



RULING THE VOID



THE HOLLOWING-OUT OF
WESTERN DEMOCRACY

PETER MAIR

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For Tessa, John and Cathleen, 'brave new world ...'

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THE PASSING OF POPULAR INVOLVEMENT

In this chapter I focus on the evidence of popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics and discuss the emptying of the space in which citizen interaction with political representatives might be expected to be at its closest and most active. This is a relatively familiar process, which has already been dealt with, sometimes in greater detail, in the scholarly literature as well as in more popular commentaries. However, what is often missing from those treatments is the awareness of just how pervasive and wide-ranging the process actually is. Moreover, while some aspects of popular withdrawal have received ample attention, others have not, and hence the whole gamut of features has not been brought together in one overall and accessible assessment. This chapter aims to do that, and to indicate the breadth and variety of the modes of disengagement, even if some of these are clearly less substantial than others. Here and elsewhere in this book, I assume that withdrawal and disengagement are symptomatic of a growing indifference to conventional politics – that is, they are symptomatic of indifference to politics with a capital *P*, which may not mean indifference to Beck's 'sub-politics' (Beck, 1992)¹ I also want to show here that this indifference is evident on both sides of the democratic bridge. That is, I am concerned to emphasize the evidence of indifference on the part of both the citizenry *and* the political class: they are withdrawing and disengaging from one another, and it is in this sense that there is an emptying of the space in which citizens and their representatives interact.

Party democracy, which would normally offer a point of connection and site of engagement for citizens and their political leaders, is being enfeebled, with the result that elections and the electoral process become little more than 'dignified' parts of the modern democratic constitution. That is, elections have less and less practical effect, because the working, or 'efficient' part of the constitution is being steadily relocated elsewhere (Katz and Mair, 1995: 22).² This enfeeblement is expressed by citizen withdrawal from active engagement in, and commitment to, conventional political life, on the one hand, and by the retreat of political leaders into the institutions of the state, on the other. This process has had two notable concomitants, which should be mentioned right away. First, in terms of politics on the ground, the widening gap between rulers and ruled has facilitated the often strident populist challenge that is now a feature of many advanced European democracies – the challenge represented by the far-right People's or Progress parties in Denmark and Norway, by Strache and Wilders in Austria and the Netherlands, De Winter and Le Pen in Flanders and France, and by Blocher and Bossi in Switzerland and Italy. Each of these particular versions of the challenge to the political mainstream has its own nationally specific set of ideas, policies and interests, often revolving around shared expressions of xenophobia, racism and cultural defence,

and usually emerging on the right wing of the political spectrum (Mudde, 2008). But each is also marked by a common and often very explicit hostility to what is seen in the different countries as the national political class. In other words, I argue that because of the gap that has been created by the process of mutual withdrawal, and really for the first time in postwar political history, the political class itself has now become a matter of contention in a large number of democratic polities.

The second concomitant – in part a cause of the withdrawal and in part a consequence – operates at the level of public policy, and may be seen in the growing acceptability and legitimation of non-political, or depoliticized, modes of decision-making. Among the important manifestations of this tendency are the growing significance (in both range and weight) of so-called ‘non-majoritarian institutions’; the growing importance of the European Union as a decision-making forum, and, on a wider stage, the greater weight accorded to other supranational and international agencies, including the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, and so on; the increasing tendency for citizens and politicians to seek redress for grievances and problems through judicial or quasi-judicial solutions; and the growing acceptance that the modern state is regulatory in character, and hence limited in its capacities, rather than political or redistributive.

In sum, because of the growing enfeeblement of party democracy, and the indifference towards party democracy that is being expressed on both sides of the political divide, we now find ourselves being offered as alternative scenarios either the populist or the ostensibly non-political expert.³

CITIZEN DISENGAGEMENT

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

In fact, what we see here are two features that are not normally seen to be applicable to changes at the level of mass politics in Europe. The first is that virtually all of these separate pieces of evidence point in the same direction. This in itself is very unusual. Analysts of data relating to mass politics almost invariably expect to find mutually opposing trends in the different streams of indicators – that is, while one indicator might point in one direction, it is often contradicted by a

second indicator pointing in a different direction. Mass politics rarely moves in concert, but in this case it is precisely the consistency of the trends that is striking. Second, virtually all of these trends in the data are consistent across countries. This again is most unusual. The normal expectation in comparative political research is that while particular trends in mass politics may well be noted in some countries, they are almost never pervasive. Some countries may shift together, but it is only very rarely that all, or even most, shift in the same way and at the same time. What we see now, however, is a much clearer indication of cross-national convergence in the trends that matter. In other words, not only are these various trends now pointing in the same direction, they are also doing so almost everywhere.

ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

So what trends are we talking about here? Let me begin with the most obvious and most immediate indicator: the level of participation in national elections. Given what has been said about citizen withdrawal in the more popular media in particular, it is by means of this indicator that we might expect some of the most striking trends to be identified. At the same time, however, it is often this particular evidence that is most strongly disputed. In other words, while various expectations regarding the possible decline in levels of electoral turnout have been current for some years, they have often been found to have little backing in the aggregate empirical data. Reviewing the evidence from the 1960s through to the end of the 1980s, for example, Rudy Andeweg (1996: 150–51) noted that most countries in Europe were exhibiting more or less trendless fluctuation in turnout levels: although participation rates among those eligible to vote had indeed fallen in some countries in this thirty-year period, they had increased in others, resulting in what was in fact just a very small decline in Europe as a whole across this period. Taking a much larger set of countries, and looking at data running through to a later date, Pippa Norris also found little or no evidence of serious decline. Among the advanced, postindustrial democracies, turnout as a percentage of the voting age population rose during the 1950s, stabilized in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and then underwent what Norris refers to as ‘a modest slippage’ in the 1990s. This slight fall was statistically insignificant, however, leaving a more generalized pattern among the majority of nations of ‘trendless fluctuation or stability’ (Norris, 2002: 54–55, 67). Another assessment, by Mark Franklin (2002), was also inclined to dismiss any real concern. Franklin noted that although turnout in the long-established democracies might have declined at the end of the century, this was usually only relative to the very high levels recorded in the 1960s, and was probably reflecting simply a short-term lack of interest in contingently quite non-divisive contests: ‘elections in recent years may see lower turnout for the simple reason that these elections decide issues of lesser importance than elections did in the late 1950s’ (2002: 164). Once more important issues were at stake, he implied, participation levels could be expected to increase again. If, of course, these important issues never materialized – as I argue is the most likely scenario, given the decline of party democracy – then turnout might never pick up. Elsewhere, in a very extensive and precise analysis, Franklin (2004) linked the slight decline in turnout to the effects of generational replacement: turnout falls because non-participating younger people replace participatory older generations in ever-changing electorates. In this case, it is

not so much that existing citizens withdraw or disengage, as that younger citizens, whose demographic weight naturally increases with time, were never engaged to begin with.

Whatever the reasons for any fall in levels of participation, therefore, these analyses seem mainly quite sanguine about the trends. Long-term stability in levels of participation has been followed by a slight decline, but this is not so great that it need be a source of worry for those concerned with the healthy functioning of modern democratic life. Is this a reasonable conclusion? On the face of it, and especially with regard to the European data, the interpretation is certainly plausible.⁴ Thus, through each of the four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, average turnout levels in western Europe scarcely altered, increasing marginally from 84.3 per cent in the 1950s to 84.9 per cent in the 1960s, and then falling slightly to 83.9 per cent in the 1970s and to 81.7 per cent in the 1980s. This was essentially the steady-state period, as has been emphasized by Norris and Franklin. That said, the decline from the 1970s to the 1980s, while small, was remarkably consistent across fifteen long-established European democracies, with just three countering an otherwise general trend: in Belgium, where voting is compulsory, turnout increased slightly from 92.9 to 93.9 per cent from the 1970s to the 1980s; in Norway, where turnout increased from 81.6 to 83.1 per cent; and in the Netherlands, where mean turnout remained more or less unchanged. In each of the other twelve countries for which long-term data are available, however, mean levels did in fact decline in the 1980s, whether marginally, as in Austria, which recorded a fall of less than 1 per cent, or more substantially, as in France, which recorded a fall of more than 10 per cent. The decline may have been marginal when looked at cross-nationally, but it was almost universal, and hence might well have justified some concern.

More important, it is a trend that began to accelerate in the 1990s and beyond, with average turnout across western Europe falling from 81.7 per cent to 77.6 per cent in the last decade of the twentieth century, and to 75.8 in the first decade of the new century. To be sure, even at this level, which is the lowest recorded in any of the postwar decades, turnout remained relatively high, with an average of slightly more than three-quarters of national electorates casting a ballot in the elections held during the 1990s, a figure that remains substantially higher than that recorded in nationwide elections in the United States, for example. Even allowing for this, however, and for the fact that the drop from the 1980s to the 2000s is little more than 6 per cent, it is nevertheless striking to see the overall European figure in the 1990s dipping below the 80 per cent level for the first time in five decades. Here also, moreover, there is a striking consistency across countries, in that, looking back from the turn of the century, eleven of the fifteen democracies involved also recorded their lowest ever decade averages in those ten years. The exceptions to this pattern again include Belgium, where the decade averages are almost invariant, but where the lowest level was recorded in the 1960s, and Denmark and Sweden, which both recorded their lowest levels in the 1950s. Even in these three cases, however, it should be noted that the average level of turnout in the 1990s was lower than in the 1980s. The fourth exception is the United Kingdom, which was unusual in recording its trough in participation in the 1980s. Indeed, the UK is the only one of these fifteen countries that recorded even a marginally higher level of turnout in the 1990s than in the 1980s, although in this case turnout later plunged to a remarkable

low of just 59 per cent in the first election of the twenty-first century.

