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CHAPTER ONE

Political Citizenship under Threat: Dimensions, Causes and Responses

There is a *prima facie* case for the proposition that our sense of political citizenship in national democracies appears to be under threat. That case rests simply on recalling your last conversation about politics with a fellow citizen. In that conversation they will have, quite likely, expressed a sense of uneasiness about politics and a view that they feel relatively powerless in the face of machinations of formal politics. Popular political culture in many mature and new democracies is tinged with a strong sense of being 'anti' both politics and politicians. Many citizens hold that politics is 'synonymous with sleaze, corruption, and duplicity, greed, self-interest and self-importance, interference, inefficiency and intransigence. It is, at best, a necessary evil, at worst an entirely malevolent force that needs to be kept in check' (Hay 2007: 153). Yet faith in politics as a mechanism for solving collective action problems and a sense that you, as a citizen, have a capacity and orientation to play a positive role in politics are central to political citizenship. That sense of political citizenship in many national democracies could reasonably be described as under threat.

Maybe we do not so much hate politics as see it as in increasingly pointless activity. There is a demand and a supply side in the threat to political citizenship (Hay 2007). Many citizens, it appears, fail to fully appreciate that politics in the end involves the collective imposition of decisions, demands a complex communication process and generally produces messy compromise. In short, politics found itself out of step with the dominant self-actualizing and individualistic narrative of the neo-liberal era. But it is the supply side of the argument that has the greater magnitude and momentum. On the supply side the space for politics is being squeezed by processes of depoliticization, the professionalization of politics, globalization and privatization. More decisions are handed over to institutions beyond popular politics; the forces of global economy and society appear to be taking issues beyond nationally based politics, and key aspects of public goods and services are managed through private companies and institutions.

Democracy needs citizens to value political citizenship yet in many democracies it appears that connection is under threat. I want to dismiss

at the outset the idea that there was a golden age of political citizenship or that a positive sense of citizenship implies all citizens acting with sustained virtue. Most citizens in the founding days of mass democracy probably never especially trusted politicians or liked doing politics. Moreover, politics is not necessarily noble; it can reflect self-interest. Its practice is often boring rather than inspiring and its successful outcomes are often messy and full of compromise. Yet it does demand a public morality of taking into account the views of others and adjusting your position accordingly rather than the private morality of sticking to your principles no matter what. Political citizenship does make uncomfortable demands on us. The opening of this chapter requires us to address the issue of what would make for a good civic culture, one with a positive sense of political citizenship.

In established and new democracies there is a danger that many – even a majority of – citizens have no positive sense of political citizenship, and that this in turn provides the base for a potential undermining of a commitment to democratic principles and practices. Evidence about a malaise within politics can be presented from a range of countries but given limits of time and evidence the discussion about decline is restricted to Europe and the United States. The analysis then turns to examine in greater depth explanations for that malaise and finally it asks what if anything could be done to restore a stronger sense of political citizenship. The discussion then closes with a plea for more research into how citizens understand politics.

The Dimensions of Political Citizenship

Pattie *et al.* (2004: 22) argue that citizenship revolves around ‘a set of norms, values and practices designed to solve collective action problems’. The core problem addressed by political citizenship is how to establish an orientation and set of practices towards our fellow citizens that make it possible for us to commit together to solve shared challenges without resort to violence or unnecessary coercion. The issue of the nature of ‘good’ political citizenship has been a focus of intellectual reflection and practical debate for over 2000 years (see Pattie *et al.* 2004: 5–22). My focus is on a more narrow concern: What orientation do citizens need to have towards politics in modern democracies in order to support a commitment to their polity? This I might describe as the starting base for any meaningful sense of political citizenship.

An interesting point of departure in pursuing a response to this question is provided by Almond and Verba’s (1963) classic study of the civic culture of five nations. It compared Great Britain with the United States, Germany,

Italy and Mexico. Culture for these two American authors constituted the broad orientation of citizens towards their political system and their sense of citizenship, measured by way of attitudinal and behavioural data collected through a series of national surveys. The book may be a classic but it is also the focus for a substantial range of criticisms. The dominant view of the Almond and Verba thesis is that it was a pioneering but seriously flawed effort at understanding civic culture. There have been criticisms from academics about the theories underlying the work in that Almond and Verba appeared to sustain a very elitist understanding of democratic practice and a rather individualistic understanding of culture. The empirical findings of the study have also been questioned. The United States and the United Kingdom in the Almond and Verba study were both seen as blessed with citizens furnished with different but supportive civic cultures for modern democracy. Other countries were designated as having some key ingredients missing. Some disputed the findings. Others disputed the interpretation offered by Almond and Verba. Almost as soon as the book was published, many suggested that the cultures they had described even if they had been captured effectively were within a decade or so gone. Almond and Verba gave a fair hearing to many of the criticisms in *The Civic Culture Revisited*, a book published about two decades after the original study (Almond and Verba 1980). But from that point onward the work somewhat faded from view. There is a case for bringing it back under scrutiny.

