

Interest Groups and the Revitalization of Democracy: Are We Expecting Too Much?

William Maloney, Newcastle University

Revitalising Politics Conference, 5-6 November 2008

Introduction

The UK (and other advanced democracies) appear to be suffering from a democratic squeeze. Voter turnout, partisan consistency, partisan identification, party membership, and trust in politicians and government – all crucial to a healthy functioning democracy – are declining (see Mair, 2006). The contemporary democratic tenet is that ‘Unless citizens participate in the deliberation of public policy, and their choices structure government action, then democratic processes are meaningless (Dalton, 2008: 78). However, strengthening democratic decision-making processes is not an easy matter – most citizens are hard to motivate to engage in public-policy debates and most can find *better things to do with their time*.

Hay, Stoker and Williamson (2008) in their stimulating tract argue that Government and political elite have failed to recognize the profundity of the contemporary democratic malaise. They further argue that ‘Political parties, single issue campaign organizations and the media all play a vital part in politics. As such, they too are part of the problem; they need also to be seen as part of the solution’. This memo deals directly with campaign groups(/interest groups) general ‘contribution’ to UK democracy, and what part these bodies can be expected to play in the solution to the alleged democratic malaise.

Groups and the Delivery of Democracy

Participation through interest groups is seen both as beneficial for individuals from a developmental perspective and as a functional policy-making necessity. Groups can be seen as delivering for democracy on two main counts. First, as effective representative vehicles: ‘better’ policy emerges as a result of group activities. These outcomes are more informed and workable and greater legitimacy is attached to them

because they approximate more closely to citizens' preferences. Secondly, there is the J S Mill and Putnam (2000) proposition that 'better democrats' may be produced via their experiences within groups. The internal social capital experiences within groups are seen as civically and democratically useful: groups facilitate the generation of pro-democratic and pro-civic values that have the potential to enhance the quality of the political linkage between citizens and decision-makers. An engaged and vibrant group system (and civil society) is not as a desirable luxury, but a democratic necessity.

Recent years have witnessed the rise of supporter-based, memberless (protest business) groups and more individualised participation (Jordan and Maloney 1997, 2007; Pattie *et al.*, 2004). Many of these groups are organized according to hierarchical business principles aimed at maximizing the efficiency of operations. Hay, Stoker and Williamson (2008) bemoan the rise of these professionalized bureaucratic interest groups staffed by lobbyists, scientists, and public relations experts, and supported by sophisticated fund-raising departments and management structures. They maintain that these bodies offer 'ephemeral, thin, sporadic' and potentially 'ill-informed' engagement. Hay, Stoker and Williamson (2008) further argue that '... the advocacy of special interests through lobbying and the challenge and dissent presented through various forms of protest, offer vital links in the democratic chain between the governors and governed. But they are failing to engage citizens-at-large in politics'. Are such great expectations too heroic? Do these groups see themselves as in the business of supplying and engendering deliberation, social capital and participatory democracy? Do the citizens who patronise these groups seek deep and meaningful political involvement?

Explaining Limited Involvement

The democratic potential and contribution of groups in generating participatory habits is less effective than might be assumed because groups have found that that *less internal participation is an attractive quality in generating large-scale support*. Many groups have found that checkbook participation is an efficient way to generate support

because many citizens find such limited involvement appealing. These organizations have sought to influence policy outcomes largely without the active assistance of members – beyond mobilizing credit card/direct debit accounts. Skocpol noted the ‘shift from membership to management in American civic life’. This shift is not restricted to the US. Survey evidence from the mid-1990s of AIBS and FoE supporters found that they were content to contract-out their participation to groups and did not see membership as a means of being ‘active in politics’. These findings were echoed by the group leaders we interviewed some 10 years later. A Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) representative stated that, “... we’re sort of acting as a *de facto* for an individual ... if they could do it themselves they would but because they can’t, they trust us to get on with it ...”. Many citizens perceive passive involvement as a ‘benefit’ and would consider leaving organizations that sought to impose the ‘cost’ of active involvement in group activities. As the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) representative put it:

“We think we’d lose them if we did that (press for more active membership) because they’re people who want to give money and they don’t want to do anymore than that ... So the whole task (of recruiting people) has to be geared around saying ‘oh don’t worry, we’re not expecting you to come to meetings and things, we just want your support’”.