This pattern is therefore very striking, and all the more so when account is taken of the sheer extent of the decline in particular countries. In Austria, for example, where turnout had remained safely above the 90 per cent level in each of the preceding four decades, the drop in the 1990s was almost 8 per cent. Similarly sharp declines were recorded in Finland, in Germany, which had absorbed the new voters of the former Democratic Republic during this period, and in the Netherlands and Norway. Even more striking, although across the longer term, is the case of Switzerland, where the then exclusively male electorate recorded an average of 69 per cent turnout in the 1950s – higher than that recorded in France or Ireland during the 1990s – but which, this time with equal rights for women, recorded an average of less than 44 per cent in the 1990s. In other words, more and more countries experienced record low decade averages in the 1990s, these in some cases reflecting very sharp declines.

This trend has persisted into the twenty-first century. As noted, the 2001 election in the UK was marked by the lowest level of turnout since the advent of mass democracy. The 2002 parliamentary elections in both France and Ireland were also marked by historic low levels of turnout, and while Ireland picked up again in 2007, France fell to a new record low of 60.4 per cent. Record lows were also recorded in 2008 in Italy and 2001 in Norway, as well as in 2002 in Portugal, and in 2000 in Spain. Levels close to historic lows were recorded in Greece in 2000, in Switzerland in 2003, in Austria in 2006 and in Finland in 2007. Why the trend towards ever lower levels of participation has continued remains, of course, an open question, to which we will return. It may simply reflect generational shifts. It may also be because of sheer boredom. The key point, however, is that we are seeing something that is both unidirectional and pervasive, and that offers a striking indicator of the growing enfeeblement of the electoral process.

There is one other way of seeing this picture that is perhaps even more telling. Indicators of turnout change are somewhat like those of climate change: the shifts we see do not necessarily occur in great leaps or bounds, and are not always linear. Moreover, while indicating withdrawal and disengagement, change in turnout levels is often registered as a trickle rather than a flood. For these reasons, and again like the indicators of climate change, the importance of what is often just a slight or uneven trend may be underestimated or even disputed. One way in which climatologists get around this problem is by laying less stress on the trends as such, and by drawing attention instead to the patterns that are visible in the timing and frequency of the peak values. This is, in fact, a very simple approach to measurement, and is also intuitively meaningful. Thus, for example, in a publication from 2003, Phil Jones and Anders Moberg adduced clear evidence of global warming by noting that the warmest decade on record had been the most recent, the 1990s, while 1998 emerged as the warmest single year, followed by 2001. Further evidence of global warming was adduced by noting that the eight warmest years on record had all occurred since 1990, even though in that same period air temperatures were also recorded (for example, in 1992, 1993 and 1994) that were little higher than those reached in the late 1970s. In other words, the pattern is evident, even if the trend is not wholly unidirectional.

The same is true for turnout levels, and indeed for many other indicators of mass political behaviour, and for this reason the sheer extent of change at this level is also

often underestimated. Although there is no undisturbed downward trend in levels of electoral participation, for example, record lows now come with greater frequency, and in a greater number of polities. As can be seen from Table 1(a) overleaf, which lists the three elections with the lowest levels of turnout in each of the fifteen long-established European democracies, almost four-fifths of these elections have taken place since 1990. In other words, not only do the last decades hold the record for the lowest turnout of any postwar decade in western Europe, but within the great majority of west European democracies, most, or even all of the record low turnouts have occurred since 1990. The two clearest exceptions are Denmark and Sweden, where, seemingly for unremarkable contingent reasons, the lowest-turnout elections fell in the 1950s. Beyond these cases, the only other odd exceptions are one low-turnout election in the 1960s (in Belgium), another one in the 1970s (again in Belgium), and two in the 1980s (in France and Luxembourg). The remaining thirty-five cases all date from 1990 or later. In other words, however small the overall shifts in turnout might be, they are nevertheless clustering together in a remarkable fashion – see Table 1(b). Indeed, this pattern also extends to the newer southern European democracies: the three lowest levels of turnout recorded in post-authoritarian Greece were those in 1996, 2000 and 2007; in Portugal, the lowest levels were recorded in 1999, 2002 and 2005; and in Spain in two of the three lowest turnouts fell in 1989 and 2000 (the third was in 1979). Here, as in the long-established democracies, the more recent the elections, the more likely they are to record troughs in participation. There is no certainty here, of course; like the pattern evinced by climate change, turnout sometimes bucks the overall trend, even today. However, the overall direction and reach of the change is unmistakable, and it offers the first strong indicator of the increase in popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics.⁵