What I propose is that there may be some advantage in returning to examine the conceptual framework underlying the work. The key conceptual work in *The Civic Culture* is done by a distinction between three types of political culture. Each type captures a citizen orientation towards their polity. The first is the *parochial* political culture where the citizen has little direct contact with the formal and specialized agencies of government and spends much of their time unaware of the political system. The example in the mind of the authors is a village tribe member in a large-scale colonial or former colonial state where the reach of government is limited. The second orientation is referred to as the *subject* political culture. Here the orientation of the citizen is as an observer with an awareness of the political system in general but a lack of engagement with it on particular issues. This orientation is used later in the book to characterize a substantial element in British political culture as deferential. But deference towards the political system is only one response that could be in tune with Almond and Verba's subject culture. The subject

culture can lead to citizens seeing the political system as legitimate or in a more negative light. Crucially, it is rather defined by its passive orientation towards the outputs of the system. The crucial question for subject political culture is: Does the political system deliver? Finally the *participant* political culture is one where citizens understand the political system and are orientated towards being actively engaged with it both in general terms and over particular issues. Again that engagement may lead to positive or negative evaluations of the political system but the orientation towards engagement remains.

The final element in the analysis offered by Almond and Verba is to specify those combinations of cultures that are seen as supportive of democracy: low levels of parochialism but a mix of strong subject and participant are seen as key. Thus, in their study of Britain in the late 1950s, the picture is of a country at ease with itself: citizens deferential and respectful of their leaders but confident of their role and capacities and the responsiveness of government. Almond and Verba (1963: 455) comment about politics in Great Britain:

The participant role is highly developed. Exposure to politics, interest, involvement, and a sense of competence are relatively high. There are norms supporting political activity, as well as emotional involvement in elections and system affect. And attachment to the system is a balanced one: there is general system pride as well as satisfaction with specific governmental performance.

British citizens were more deferential than their American counterparts but this aspect of their culture was balanced by an active and participative orientation towards politics: a blend of activity and passivity that according to Almond and Verba allowed a civic culture to develop. The American route was different with a stronger emphasis on participation, but it too involved a mix of cultures that allowed a positive form of citizenship to emerge. Looking back from a distance of fifty years and more – as the later sections of this chapter will show – it becomes possible to see that the empirical world described by Almond and Verba in both Great Britain and the United States has gone. The conceptual framework could, perhaps, be reinvigorated in the light of current developments.

In our globalized world where decisions are made in locations that are hidden from, or at least opaque to, many citizens it would appear that a parochial perspective by citizens might have enhanced its relevance.

Whereas for Almond and Verba the parochial perspective was a throwback to traditional societies and under challenge from modernization, in today's global world we may all perceive our citizenship in parochial terms, where decisions are made by distant figures of whom we are mostly unaware. The subject perspective would appear to have sustained its relevance as politics but become less ideological and more focused on issues of management and delivery. It appears the participant perspective is the most obviously under threat, although it may be that citizens have sustained or advanced their view of their right to influence collective decisions but found formal politics an increasingly unattractive vessel for carrying that interest.

The framework of parochial, subject and participant political cultures may still provide a relevant and valuable way of thinking about the composition of political citizenship in a country. They may have been in balance in the 1950s in the United States and Great Britain, enabling citizens and the governing political class to live comfortably with one another. But as we shall see below they have got out of kilter not only in those countries but also more widely. From the perspective of many citizens of democracies today, they are to an increasing extent parochials in a world governed by global or at least beyond national forces. They are willing participants in the world of political influence but disengaged by the practices of formal politics. They are subjects but ones who find the performance of politicians and the political system increasingly disappointing. Whereas Almond and Verba, in Britain and the United States, found participant citizens and satisfied subjects with few alienated parochials, we might find a rather different mix now and one undermining of political citizenship: displaying more alienated parochials, dissatisfied subjects and frustrated participants.

The Malaise in Political Citizenship

After a comprehensive and intensive survey of advanced industrial democracies, Russell Dalton concludes that citizens 'have grown distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned about how the democratic process functions' (Dalton 2004: 1). One symptom of distress in political arrangements is decline in voter turnout. In competitive national elections across the globe, turnout rose steadily between 1945 and 1990 to 68 per cent but in the 1990s it started to dip down to 64 per cent (IDEA no date). But turnout in elections is only one element indicating a threat to political citizenship, and in order to investigate the issues further we narrow our focus to countries of the European Union and the United States of America.

Europe

Turnout by European voters, in their own national elections, decreased from 88 per cent in 1980 to 74 per cent in 2002 (Schmitter and Treschel 2004). However, there are still significant differences between countries. Within the European Union, eight countries – Portugal, the Netherlands, France, Austria, Finland, Italy, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg – have experienced a clear downward trend in turnout. But in seven countries – Greece, Denmark, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Germany and Ireland – fluctuations in turnout mean no clear pattern can be observed (Rose 2004).