Many groups are also unashamedly oligarchical – being supporter- as opposed to member-based organizations. The CPRE representative said, “We believe in a particular cause and its ‘come and join us’ on that basis”. In his study of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the development policy area Warleigh (2001: 623) found that these bodies were staff-dominated and made ‘... little of no effort to educate their supporters about the need for engagement with EU decision-makers ... Moreover – and perhaps more worryingly – I found no evidence that supporters are unhappy with this passive role, displaying at best little interest in the EU as a focus of campaigning or locus of political authority’. Sudbery (2003: 90) quoted a senior representative of the European Environment Bureau (EEB) said that ‘While ideally it would be good to get people involved ... my role is not to encourage the most participatory governance, but to ensure the best results for the environment’. Thus the

organizations do not see themselves in the business of enhancing participatory democracy, their role is to achieve the ‘best’ outcomes in the relevant policy area. In addition to this, participation rights are not being denied to frustrated members and a ‘lack’ of such rights may not be an important or pivotal disincentive. Indeed, quite the reverse. Shallow, contribution-based participation is *precisely* what is sought.

Two other developments can be seen as working against the active involvement of citizens: *patronage* and the *increasing professionalization the policymaking process*. First, the growth of patronage can obviate the need for members. For example, at the EU level Greenwood (2007: 343-344) noted that the Commission spends approximately €1bn on funding groups – and almost the entire (300) citizen interest group universe (excluding Greenpeace) mobilized at the EU level receives some funding. Some groups (European Network Against Racism and the European Social Platform) are close to being almost entirely solvent on the basis of EU money receiving 80-90 percent of their operating budgets from EU institutions. While these efforts to support civil society organizations are laudable, there is a potential downside.¹ If institutional sources are prepared to fund organizations to operational levels of 80-90 percent then members become a luxury because groups can exert influence without them. As, Skocpol (2003: 134) acerbically puts it, “*Members are a nonlucrative distraction*”.

Secondly, the increasing professionalization the policymaking process itself has further undercut the need for members. Crenson and Ginsberg (2002: 147) argue that the new politics of policy-making advantages expertise and technical knowledge over the mobilization of large numbers of citizens. This new politics is open ‘... “to all those who have ideas and expertise rather than to those who assert interest and preferences”’. Those admission requirements exclude the great mass of ordinary citizens’. Similarly, Chaskin (2003) – who focussed on attempt at fostering neighbourhood democracy – highlighted the importance of expertise and argued that

¹ There is also the ‘danger’ that patronage may affect the tactics and strategies and policy positions of groups. Groups heavily reliant on patronage may not want to engage in activities that may be frowned up by their sponsor or occupy policy positions too distant from the major funder’s standpoint.

this was partly driven by the professionalization of public agencies. While Saurugger (2007: 397-398) notes, ‘Organized civil society – organized as groups or social movements – has a tendency to become increasingly professionalized to represent the interests of their constituency in an efficient way’. Groups can be seen, at least partly, as responding to the changing policy-making context. Affecting outcomes appears to require less membership muscle and more policy expertise and professionalism. More cynically, Bosso (2003: 410) comments on the US trends:

“... what use are ‘members’ when lawyers, scientists, and policy experts are far more valuable in day-to-day policy debates ... members ... are little more than organizational wallpaper, a collective backdrop for professional advocacy”.

Any Redeeming Features?

The brief sketch above can be seen as adding to Hay, Stoker and Williamson’s (2008) pessimism regarding the democratic contribution of interest groups. However, should we be as concerned as these leading scholars? Can we uncover any group features that could be presented as participatory or democratically redeeming? First, FoE, Amnesty, Greenpeace, the CPRE and the RSPB – have networks of local branches and chapters that offer opportunities for involvement and volunteering. The CPRE has a network of over 200 district groups and the RSPB has 12,000 volunteers delivering some 700,000 hours of assistance which the group claims is worth over £3.7 million and is the equivalent of around 360 additional members of staff (RSPB, 2004: 3). Secondly, groups act as *surrogates* for those who cannot effectively represent themselves – *i.e.* acting on behalf of a public that lack the necessary knowledge and expertise. Much group participation seeks to advance many causes that benefit constituencies beyond the direct sectional interests of their supporters (*e.g.* children or animal welfare). Thirdly, there may also be a *redistributive* element to involvement. Resource-rich citizens are more active in politics than their less well-endowed peers and patronise causes that many resource-poor individuals also support. For example, many relatively less affluent individuals have strong pro-environmental attitudes, but simply can’t afford the indulgence of membership. The contribution of their wealthier co-citizens ensures this interest is represented. Finally, while the internal democratic procedures of