Table 1 Record low levels of turnout in western Europe, 1950–2009
 (a) *Years of lowest turnout*

Austria	1994, 1999, 2006
Belgium	1968, 1974, 1999
Denmark	1950, 1953 (i), 1953 (ii)
Finland	1991, 1999, 2007
France	1988, 2002, 2007

Germany	1990, 1994, 2005	1990-99 18 37.8	2000-09 17 35.8
Iceland	1999, 2007, 2009		
Ireland	1997, 2002, 2007		
Italy	1996, 2001, 2008		
Luxembourg	1989, 1994, 1999		
Netherlands	1994, 1998, 2002		
Norway	1993, 2001, 2005		
Sweden	1952, 1956, 1958		
Switzerland	1995, 1999, 2003		
UK	1997, 2001, 2005		

(b) Frequency of record low turnouts, by decade

	No.	%
1950-59	6	13.3
1960-69	1	2.2
1970-79	1	2.2
1980-89	2	4.4

1990-99	18	40.0
2000-09	17	37.8

ELECTORAL VOLATILITY

The second key aggregate indicator relates to the behaviour of those citizens who do participate, and measures the extent to which their voting patterns reveal consistency and stability over time in the distribution of partisan preferences. Those citizens who continue to vote in elections are clearly still engaged with conventional politics, however marginally. As popular involvement fades, however, and as indifference grows, we can expect that even these citizens who do continue to participate will prove more volatile, more uncertain and more random in their expressions of preference. If politics no longer counts for so much, then not only should the willingness to vote begin to falter; so also should the sense of commitment among those who continue to take part. Choices are likely to prove more fickle, and to be more susceptible to the play of short-term factors. In practice, this also means that election outcomes are likely to prove less and less predictable. Electoral volatility is likely to increase; new parties and or new candidates are likely to prove more successful; and traditional alignments are likely to come under pressure. Hand in hand with indifference goes inconsistency.

As with patterns in turnout, expectations of growing unpredictability in the balance of party support in national party systems in western Europe have been current for a number of years. Here too, however, the empirical record at the aggregate level has usually failed to confirm them. Thus while party systems in some countries did indeed experience a substantial increase in their levels of electoral flux through the 1970s and 1980s, others appeared to become even more settled than before, resulting in what was generally a 'stable' and relatively subdued level of aggregate electoral change across western Europe as a whole (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). For many observers, such findings proved puzzling, since the evidence from survey data in particular had suggested that in the 1970s the western democracies had already begun to experience symptoms of breakdown in their traditional electoral alignments and historic cleavage voting patterns (Dalton et al., 1983; Franklin et al., 1992). As it turned out, however, these undeniable changes at the level of individual behaviour did not seem to translate into equivalent shifts in the party balance at the aggregate level. Indeed, even by the end of the 1980s, aggregate electoral volatility on a European-wide basis remained relatively muted, while many of the traditional parties that had already dominated electoral competition in the 1950s or even earlier continued to be serious contenders. These older parties had certainly seen some of their aggregate support slipping away to the benefit of new formations, but even by the end of the 1980s it was striking to see how much of their overall vote share they managed to retain.

This is borne out by the mean levels of aggregate electoral volatility in the period from 1950s to the 1980s. The measure applied here is that originally proposed by Mogens Pedersen (1979), who calculated the level of volatility simply by summing the (aggregate) electoral gains of all winning parties in a given election, or, which is the same thing, the (aggregate) electoral losses of all losing parties. It is, of course, a

crude aggregate measure, and it may well underestimate the real level of vote switching – as measured by individual survey evidence, or whatever. As an aggregate measure, however, it has the advantage of being calculable for all elections, including those in the distant past as well as those in polities where survey data are either absent or unreliable. In any case, the point here is to note that by this measure, contrary to many expectations, levels of aggregate electoral volatility across the fifteen long-standing democracies in Europe scarcely changed between the 1950s and the 1980s: the west European national average fell from 7.9 per cent in the 1950s to 6.9 per cent in the 1960s, and then rose to just 8.9 per cent in the 1970s and in the 1980s. This was hardly the stuff of electoral earthquakes. That said, these averages did conceal quite a bit of flux within the individual party systems. Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway moved from remarkably quiet elections in the 1950s to relatively unstable elections in the 1970s, before returning again to more stable outcomes in the 1980s. In contrast, both France and Germany began the postwar period marked by the substantial flux of postwar political reconstruction, and then settled down to more steady-state politics in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, while the average level of aggregate electoral volatility in western Europe as a whole tended to remain quite stable, this was partly masking the contradictory patterns in the experiences of the different polities.