Disengagement is also reflected in the collapse in membership of political parties, a major trend in the mature democracies. In the UK 9 per cent of all registered electors were party members in 1964 but by 1992 it was barely 2 per cent (Webb 2002a: 23). Overall, as Table 1.1 suggests, party membership across Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century is running at just under 4 per cent of the population. A more detailed survey of the position of parties in advanced industrial democracies reveals a decline in members in all countries except Spain and argues more generally ‘there is evidence of a significant level of disaffection with, or cynicism towards, parties’ (Webb 2002a,b: 441). Political parties in many countries struggle to recruit and maintain more than a handful of activists in most localities. Voters themselves have become less partisan and more prone to shift their vote between parties. As activists and voters have moved away from parties a contradiction has developed in the political systems between party systems with weak informal community linkages but strong formal governmental power (Stoker 2006a: 104–7).

Are citizens finding new forms of expressing their politics as the attachment to old mechanisms is fading? Evidence from the European Social Survey again enables us to make a judgement on this point (see Stoker 2006b). What emerges is a picture of citizens still engaging but through relatively thin and sporadic forms of activity. The figures contained in Table 1.1 reveal several things. First, the different practices of political engagement are not something that most people do all the time. On average the most popular forms of political engagement – signing a petition or buying a product to make a political or ethical point – had been undertaken by only a quarter of the participants in the survey in the previous twelve months. However, there are many and various expressions of political activism. Citizens in these advanced industrial societies may not all be active all the time but there are lots of ways in any twelve-month period by which they are trying to make their voices heard. Much of that activity, though, is individually

Table 1.1 Political activism in various European nations

Activity	% engaged in political activity in last twelve months							
	UK	Germany	France	Spain	Italy	Sweden	Denmark	Average across Europe
Contacted politician or official	18.1	12.8	17.6	12.0	12.0	16.5	17.9	14.7
Worked in political party or action group	3.4	3.9	4.9	6.1	3.0	5.0	4.1	4.2
Worn or displayed campaign badge/sticker	9.8	5.8	11.4	9.8	7.3	10.7	5.1	7.7
Signed petition	40.0	30.5	34.8	24.2	17.4	40.8	28.2	25.8
Took part in lawful public demonstrations	4.4	10.6	17.9	17.5	10.9	6.4	8.3	9.3
Boycotted certain products	26.1	26.1	26.6	8.0	7.5	32.5	22.9	17.7
Bought product for political/ethical/environmental reason	32.3	39.2	28.0	11.6	6.5	55.1	43.8	24.4
Donated money to political organization or group	7.8	9.2	2.9	5.3	3.0	6.5	9.1	6.8
Participated in illegal protest activities	0.8	1.1	2.6	1.7	1.8	0.8	1.1	1.3
Member of political party	2.7	3.6	2.3	3.2	3.9	8.2	5.9	3.8

Source: Calculated from data taken from European Social Survey (2002) available at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> [accessed 24 July 2009]. The average figure includes data not only for the countries reported here but an additional sixteen European countries.

focused (based around an act such as boycotting a good or service or contacting an official) rather than collectively organized. Participation in parties, action groups and collective protest pales alongside engagement through signing a petition or using consumer power to make a point.

There are some interesting variations between countries. Consumer power appears to be used less as a political weapon in Italy and Spain. Demonstrations are more popular as a form of political activity in France and Spain than in the UK and Sweden. Membership of political parties is higher in Sweden and Denmark than in France or the UK. But overall the evidence suggests that more collectivistic forms of participation are less prominent than more individualist forms (for further discussions of this in the UK context see Pattie *et al.* 2004).

There are also differences to be observed among different social groups in terms of their political engagement. Turnout in local elections among young people in England is little more than 10 per cent (Electoral Commission 2005) and in the 2005 UK general election only four out of ten 18–25-year olds voted (Electoral Commission 2005). The evidence presented in Table 1.2 from the 2008 Audit of Political Engagement in Britain suggests citizens from professional and managerial social groups are twice as likely as those from unskilled groups to vote, donate to a party or campaign, and four times more likely to have engaged in three or more political activities. A range of ethnic minorities that are now a vital part of British society and their engagement in politics also creates a complex pattern of difference.

Table 1.2 Political activism in 2007: social grades compared

Activity	% AB social class	% DE social class
Propensity to vote	66	34
Contacted elected representative in last two or three years	16	10
Donated to a political party	7	2
Donated to a charity or campaigning organization	52	24
Engaged in three or more political activities in last two or three years	21	5

Note: The social grade definitions as used by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising. A and B social grades include those with professional and managerial jobs. D and E include semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers and those living on the lowest levels of subsistence.

Source: Developed from data in Hansard Society (2008).

The key point is that alongside a general sense of malaise in political engagement there are factions of society that appear to be particularly prone to disengagement.

