalism in Franklin's view of the determinants of voter participation. In emphasizing the 'stickiness' of generational cohorts' differential propensities to vote, he seems to imply that little or nothing can be done on the supply side to raise aggregate levels of participation. Indeed, his proposed solution to the problem of declining voter participation is, in effect, a technical fix – namely, to lower the voting age to 15, and to enlist the support of the educational system in socializing first-time voters into the habit (or civic duty) of voting. This is certainly ingenious, but arguably it is a rather cosmetic strategy of alleviating the systems rather than addressing their origins. For the problem surely lies in the propensity of those voters who do not feel themselves to be part of a potentially winning coalition to conceive of their decision to participate electorally in narrowly instrumental terms. Democratic political participation could, and perhaps should, be about more than rational self-interest; and as the rational voter model demonstrates all too well, citizens (if we can call them that) animated solely by considerations of self-interest will rationally absent themselves from the electoral process altogether. Moreover, in concentrating on constitutional change, Franklin effectively gives up all hope for those who are set to suffer, in his own terms, 'a lifetime of disenfranchisement' as an unintended consequence of the previous lowering of the voting age (2004: 213). Given his own stated view that 'there is nothing inevitable about declining turnout' (2004: 212), this seems both unnecessarily fatalistic and somewhat premature.

## **Bringing politics back in: towards a supply-side alternative**

In the previous section we considered three influential accounts of the contemporary condition of political disaffection and disengagement. What these perspectives share is a perhaps surprising tendency to depoliticize the

question of political participation. The social capital thesis looks at the problem of political disengagement in terms of the growing atomism of citizens and the associated diminution in their sense of civic and political obligation. The critical citizens thesis attributes a very similar set of outcomes to the increasingly questioning and post-material orientation of the voting age public towards politics. And Franklin's thesis of 'generational replacement' attributes declining electoral turnout to the enfranchisement of a particularly atomistic, and correspondingly self-interested, cohort of young potential voters. In so doing, it endorses significant elements of the social capital thesis.

Each provides, in effect, a sociological explanation for exhibited trends in political participation, highlighting the socio-economic and demographic determinants of behavioural change over time. Such sociological explanations are also *demand-side* explanations, in that the principal explanatory work that they do is in accounting for (or often simply in documenting and mapping) changes in the receptiveness of political constituents to political appeals. Virtually no consideration is given to a range of potential *supply-side factors* – changes in the content of the appeals that the parties make to potential voters, changes in the character of electoral competition, changes in the substantive content of the 'goods' that politics offers to political 'consumers', and changes in the capacity of national-level governments to deliver genuine political choice to voters.

The demand-side bias of the existing literature is very clearly demonstrated in table 1.11, in which a variety of potentially significant supply- and demand-side factors are identified. Those largely absent from the existing literature are italicized. Each of these appears on the supply-side of the balance sheet; each forms a core part of the alternative explanation for the contemporary condition of political disaffection and disengagement that I seek to develop in the chapters that follow.

So what are these potential supply-side factors?

The first is what I have termed the 'marketization' of electoral competition in the advanced liberal democracies. This is by no means a new phenomenon, or one confined to the advanced liberal democracies, though it has reached unprecedented levels in recent years in these polities. The competition between parties for votes has long been considered analogous to that between businesses for market share (see Downs 1957 for a classic exposition). But it is only recently that this has been taken to its logical conclusion – the direct deployment of marketing and advertising techniques in strategies of electoral competition and engagement (see Lees-Marshment 2001). The consequences of this are multiple, and are explored more

Table 1.11 Potential demand-side and supply-side factors responsible for declining political participation

Demand-side factors	Supply-side factors
Changing public sense of civic and political duty as levels of social capital are eroded (Putnam)	<i>The 'marketization' of inter-party electoral and the competition individuation of electoral appeals</i>
Changing public receptiveness to political appeals/the supply of political goods (Norris)	<i>Policy convergence between the principal parties increasing the electoral salience of more ephemeral 'brand' issues and considerations of trust and competence</i>
Decline in the culture of political deference that emerged in the post-war years (Citrin, Inglehart)	<i>The internalization by political elites of public choice theoretic assumptions about the inefficiency of the public sector when compared to the market and the incapacity of politics to deliver public goods</i>
Difficulty of accommodating electorally post-material values and greater value diversity (Inglehart, Norris)	<i>The tendency towards depoliticization associated with the displacement of responsibility for policy making or implementation to independent public authorities</i>
Changing balance of societal preferences pooled in elections due to the enfranchisement of younger, more atomistic voters (Franklin)	<i>A growing awareness (or perception)* of the diminished capacity of national-level government in an era of complex economic interdependence to deliver public goods (Franklin, Katzenstein)</i>
	<i>Higher levels of financial and sexual impropriety on the part of political elites may have served to discredit politics in the public imagination (Norris)</i>