many groups are seen as democratically wanting – lacking a fully empowered membership with a formal *voice*. The *exit* option can be seen as a significant threat and maintains a link between leaders and followers. Many organizations are involved in a fierce competition to attract and retain support and suffer from high membership turnover because significant proportions of ‘their’ support operate on a revolving-door basis. Groups take great care to avoid members taking the *exit* decision and policies are drawn in ways that show some sensitivity to the views of members. Through the use of market research techniques supporter attitudes may feed into policy direction. While internal democracy is atrophied in many organizations, or if groups seldom have effective mass policy-making influence through traditional means, most groups try to avoid taking stances that may cost support. Dahl (1961) sees the relationship between leaders and citizens in a pluralistic democracy as reciprocal: ‘... leaders influence the decisions of constituents, but the decisions of leaders are also determined in part by what they think are, will be, or have been the preferences of their constituents’.

Concluding Comments: Great Expectations.

Should we expect interest groups to contribute to democratic deliberation, participatory democracy and the generation of social capital? Are we expecting too much? The structure of limited participation supplied by groups and the limited participation demanded by citizens could be presented as an efficient market. It suits both parties. Shallow involvement is not to everyone’s taste – and certainly there are many commentators and participatory enthusiasts who see great problems with such minimalism. However, just because involvement is shallow does not mean that groups are devoid of democratic content. Groups do seek to lead *supporters* – as opposed to being democratically accountable to a vibrant participatory *membership* – and seek out passive supporters to provide regular contributions. Citizens who wish a more active role may find opportunities for deeper or more ‘meaningful’ involvement. However, most supporters’ contributions are financial and they are content to embrace a politically marginal role. The fact that the vast bulk of supporters choose not to avail themselves of these opportunities is not particularly surprising and we should be concerned if groups were not offering such opportunities. Many organizations are in the business of campaigning, lobbying and advocating for many causes. Members can

be useful in that process, providing resources and legitimacy. Do groups need to be paragons of participatory democracy to enhance democracy? Probably not. Democracy benefits by the fact that these bodies activate support by individuals for collective ends and provide policy expertise that can challenge government.

References

- Bosso, C J (2003), 'Rethinking the Concept of Membership in Nature Advocacy Organizations', *The Policy Studies Journal*, vol. 31, no. 3: 397-411.
- Chaskin, R J (2003), 'Fostering Neighborhood Democracy: Legitimacy and Accountability Within Loosely Coupled Systems', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2: 161-189.
- Crenson, M A and Ginsberg, B (2002), *Downsizing Democracy: How American Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press).
- Dahl, R A (1961), *Who Governs?: Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Dalton, R J (2008), 'Citizenship Norms and the Expansion of Political Participation', *Political Studies*, vol. 56: 76-98.
- Greenwood J (2007), "Review Article. Organized Civil Society and Democratic Legitimacy in the European Union", *British Journal of Political Science*, 37: 333-357.
- Hay, C, Stoker, G and Williamson, A (2008), 'Revitalising Politics: Have We Lost the Plot?'. Unpublished memo.
- Jordan, G and Maloney W A (1997), *The Protest Business: Mobilizing Campaign Groups* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
- Jordan, G and Maloney, W A (2007) *Democracy and Interest Groups: Enhancing Participation?* (London: Palgrave).
- Mair, P (2006), 'Polity Scepticism, Party Failings, and the Challenge to European Democracy', *Uhlenbeck Lecture 24*, (Wassenaar: NIAS).

Pattie, C, Seyd, P and Whiteley, P (2004), *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Putnam R D (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster).

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) (2004), *Introducing the RSPB* ... (http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/Introducing%20the%20RSPB_tcm5-58645.pdf accessed 20th July 2006).

Saurugger, S (2007), 'Democratic 'Misfit'? Conceptions of Civil Society Participation in France and the European Union', *Political Studies* 55: 384-404.

Skocpol, T (2003), *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Oklahoma, University of Oklahoma Press).

Sudbery, I (2003), 'Bridging the Legitimacy Gap in the EU: Can Civil Society Help to Bring the Union Closer to Its Citizens?', *Collegium* 26: 75-95.

Warleigh, A. (2001), "'Europeanizing" Civil Society: NGOs as Agents of Political Socialization', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 39 (4): 619-639.