One commonly observed trend in mature democracies is the decline in deference and the emergence of more critical and educated citizens (Norris 1999). But 'critical' is not the right adjective to explain the dynamics of citizenship that they experience. Citizens are not confident or assertive about politics and are more alienated, confused and in the end cynical. Evidence from the European Social Survey can be used to support this argument (see Stoker 2006a: 119–21). With little observable difference between men and women, a quarter of Europeans think that hardly any politicians care what they think and a further third hold the view that very few politicians care what they think. There was some variation by country but in all countries there appears to be a substantial number of people who believe that politicians do not care what they think. Not surprisingly, there are also substantial numbers of Europeans who do not trust politicians (see Table 1.3). Over one in ten has no trust in politicians and about half express low trust in politicians. Compared to trust in the legal system or the police, politicians fare badly. Again there are differences between countries and between groups inside countries but the overall message is clear: many people don't trust politicians.

Table 1.3 Europeans' trust in the legal system, police and politicians

	Trust in the legal system (%)	Trust in the police (%)	Trust in politicians (%)
No trust at all	5.6	3	11.8
1	3.6	2.1	7.5
2	7.1	3.8	12.6
3	9.7	6	15.8
4	10.4	7.2	13.5
5	18.4	15.4	19.6
6	12.3	13	9.8
7	13.5	17.5	6
8	12	17.8	2.6
9	4.6	8.1	0.6
Complete trust	2.8	6.1	0.3

Source: Data taken from European Social Survey (2002).

The United States

Nye (1997) in a book whose title tells the main story – *Why People Don't Trust Government* – reviews the evidence and shows quite a sharp decline in confidence in government in the United States. In 1964, three quarters expressed confidence in federal government; but by the late 1990s that level had reduced to a quarter, with a similar pattern of decline being replicated at state levels of government. What comes across in the sifting of evidence is a big shift in opinion (Stoker 2006a: 36–7).

The mid-1960s appears to have been the high point in citizen confidence in government and politics in the United States. One US political scientist writing in 1965 reported an increase in trust in government since the 1930s (Lane 1965). He argued that years of affluence had brought contentment and that as a result there had been ‘a rapprochement between men and their government and a decline in political alienation’ (Lane 1965: 895). The author even found that in 1945 a quarter of parents would be happy for their son to go into politics, and that this proportion had gone up to a third by 1965; and he concludes that this positive attitude on the part of a substantial proportion of Americans reflected ‘a growing attitude that political life is both rewarding and honourable’ (Lane 1965: 894). So confident was the author that he went on to predict a ‘growing state of confidence between men and government, perhaps especially between men and politics, during the “Age of Affluence”’. A prediction that has proved to be not one of the better ones made in political science.

In the United States, turnout in presidential elections dropped from 62.8 per cent in 1960 to 51.2 per cent in 2000, although it recovered somewhat in 2004 and 2008. In other elections at state and local levels the evidence is mixed but there are clear signs of a lowering of turnout and of young people in the United States being particularly disinclined to vote (Wattenberg 2002). The evidence about voter turnout needs to be added to the wider and comprehensive evidence of social disengagement and a weakening of civic institutions, collected by Bob Putnam (2000) in his thesis about declining social capital in the United States. Putnam records a roughly 20 per cent drop in the public’s following of current affairs in the last quarter of the twentieth century and a similar level of decline in interest in politics (Putnam 2000: 36). Against a range of measures of political participation, Putnam (2000: 45–6) finds a 25 per cent drop in activity between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. Some remain civic activists and others civic slugs, as Putnam puts it, but there has been a steep decline in the former and a substantial rise in the latter. In the 1960s

most Americans felt they could be politically effective and even in times of crisis were prepared to give their government the benefit of the doubt at least, in respect of its good intentions. But by the 1990s, all that had changed with cynicism becoming a more dominant theme. He argues that the emergence of 'cynical views may or may not be more accurate than the Pollyanna-ish views of the early sixties, but they undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political involvement' (Putnam 2000: 47). In comparative terms, America remains a country of active citizens, but the evidence suggests strongly that it is much less engaged than it was.

The United States is, at the very least, a country not at ease with itself over its politics. Others (Macedo *et al.* 2005: 5) writing under the auspices of the American Political Science Association go further:

American Democracy is at risk. The risk comes not from some external threat but from disturbing trends: an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship. Americans have turned away from politics and the public sphere in large numbers, leaving our civic life impoverished. Citizens participate in public affairs less frequently, with less knowledge and enthusiasm, in fewer venues, and less equally than is healthy for a vibrant democracy

This stark judgement suggests that people are indeed disengaging from formal politics in the United States; and provides little to support the view that a new spread of critical citizen politics has stepped into the vacuum. The Obama campaign in 2008 and the early months of his presidency may have given a lift to many citizens of the United States about the state of politics, but fundamental problems remain observable. In short the evidence from Europe and the United States supports the thesis that there is a malaise in political citizenship.

Explaining Citizen Disenchantment

There has been a considerable amount of debate in the political science community about the factors that are driving the rise of citizen disenchantment. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, there are supply and demand-oriented explanations on offer. We start with those explanations that argue that it is the nature of the politics on offer to citizens that explains their disengagement. These are the dominant and most powerful arguments coming from political science. We then turn to explanations that say that

demand from citizens is also part of the problem and that changes in our culture and practices help to explain our disengagement.