\* Although some of the existing literature does consider the potential salience of globalization as an explanatory variable, none of which I am aware looks at perceptions of globalization – amongst either political elites or the public more generally.

systematically, and in greater detail, in chapter 3. Amongst these, the most significant is the effective downgrading of electoral competition. Today it has become little more than another exercise in brand marketing, brand management and product placement, the aim of which is to mould the party cosmetically to appease what are perceived to be the preferences of the target voter. Unremarkably, perhaps, what is lost in this process is all that previously distinguished political competition from competition for market share – such as the principled advocacy and defence of consistently articulated policy platforms by political parties. As a consequence, elections are fought over an increasingly narrow range of the policy spectrum, to the extent to which they are fought over policy content at all. Moreover, to differentiate themselves electorally, parties increasingly compete on the basis of more ephemeral differences in branding and on the images of trust

and competence they seek to construct for themselves. Assessments of party leaders' character traits, credibility and trustworthiness, which arguably the electorate are singularly ill-placed to judge, tend to replace those of policy substance. Finally, often facilitated by new digital technologies, individuated appeals to the electorate as atomistic consumers tend to replace strategies of mass political persuasion. The result of each process is to replicate ever more closely the assumptions of the rational voter model, reducing the stakes of the contest (the difference in the expected utility associated with the election of the principal parties) and contributing to the atomism of the voter. Parties appeal to voters as individual rational consumers; and, as the rational voter model predicts, rational consumers will rationally disengage.

Changes in the marketing of political goods to the consumer are not the only relevant changes on the supply side of the political marketplace, however. For, since the 1980s, political elites throughout the advanced liberal democracies (and beyond) have increasingly come to embrace and internalize a very distinctive set of academic and quasi-academic theories. These are associated with public choice theory, and have arguably led to something of a crisis of self-confidence amongst political elites. Public choice theory is predicated on the projection on to politicians, political elites and public officials more generally of narrowly instrumental assumptions. It shows, in effect, that if we assume politicians and public officials to be rational, calculating and self-interested, then we cannot trust them to deliver public or collective goods. Public choice theory came to prominence through its seeming ability to account for the widely identified crises of the 1970s. These it described as crises of political 'overload', in which a bloated state had simply taken on too much by sanctioning ever spiralling expectations and siphoning off an ever growing share of national output through taxation receipts in the attempt to satisfy such expectations (see for instance Crozier et al. 1975). It argued that what we needed was rather less 'politics' (for which read the instrumental self-interest of politicians and those whose sectional interests they really served) and rather less 'public sector' (for which read the inefficiencies of mass public bureaucracy protected by the vested interest of 'public servants'). It may seem rather perverse that political elites should come to embrace such assumptions about themselves. There is certainly something of the self-denying ordinance about the influence of public choice theory on contemporary public policy. But this does not make it any less influential. The widespread current tendency to 'depoliticize' public policy by displacing responsibility for policy making and/or implementation to independent public bodies, such as operationally independent central banks, is but the latest illustration of that

influence. The point is that it is hardly surprising that in a context in which even politicians concede that 'politics' is something we need rather less of, public political disaffection and disengagement is rife.

A final factor is the impact – real or imagined – of globalization on public policy-making capacity and autonomy. This forms the focus of chapter 4. Once again, whether they are right to do so or not, political elites have increasingly come to accept that their ability to offer genuine choice to the electorate is significantly restricted by virtue of globalization. In an era in which flows of information, people, pollutants and, most significantly, goods, services, investment and finance are global, it is argued, domestic policy cannot afford to answer solely, or perhaps even primarily, to the wishes of the electorate. In such a context domestic policy-making autonomy and, indeed, democratic responsiveness need to be curbed such that they do not interfere with ultimately more pressing considerations – most notably, economic competitiveness. The extent to which this is an accurate representation of the contemporary domestic political landscape, indeed, the extent to which it is perceived as such, is the extent to which democratic processes at the national level matter less than they once did. As such, it is also likely to be an index of disaffection and disengagement with formal politics.

These supply-side factors provide the basis of the alternative account of political participation and non-participation that I offer in this volume. They are largely absent from the existing literature. Yet, as table 1.11 shows, that literature does not completely overlook supply-side factors and does at times acknowledge the possibility that the changing content of politics might have something to do with contemporary levels of disaffection and disengagement. Yet, however important it is to acknowledge this, a number of qualifications must be made immediately.