Here again, however, as with the evidence of turnout, the more important observation is that this picture began to change significantly in the 1990s. Across western Europe as a whole, the 1990s became the peak decade for electoral volatility, with a score of 12.6 per cent, almost 4 points higher than that recorded in the 1970s and 1980s. Not too much should be made of this, of course. On a scale with a theoretical range running from 0 to 100, and which even here had a range of decade averages that ran in practice from 2.5 (1950s Switzerland) to 22.9 (1990s Italy), a mean value of 12.6 still reflects more (short-term) stability than change. On the other hand, the 1990s was the first of the five postwar decades in which the overall mean of instability breached 10 per cent, and also the first decade to record such a major shift from the previous mean value.

The significance of the 1990s is also underlined by reference to the individual national experiences. In all but four of the countries (the exceptions are Denmark, France, Germany and Luxembourg), the 1990s constituted a new national peak in volatility levels, which, in the majority of cases, easily exceeded 10 per cent: 10.8 in Belgium, 11.0 in Finland, 13.7 in Iceland, 11.7 in Ireland, 22.9 in Italy, 19.1 in the Netherlands, 15.8 in Norway and 13.8 in Sweden. Indeed, of all the individual national elections held in the 1990s, close to two-thirds recorded volatility levels in above 10 per cent. This confluence was also unprecedented, and again signalled that the patterns at the end of the century were markedly different from those of the earlier postwar years.

Moreover, and as with the turnout data, there was little sign that these new excesses had begun to abate in the new century. In elections in 2002, both Austria and the Netherlands experienced record high levels of aggregate instability, as did Italy in 2001. France, Norway and Sweden also recorded remarkably high levels of volatility in their first twenty-first-century elections, although in these cases no absolute records were broken. More generally, as can be seen in Table 2, a clear majority of the most unstable national elections to be recorded since 1950 have occurred since 1990.

Table 2 Record high levels of volatility in western Europe, 1950–2009*(a) Years of highest volatility*

Austria	1994, 2002, 2008
Belgium	1965, 1981, 2003
Denmark	1973, 1975, 1977
Finland	1970, 1991, 1995
France	1955, 1958, 2002
Germany	1953, 1961, 1990
Iceland	1978, 1999, 2009
Ireland	1951, 1987, 1992
Italy	1992, 1994, 2001
Luxembourg	1954, 1984, 1989
Netherlands	1994, 2002, 2006
Norway	1997, 2001, 2005
Sweden	1991, 1998,

Sweden	2006
Switzerland	1991, 1999, 2003
UK	1974(i), 1979, 1997

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

	No.	%
1950–59	5	11.1
1960–69	2	4.4
1970–79	7	15.6
1980–89	4	8.8
1990–99	15	33.3
2000–09	12	26.7

The very simple approach to presenting the data here is again borrowed from the climatologists, and follows the breakdown applied to the turnout data in Table 1. In this case the pattern is not so one-sided: volatility data inevitably prove more erratic than turnout data, being quickly responsive to political crises as well as to institutional and social-structural change (Bartolini and Mair, 1990: 253–308). Nevertheless, the period since 1990 again proves exceptional: not only do 60 per cent of the record national highs in volatility fall in this period – one-third in the 1990s, more than a quarter in the next ten years – but it is also noteworthy that no other decade comes close to matching this clustering. Indeed, in no earlier decade does the number of high volatility elections even come close to double figures. Once again, the more recent the elections, the less likely they are to yield a predictable outcome.

Since 1990, in short, ever fewer voters have seemed ready to participate in elections, although turnout levels in themselves have remained reasonably high, while among those who do participate, there has been a greater likelihood that they will switch their preferences from one election to the next.⁶ Not only has each of these indicators reached a relative extreme in the period since 1990 (whether recording troughs in turnout, or peaks in volatility) across western Europe as a whole, they also tend to the extreme in a large majority of the individual polities. That is, *both extreme lows in turnout and extreme peaks in volatility* have been recorded since 1990 in almost all of the long-established European democracies.

volatility; Sweden, which recorded high volatility but not exceptionally low turnout; and Denmark, which proved extreme on neither indicator during this recent period. Beyond these cases, the evidence of unusual patterns since 1990 is not only striking, but also remarkably consistent. Across western Europe, citizens, where they are not abstaining from the ballot altogether, are voting with significantly reduced partisan commitment. In these heightened levels of instability, we see a second strong aggregate indicator of disengagement.