Hay (2007) argues that our politicians are to blame. Not so much because they have shown themselves to be comprehensively sleazy or corrupt but more because they have lost faith in politics themselves. His underlying fear is that our low expectations of politics and politicians – fostered substantially by political elites themselves – have created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our political masters have shot themselves in the foot by swallowing wholesale the economic analysis of politics, coated in a neo-liberal framing of the limits and failings of the state. Their problem which has become our problem is that politics is now interpreted as a game where all players are instrumental and self-interested. The economic analysis of politics has become manifest in the way that politics is presented and sold to us.

Politicians compete not for our souls but for our stomachs: debating with us not values but rather who can give us the best deal. Politics has been reduced to competing marketing campaigns. As voters we are not asked to make a political choice about different political values or programmes but rather to decide whether one lot of politicians are more managerially competent than the next to deliver on their promises to deliver a better life for us. 'Judge me on my performance' the politicians demand. But the difficulty is that we have, with their encouragement, created a blame game that offers a thin and inadequate diet of politics. Every aspiring politician convinces themselves they can deliver what people want, and every citizen wonders if this time they are going to get the real thing: a politician who keeps his promises. But we all know that it will, every time and on every cycle, end in disappointment.

The actions and moves of politicians are constantly interpreted by the politicians and the media through a lens that emphasizes their instrumental, self-interested motivation. The blame game is based on assumptions of instrumental rationality driving human action and in particular the practices of politics. The economic academic analysis of politics has infested the very practice of politics and undermined its capacity to engage people in collective endeavour. It has encouraged us to assume the worst, and politicians and citizens have taken its messages to heart. The gloomy atmosphere is reinforced by the hegemonic domination of neo-liberal thinking that tells us to expect little but failure from the state, the public realm and politics.

On the supply side, the opportunities to engage in collective decision making for citizens have also been squeezed. It is possible to observe three

forms of depoliticization that have become more prominent over the last few decades (Hay 2007). Type 1 is when issues and decisions that were previously the subject of public scrutiny are placed in a public yet non-government sphere. The displacement of decision-making functions to quasi-independent bodies takes politics out of the reach of the ordinary tools of the citizen's political armoury and justifies this shift by arguing that politicians are not to be trusted with certain types of decisions: a double blow to the practice of democratic politics. Type 2 depoliticization is where issues that might have previously been seen as issues of the public realm are moved to that of private concerns to be driven by private choice. The message is: be an active consumer not an active citizen. If you care about the environment make market choices to buy greener goods and services, and if you want better health care then look to the private sector to provide a solution. The final type of depoliticization (Type 3) is where issues are transferred from the realm of political deliberation and choice to the realm of fate and the disavowal of human agency. The forces unleashed by globalization are often depicted in this way. The loss of faith in politics means that alternative ways of legitimizing decisions issues and choices are being taken out of the open realm of democratic collective decision making. Our best hope – we are told – lies in the introduction of market-like incentives to keep politics and public management on the straight and narrow as part of a strategy of depoliticization. The answer lies in less politics and more handing over of decisions to quangos and consumerization of choice. In a difficult-to-control world it's the best we can hope for.

According to Meg Russell in her thoughtful pamphlet, we have failed to come to terms with mass democracy in our culture. She argues that 'the ways that our political culture has adapted itself to modern life have, over time, conspired to erode faith in political rule' (2005: 4). The culture of consumerism has led politicians to offer promises to the public on which they struggle to deliver effectively. Single-issue pressure groups add to the demands made on the political system to deliver without aiding any understanding of the need to balance competing demands. Citizens are given a constant message that suggests that politics is failing and the cynical and simplistic approach of the modern media has also 'played a key part in feeding all these problems' (Russell 2005: 5). The adversarial style of our politics has, when combined with the sense that politicians must permanently campaign, helped to feed distrust.

In my *Why Politics Matters* (Stoker 2006a) I add to the list of supply-side woes about politics. As we have seen, most citizens' engagement has

a sporadic and mundane character. There is nothing wrong with such expressions of citizenship; they are just rather limited. Much engagement is directed towards something that brings personal benefit or perhaps provides an expressive statement about a person's sense of themselves and their identity. These atomized forms of citizenship mean that people often have only a surface engagement with political issues and complexities. There is hope in the range and diversity of engagement in democracies, but there are concerns because of its uneven spread and shallow quality. Most of the real politics is done in a space where we are spectators. It is the sphere of professionals where we are the amateurs.

The professionalization of politics is a potential factor in the demise of political citizenship. The cohesion brought by parties, the advocacy of special interests by the lobby and the challenge and dissent offered through various forms of protest offer vital links in the democratic chain between governors and governed. But all are failing to engage citizens-at-large in politics. Activists are odd people, very much in a minority in our society. They do a lot of the work of politics for us and we should be grateful to them. But the way their organizations work is in part responsible for people's sense of alienation from politics.