First, when they are considered at all, supply-side factors are invariably grafted on to predominantly demand-side accounts, as at best secondary considerations (see for instance Franklin 2004: 179–81; Newton and Norris 2000: 53–4; Norris 2000: 250; Scharpf 2000: 101–8). Second, to suggest that such factors are actively considered may be something of an exaggeration. In many cases it would be more accurate to state that they are mentioned in passing, and not actively dismissed as potentially significant. Pippa Norris, for instance, concludes her excellent analysis of the (exaggerated) impact of television viewing on civic malaise by stating: 'if leaders in high office are increasingly rocked by financial sleaze and sexual shenanigans, if the public is increasingly disillusioned with government institutions, we should look more directly at the functioning of representative democracy and stop blaming the messenger' (2000: 250). Yet these are her last words

on the subject. Similarly, Mark N. Franklin notes the potential salience of globalization as a factor which might account for declining electoral turnout (2004: 179). But, pointing to its relatively late onset in the time-series data with which he is working (an assumption we will have reason to question later on), he does not pursue the suggestion empirically. Third, the most frequently cited (indeed, often the only cited) supply-side factor – the decline in domestic policy-making competence and/or autonomy in an era of globalization – is treated as a simple and unproblematic structural constraint (e.g. Franklin 2004: 179–8; Katzenstein 2000). As a consequence it, too, is depoliticized. Finally, Peter J. Katzenstein, who is the only author to examine the question in any empirical depth, dismisses the role of globalization in declining electoral participation on the grounds that small open economies (like the Nordic countries) are characterized by high levels of political trust, whilst large closed economies (like the US) are characterized by low levels of political trust (Katzenstein 2000: 136). This is a very peculiar inference to draw. At best, these data suggest that the extent of economic integration itself cannot account for a high proportion of the variance between cases in aggregate turnout levels. But who would suggest that it could? Globalization, and the perception of globalization (be it accurate or otherwise), may well have contributed to turnout decline, in small open economies and large closed economies alike. But it is unlikely to be able to explain the difference in turnout levels between such cases.

As this suggests, even the literature most sensitive to supply-side factors either (i) notes, but then fails to consider in any detail, such factors; or (ii) serves to absolve elite political actors from responsibility for such factors by attributing them to processes beyond their control; or (iii) dismisses the salience of such factors on the basis of dubious statistical inferences. Either way, supply-side factors have yet to receive adequate consideration. But before we turn to these factors directly in chapters 3 and 4, it is first important to problematize the simple demand-side/supply-side analogy we have adopted thus far.

The clear separation of demand- and supply-side factors is certainly neat; but arguably it is too neat, and perhaps serves to do a certain injustice to the existing literature on political participation. For, in a sense, a focus on the demand side is inevitable. The reason for this is simple. Ultimately it is the electorate, not those whom they elect, who must choose whether or not to participate, and whom to vote for, should they choose to participate. As a consequence, if we are to explain trends in electoral participation – or, indeed, any other form of political participation – we must consider the attitudes, perceptions and motivations of potential participants. In considering

the determinants of electoral participation, this takes us immediately to the *demand* of potential voters for the political goods with which the parties seek to *supply* them. As this suggests, it is much easier to ignore the supply side than the demand side, for the former is always at one remove. The point, however, is that in seeking to account for any trend in levels of participation, we can choose to emphasize either dispositional factors in the character of the electorate or factors associated with the provision of political goods by the parties and the political system more generally. Up until this point we have labelled the former demand-side explanations, the latter supply-side explanations. But that is not, strictly speaking, accurate. For supply-side factors are only important in so far as they come to influence voters' disposition to participate or not. In other words, they are only important in so far as they influence demand. And in order to influence demand, they must be *perceived* by potential participants as salient. Moreover, it is the perception rather than the reality of the supply-side factor that is important here. Thus, the US may remain an essentially closed economy in comparative terms, but if it is perceived to have undergone a process of globalization, if globalization is perceived to have led to a loss in governmental capacity and autonomy, and if this is perceived to be electorally salient, then it may well influence a citizen's disposition to vote.

This, of course, makes the task of demonstrating empirically the existence of such supply-side factors rather more difficult than it is for their demand-side counterparts. That, in part, must surely explain the comparative silence of the existing literature on such factors. But it cannot entirely excuse such a significant oversight. It is to the task of rectifying that omission that the rest of this book is principally devoted. Before proceeding, however, it is first important to reflect on the concept of politics itself. For it has already been deployed in a variety of different ways, and it is important that we inject some clarity and precision into our usage of the term.