PARTY LOYALTIES

The same message comes through more and more clearly from individual-level survey data. That is, the often substantial shifts evinced by these aggregate data on turnout and volatility now correspond closely to the evidence of individual-level experiences as tapped by election studies and commercial polling projects. Many of these latter data have been collated and summarized by Dalton and Wattenberg in their comprehensive *Parties Without Partisans* (2000), and what is also striking in this instance is both the consistency and the pervasiveness of the various changes that have been observed. One key indicator is the degree to which individual voters feel a sense of belonging or commitment to particular political parties, a feeling captured by various measures of partisan identification. And here (Table 3) decline is very evident: in eleven of the thirteen countries, including a number of non-European Union polities, for which relevant data are available – the exceptions are Belgium and Denmark – the percentage of voters claiming a sense of identification with parties has fallen over the past two decades or so. Even more strikingly, the smaller numbers of voters who report a strong sense of belonging or identification has also decidedly fallen, and this time in every single one of the countries concerned. As Dalton notes, it is not just the scale of the decline that is important here, but also the fact that it occurs in all of the cases for which data are available. There therefore seems little that is either contingent or circumstantial, and as with so many other data discussed in this chapter, ‘the similarity in trends for so many nations forces us to look beyond specific and idiosyncratic explanations ... For public opinion trends to be so consistent across so many nations, something broader and deeper must be occurring’ (Dalton, 2000: 29).

Table 3 Trends in party identification in western Europe, 1960s–1990s

Country	Per annum trend in:	
	% party identifiers	% strong party identifiers
Austria	-0.916	-0.663
Belgium	+0.090	-0.285
UK	-0.202	-0.882
Denmark	+0.001	-0.207
Finland	-0.293	-0.147
France	-0.712	-0.329
Iceland	-0.675	-0.250
Ireland	-1.510	-0.767
Italy	-0.979	-0.770
Luxembourg	-0.317	-0.316
Netherlands	-0.329	-0.129
Norway	-0.542	-0.450
Sweden	-0.733	-0.543

Source: Dalton (2004: 33), as derived from Eurobarometer and election study data.

Yet more evidence of this broader and deeper process can be seen in the other sets of survey data that Dalton and his colleagues marshal. Split-ticket voting, for example, whereby voters opt for one party in one electoral arena, and for another party in another electoral arena, has risen in all those cases where it can be measured over time (Australia, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United States). A committed and engaged voter, with strong partisan loyalty, will normally vote for the same party regardless of the arena involved – for example, voting Democrat in US presidential and congressional contests, as well as probably in local state and county elections. Lesser partisan commitment and lesser engagement are more likely to be associated with more free-range voting patterns, and hence with a greater willingness to split the ticket, and it is this latter practice that is growing. Voters are also less ready or less able to decide in advance how they will vote, preferring to observe the campaign, or even remaining uninterested, until closer to polling day. Here too, with a single Danish exception, this pattern is more and more prevalent, with almost every election study reporting a substantial increase in the proportion of voters who make their decision how to vote either during the campaign or only shortly before polling day. Again, the implication is a lack of stable commitment on the part of voters, and hence also a lack of engagement. It is also hardly surprising, then, to see that these voters are also far less likely to engage in more demanding campaign activities, whether this might be by way of attending political meetings, working for a party or candidate, persuading others to vote in a particular way, or even donating money. On almost all of these measures, and in almost all the countries for which data are available, the survey evidence once again clearly points to decline: individual voters are less and less willing to participate in this more demanding sense – for many, at least as far as conventional politics is concerned, it is enough to be simply spectators.

PARTY MEMBERSHIP

Citizens are also obviously much less willing to take on the obligations and commitments associated with membership in party organizations. Here too, it is striking to note not only the sheer decline in the number of party members over

time, but also the extent to which this decline seems characteristic of all long-established democracies (Van Biezen et al., 2009). Although the pattern here is more pronounced than in the case of changes in levels of turnout or of electoral volatility, the conclusions that have been drawn about party membership levels tend to reiterate in an even more compelling way those drawn about the more conventional levels of participation. In other words, through to the 1980s, the evidence of decline in this form of political engagement was somewhat ambiguous and disputable. From the 1990s onwards, by contrast, the trend has been unequivocal and seemingly unstoppable.

The first major study based on aggregate – often official party – data was that summarized in Katz and Mair (1992), and covered a large number of European polities from the beginning of the 1960s through to the end of the 1980s. This study found that, while there was a decline in the numbers of party members as a proportion of their respective national electorates (the only exceptions were the cases of Belgium and West Germany), which were themselves expanding substantially in the population booms of this period, there was little evidence of decline in the actual numbers themselves. Indeed, by the end of the 1980s, it appeared that party membership had actually grown in absolute terms not only in Belgium and West Germany, but also in Sweden, Norway and Italy, while falling both in absolute terms and as a share of the electorate in Finland, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and the UK. A mixed picture, in other words, and one that led at the time to the conclusion that, contrary to prevailing expectations, there had been no wholesale ‘collapse’ in membership (Katz and Mair, 1992: 332). This conclusion was supported by a study that incorporated much of the available individual-level survey evidence on the topic (Widfeldt, 1995), and later again by a comparison of World Values Study survey data from the early 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, far from seeing the party membership ratio entering a general decline through to the early 1990s, this latter analysis suggested that it had actually grown, and sometimes quite substantially, in such countries as Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Britain and France. There seemed little evidence from these particular data that these countries were experiencing ‘a spreading disillusionment with partisan politics’ (Norris, 2002: 134, 135). On the contrary, the picture was one of vibrancy and engagement.