As parties have lost membership, they have become reliant on professional campaigners and organizers and operate in a way that treats citizens as passive political observers who just need to be mobilized at election times to back the party (Webb *et al.* 2002). Citizen lobby organizations – such as Friends of the Earth – have large-scale passive memberships and they too rely on professional organizers and experts (Jordan and Maloney 1997). Members fund but the professional politicians in the lobby organizations decide what to campaign on. Citizens are a passive audience to be talked to about particular campaigns through the media and occasionally galvanized to send in letters or cards of support or join a public demonstration based often on rather simplistic messages. Citizens are offered little in terms of depth of analysis or understanding of the issues at stake by these organizations. Even more radical protest organizations tend to be professionalized in the style of behaviour and their use of the media. The occasional engagement by a wider group of citizens in a protest 'event' or rally is in danger of being more a lifestyle statement than a serious engagement with a political debate (De Jong *et al.* 2005).

Politics is about people deciding to take action, but what is the point if the world is so out of control and the challenges so complex that political forces cannot exercise influence over it (Gamble 2000)? In response to complex new challenges politics has had to move into arenas and modes of operating

beyond the everyday capacities of citizens. Globalization has not ended the capacity for politics but it has pushed it into new and more remote settings. Governments at local and national levels can influence global trends but they do so out of sight of most of their citizens. Technological change and the pressures of scientific development again create impacts that politics is only able to contain by moving decision making onto remote and expert terrains. An effective dialogue between science and democracy has not been easy to create, as rows over GM food, global warming or cloning indicate. What is clear is that politics is in challenging and hard times and that as a result it has tended to be practised in arenas remote from the everyday experiences of citizens.

The politics we are offered is thin, narrow in its focus of attention and lacking much capacity for engagement. This dismal offer is, as Hay points out, not surprisingly, rejected by many citizens who wonder why they should bother if this is all that is on offer. Others, including myself, place some emphasis on the demand side of the explanation. The problem is more than that the politics we have been offered is rubbish; it is that we as citizens are, to put it bluntly, pretty rubbish too. The increased discontent with formal politics can be explained by a number of misunderstandings of the political process that have taken hold in the discourse of democracies. Too many citizens fail to appreciate the inherent collective characteristics of politics in an individualized world.

The pressure from the increased prominence given to market-based consumerism in the culture of many democracies has led key aspects of politics being overlooked. Making decisions through markets relies on individuals choosing what suits them. The collective processes that are essential to steer politics and government struggle to deliver against the lionization of individual choice in our societies. Politics if anything attracts as much interest as before, but that interest has been infected by the impact of the increased prominence given to market-based consumerism and more intense individualization in the culture of many democracies. As a form of collective decision making, politics is, even in a democracy, a centralized form of decision making compared to market-based alternatives. Democracy means that you can be involved in the decision, but the decision may not necessarily be your choice; yet you are expected to accept the decision.

Politics as a form of collective decision making relies on voice rather than the market mechanism of exit to enable you to make your views known. If you don't like something you see in a shop you can go elsewhere but in politics the only way to get something is to use voice and that carries far

more costs than exit. But expressing your interest or opinion is only the start of a more general challenge in politics – that of communication. You have to not only make your views known, you also have to listen. Politics is not about individual choice; it is about collective debate. Within it communication is a difficult, time-consuming and problematic business. Knowing what you want and knowing how to get it out of the political system are very testing and complex.

Politics often involves a stumbling search for solutions to particular problems. It is not the most edifying human experience. It's rarely an experience of self-actualization and more often an experience of accepting second-best. It works through a complex process of mutual adjustment as politicians and officials, and others directly involved in government, attempt coping or manipulative modifications to their behaviour in the hope of inducing the right response from others. The results tend to be messy, contingent and inevitably create a mix of winners and losers.

So it turns out that a propensity to disappoint is an inherent feature of governance even in democratic societies. We think that a substantial part of the discontent with politics is because the discourse and practice of collective decision making sits very uncomfortably alongside the discourse and practice of individual choice, self-expression and market-based fulfilment of needs and wants. As a result, too many citizens fail to appreciate the inherent characteristics of the political process in democratic settings. Politics involves two of the hardest human skills: listening carefully to the opinions of others and their expressions of their interests, and maintaining a certain resilience when things do not go right the first time. Doing politics in our large complex societies is bound to create some frustration. Democracy cannot wish away that reality.

The misunderstanding and undervaluing of collective decision making has not been helped by the way that the media – the main carrier of information and understanding about formal politics in the modern world – portrays the political world. There are several aspects of the argument to consider (Lloyd 2004). First, there has been a 'dumbing down' in news coverage which means that people are less likely to understand underlying issues or complexities in respect of politics, and politics can often be seen to fail when what it is delivering is judged in a simplistic framework. Second, the fusing of news reporting and comment, which is a characteristic of modern media coverage of politics, probably feeds a culture where fact, opinion and speculation merge into one another and which lends itself to a cynical take on political life. A third argument is that the media in some countries have actively

spread a culture of contempt; and a fourth argument is that we have seen the emergence of a style of journalism that presents itself as the champion of the people and takes a strongly adversarial position to politicians, asking all the time why this politician is lying to me and you, the viewers and listeners. The first two arguments perhaps hold true across more countries. The last two arguments are much more difficult to establish but may hold for some countries – of which the UK would be a prime candidate.

We can quite happily combine supply and demand-side explanations for the malaise in political citizenship. The way that politics is practised today leaves too great a gap between governors and governed. Most of us are judging politicians from afar and through a distorted lens. The sense of moral outrage that pervades our reaction to politics I think reflects the fact that in most mature democracies most people have little if any direct involvement in politics. Most people experience politics as spectators and through the eyes and ears of the media. The result of this alienated disengagement is that many citizens are able to combine a substantial level of cynicism about politics with occasional outbursts of moral indignation as to its failings and frustrations. Any UK readers can simply look back to May 2009 and the spectacularly negative public reaction to the way that some MPs had used and abused the House of Commons expenses and allowances regime (Kelso 2009) to remind themselves of how quickly disengagement can turn to anger in a culture pervaded by a strong sense of anti-politics.

Can We Challenge Anti-politics? Developing a Response

We should not imagine that we can do without politics. You might argue that politics persists only because humans make the wrong choices. If they followed the right path, set down by religion or some other moral guide, they would all choose the same thing and as a result politics would not be necessary. You might alternatively argue that politics operates only in societies that are structured so that people's interests are fundamentally opposed, but that it might be possible to structure a society where people's interests were always aligned and as a result politics would not be required. The former argument has at various times been made by some religious and other moralizing opinion leaders. The latter is one used by some radicals and utopians of various hues. Neither is particularly convincing to me and neither can take much succour from the historical record to date. There is little to suggest that human beings or human societies are perfectible, as implied by these contrasting understandings.

Given human society, as it has been and as it might reasonably be expected to be in the future, we could argue that people will make judgements about what is right for themselves and for others and that there is no reason to assume that those judgements will be shared. Equally, it is clear that as humans we need to find ways to act together, to engage in collective action, to resolve the problems and challenges of living together. It is an integral part of human nature to value the opportunity to be involved in decisions about issues that affect you. We will differ about what the outcomes could or should be but somehow in a democracy we need to sustain a commitment to the process and institutions of politics. To argue for political citizenship in a democracy it is not necessary to make assumptions, then, about citizens' willingness to pursue the common good. 'Rather than seeing democracy as a device for discovering or manufacturing the common good, democracy can be understood as a device for managing the power dimensions of activities people engage in as they pursue their own – individual or shared – conceptions of the good' (Shapiro 2002: 240).

As Michael Walzer (2004: 103) puts it, political decisions are inherently and permanently conflictual:

Very few political decisions are verdicts in the literal sense of that term. I don't mean that we can't sometimes insist that it is morally right and perhaps imperative to do X; but even people who agree on the necessity of doing X are likely to disagree about how to do it, or how soon, or at whose expense ... Permanent settlements in politics are rare in political life because we have no way of reaching a verdict on contested issues.

Politics as a result often requires messy compromises that are presented through 'smoke and mirrors' to bridge conflicting interests and values. Deliberation and the open exchange of different ideas are part of politics but they do not capture the roundness of its practice. Politics is a sustained battle of interests and ideas and claims for influence, accountability and scrutiny. It is an inherent reflection of our plurality and difference as human beings. Its nobility is in its capacity to enable us to manage our mutual interdependence, but its practice is often laboured, dull and untidy, muddled and occasionally dirty. So part of the message to our fellow citizens has to be to learn to live with it. So while Shapiro is right to suggest that citizenship does not demand that you pursue the common good, it does demand that you recognize politics is a collective process in which you must be willing to show a spirit of compromise and an understanding of others' positions and

interests. Citizens need to accept some responsibility for the whole as well as take care to express their interests. Politics and political citizenship demands a public morality of taking into account the views of others and adjusting one's position to enable a settlement even if that settlement is not accepted as permanent.

How could we create a political culture that provided support for such an understanding? We need a political culture that is able to live with and manage contradictory forces. Perhaps what we need to do is find a new path to reconciling parochial, subject and participant cultures. Citizens need to be more directly involved in political processes, so the participant impulse needs to be supported. In subject mode they need to judge the outcomes of the political process with less of a consumerist impulse and more of a perspective reflecting on the public interest. Finally, an element of parochialism may be required from citizens both to concentrate on things that they can influence and to become more accepting of the complexity of the political system, its messiness and disappointments. To reconcile ourselves to contradictions of political citizenship in a globalized democratic age citizens may need to acquire a degree of positive fatalism: hoping that something positive will emerge from our political exchanges but not being terribly surprised when it does not.