This relatively sanguine picture was shattered by the end of the 1990s. By then, and regardless of whatever conclusions might have been drawn from the survey data, the patterns in the aggregate data had become unequivocal. The first real check of the new patterns was reported in Mair and van Biezen (2001), and included data on thirteen long-established European democracies, as well as a number of the newer democracies. In each of the established cases, it turned out that the ratio of party membership to the electorate at large had fallen markedly between the beginning of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s (see also Scarrow [in Dalton], 2002: 86–95). That is, in not one of these cases had the membership ratio remained steady, let alone increased. The summary figures were truly striking: In 1980, an average of 9.8 per cent of the electorates in these thirteen long-established democracies were party members; by the end of the 1990s, the figure had fallen to just 5.7 per cent. To put it another way, and to trace the contrast back even further, at the beginning of the 1960s there were ten democracies in Europe for which it is possible to trace reliable membership figures, and across all ten the average

membership ratio was 14 per cent; in a majority – six out of ten – of the countries, the ratio was above 10 per cent. In other words, more than one in every ten eligible voters were members of political parties. At the end of the 1990s, by contrast, there were twenty countries for which it was possible to find reliable membership data, some old democracies, some new. Across all twenty, the average membership ratio was just 5 per cent, little more than a third of the level recorded in the early 1960s, and of these twenty countries, only one – Austria – recorded a ratio exceeding 10 per cent.⁷

This evidence of uniform decline was also reinforced by the figures for the absolute numbers of party members, for here too, and in marked contrast to the earlier pattern noted by Katz and Mair (1992), the fall-off was pervasive: in every one of the long-established democracies included in the analysis, the absolute numbers of party members had fallen, sometimes by as much as 50 per cent of the 1980s levels. In no single country had there been an increase in the number of party members. This was exit on a grand scale – both in terms of reach and direction. Throughout the old democracies, as the analysis concluded, parties were simply haemorrhaging members (Mair and van Biezen, 2001: 13). In so doing, they offered yet another telling indicator of the extent to which the 1990s had been marked by an unprecedented degree of popular withdrawal and disengagement.

This story also continued into the new century. Though the levels of party membership in absolute numbers now appear to be bottoming out – indeed, they have often fallen so low as to make it almost impossible to imagine further decline in absolute numbers without this signalling the wholesale collapse of the party organizations concerned – the scale of the decline since the high point reached in the late 1970s is unmistakable. Table 4 shows a picture of membership loss of quite staggering proportions. A decline in the ratio of members to eligible voters is evident in each of the long-established democracies, ranging from a fall of more than 10 percentage points in the cases of Austria and Norway to more moderate decreases of around 2 or 3 per cent in Germany and the Netherlands. In the thirteen countries for which long-term data are available, the average membership ratio has fallen by nearly 5 percentage points in the last thirty years – a huge decline. The absolute numbers have also fallen dramatically. In the United Kingdom and France, the parties have lost around 1 million members over the course of the last three decades, equivalent to approximately two-thirds of the memberships recorded around 1980. Italian parties today have 1.5 million members fewer than their counterparts of the First Republic, corresponding to a fall by more than one-third of the earlier memberships. The Scandinavian countries too, and

Table 4 Party membership change in established democracies, 1980–2009

Country	Change in ratio of members to electorate	Change in number of members	% change in number of members
United Kingdom	-2.82	-1,118,274	-66.05
Norway	-10.20	-284,603	-61.75
France	-3.31	-974,475	-56.09
Sweden	-4.54	-241,130	-47.46
Ireland	-2.97	-50,856	-44.67
Switzerland	-5.90	-178,000	-43.22
Finland	-7.66	-260,261	-42.86
Denmark	-3.17	-109,467	-39.70
Italy	-4.09	-1,450,623	-35.61
Belgium	-3.45	-191,133	-30.97
Austria	-11.21	-422,661	-28.61
Netherlands	-1.77	-121,499	-28.19
Germany	-2.22	-531,856	-27.20
Portugal	-1.05	+4,306	+1.28
Greece	+3.40	+335,000	+148.89
Spain	+3.16	+1,208,258	+374.60

Source: Van Biezen et al. (2009)

Norway and Sweden in particular, have suffered severe losses, with the raw numbers falling by over 60 per cent and nearly 50 per cent respectively. Although the losses appear more muted in some countries, it should also be noted that in none of the established democracies have the raw memberships fallen by less than 25 per cent. On average, across all established democracies, membership levels in absolute numbers have been nearly halved since 1980.

CONCLUSION

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

To be sure, we are dealing with sometimes quite small pieces of evidence here, and the changes which have been noted are also sometimes, though not always, relatively marginal – a trickle rather than a flood. But it is also important to appreciate that when all these disparate pieces of evidence, great and small, are summed together, they offer a very clear indication of a marked shift in the prevailing patterns of mass politics. This shift is not only consistent in focus – that is, all of these indicators now point in a common direction – but is also remarkably

consistent across the range of polities. The conclusion is then clear: all over western Europe, and in all likelihood all over the advanced democracies, citizens are heading for the exits of the national political arena.

In early 2002, in an interview with the Dutch social science magazine *Facta*, Anthony Giddens drew attention to the changes that were being wrought in mass media entertainment through the growing popularity of docu-soaps and reality television. 'A watershed has been passed here,' he noted. 'Previously television was something that reflected an external world which people then watched. Now television is much more a medium in which you can participate.'⁸ In conventional politics, by contrast, the shift has been the other way around. Previously, and probably through to at least the 1970s, conventional politics was seen to belong to the citizen, to be something in which the citizen could easily participate, and often did participate. Now, to paraphrase Giddens, conventional politics has become part of an external world which people view from outside. There is a world of the parties, or a world of political leaders, that is separate from the world of the citizenry. As Bernard Manin (1997: 218–35) put it, we are witnessing the transformation of party democracy into 'audience democracy'.⁹ Whether the increasing withdrawal and disengagement of voters is responsible for the emergence of this new mode of democratic politics, or whether it is an emerging form of democratic politics that is encouraging voter withdrawal and disengagement is, at least for now, a moot point. What is beyond dispute is that each feeds the other. As citizens exit the national political arena, they inevitably weaken the major actors who survive there – the political parties. And this, in turn, is part of, and promotes, audience democracy. As Giovanni Sartori (2002: 78) puts it, 'video politics' – and hence also audience democracy – is stronger when parties are weak, and weaker when parties are strong. Strong parties are difficult to sustain when politics turns into a spectator sport, and that it should turn into a spectator sport is hardly surprising given the fading of the real differences that divided the parties in the first place. When mainstream party competition matters little for the substance of decision-making, it is only to be expected that it should drift towards an emphasis on theatre and spectacle.

1. Indeed, for some authors, including Beck, withdrawal from capital-P politics is often believed to be compensated for by greater involvement in 'sub-politics'. Note also W. Lance Bennett's (1998: 744) suggestion that 'what is changing about politics is not a decline in citizen engagement, but a shift away from old forms that is complemented by the emergence of new forms of political interest and engagement ... [C]ivic culture is not dead; it has merely taken new identities, and can be found living in other communities.' Whether such relocation of involvement can compensate for disengagement from conventional politics is a major question.

2. For the original distinction between the dignified and efficient parts of the constitution, see Bagehot (1963: 61).

3. Occasionally, and in this context the Dutch Pim Fortuyn offered an excellent example, we get both. That is, we get a populist political leader such as Prof Dr Fortuyn, who was backed up by a team composed of supposed experts, often with hands-on experience in the organization of different policy areas, and whose appeal was based on offering practical solutions derived from knowledge and expertise rather than political or ideological preference.

4. For details of the figures reported here, see Mair (2002), from which the discussion of the aggregate

indicators is largely drawn.

5. For a comparable conclusion with reference to data from the American case, see Thomas E. Paterson (2002).

6. This counters an earlier observation by Bennett, based on the US data (1998: 745). Even though conventional political participation may be in decline, he suggested, 'those who continue to participate in traditional politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation, and policy deliberation'. To judge by the west European data, it is clear they do not.

7. The pattern is comparable in the advanced democracies outside Europe. In Australia in 1967 there were 251,000 members, the equivalent of 4.1 per cent of the electorate; in 1997, the number had fallen to 231,000, equivalent to just 1.9 per cent of the then much expanded electorate – see the figures in McAllister (2002: 389–90); in Canada, the fall-off was from 462,000 members in 1987 to 372,000 in 1994, or from 2.6 per cent of the electorate to 1.9 per cent – see Carty (2002: 355); in New Zealand, the decline was from 272,000 (or 12.5 per cent) in 1981 to 133,000 (or 4.8 per cent) in 1999 – see Vowles (2002: 416–19).

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

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