We could try to shift the culture of elite politics as a first step. Meg Russell (2005: 55–8) proposes a new political charter in which politicians are encouraged to be more honest about their mistakes. They would need to explain the hard choices that need to be made and the constraints faced by decisionmakers, and be more generous to their opponents in not making exaggerated or unnecessary attacks and campaigning responsibly and in a way that does not exploit citizens' distrust. She adds that media coverage and citizens' attitudes to politics will also need to change. But her optimism that such a new political culture could take hold needs to be tempered by a recognition that when activists do their politics they do so with a mix of motives from passion for a cause to self-interest. But above all they campaign, demonstrate, bargain, organize and do the mundane work of filling out envelopes and making phone calls in order to win. There are no neutrals in politics and to ask activists to forgo potentially winning strategies may be asking for too much.

Many argue that there may be ways of re-engaging people in politics directly, and this was a central theme that Stoker developed in his call for a new politics for amateurs in *Why Politics Matters* (Stoker 2006a). The 'Make Poverty History' (MPH) protest in the summer of 2005 could

be seen as an exemplar of the new politics of engagement. It powerfully connected campaigning with formal representative politics, and did so in way that reached out to millions of people who were relative novices in the political process over an issue of high moral import. There are lessons that can be drawn from that campaign if we are interested in a re-moralizing of politics and restoring trust in the political process (McNeill 2006). The first is that hope sells rather than guilt. MPH convinced people that they could do something to make a difference to improve the lot of the world's poor. Second, it built very deliberately from the bottom up and then tried to link visionary leadership to that base, but the base was around the local school-gate, bus stops, places of work rather than the elite institutions of politics. Finally, its message was one of rehabilitation and renewal as converts to the cause were welcomed from all quarters and not derided for making a U-turn or because they were latecomers.

Not all politics can be packaged in the same way as the MPH campaign, but it stands out as a politics that successfully brought together the formal institutions of governance and the informal power of civil society. There are other examples from across the world. Graham Smith (2009) shows how a number of public authorities worldwide have sponsored and organized innovative forms of citizen engagement, developing a range of designs including participatory budgeting, mini-publics (randomly selected assemblies), direct legislation and e-democracy initiatives (see Chapter 2, for a further development of this argument). (see Chapter 2)

However, even if we did find ways of drawing in to a degree more citizens into decision making, the bulk of citizens could still remain observers rather than practitioners of active political citizenship. The big unknown is how these observers come to understand politics and whether they could develop a complex and nuanced understanding of its practices. Even if we convince citizens that politics is not all about politicians narrowly pursuing their self-interests in a cycle of ineffectual games, we still need them to understand that politics is an awkward and difficult process.

Future Research Challenges

We would be more confident about prescribing remedies for the maladies of our political citizenship if we did not recognize that when it comes to reform strategies we are slightly pitching in the dark. We don't know enough about the problem to know what the answer might be. We have general explanations about what might be going wrong but not enough direct evidence from citizens themselves. As Hay (2007: 162) argues in terms of

the silent majority, we 'know very little ... about the cognitive process in and through which (they) come to attribute motivations to the behaviour (they) witness, or how (they) come to develop and revise assumptions about human nature (they) project on to others. If politics depends ultimately on our capacity to trust one another ... then there can be no more important questions for political analysts than these'. As Van Wessel (2009) argues, 'insights on what politics means to citizens are largely derived rather than based on research that more directly tells us what politics means to citizens'. Hay and Stoker (2009: 227) comment that:

... despite the unprecedented contemporary interest in the sources of political disengagement and disaffection, we lack a real understanding of how citizens understand politics. Any strategy for revitalising politics needs to take seriously the issue of how politics is perceived by citizens. We know a fair amount about what kinds of political activity people engage in and what factors drive that activity. We can offer some reasonable evidence – informed insights into issues such as electoral turnout and election outcomes. What political science – and the social sciences in general – is less good at understanding and explaining is what politics means to citizens at the beginning of the 21st century.

We need to expend more empirical effort in trying to find out what our fellow citizens understand by the practice of politics. We have some helpful starting points. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) provide one study of US citizens, drawing upon an opinion survey and some focus groups, to show that people often have a very naïve understanding of the way that politics works. Citizens struggle to see the world through the eyes of others, and are fearful that somehow they are going to be tricked or duped by the political process. The authors also identify a number of potential cognitive stumbling blocks in the path of greater political engagement. When people do meet in associations and groups they often, for fear of stimulating too much controversy or open discussion of troubling issues, put a lot of pressure on members to stick to a limited range of topics and matters where regular, unassuming citizens can feel at home and unchallenged. People in associations and groups as a result tend to confine their interactions to a limited set of topics and more practical issues, in part as a means of coping with the unknown views of group members and the uncertainty created by conflict and division. They prefer to stick to issues nearer at hand and to the uncontroversial, and in other instances gravitate towards groups that are populated by like-minded

people. Open systems of participation and engagement can leave people feeling humiliated and brow-beaten. People may be required to open up in a way that they do not feel comfortable with. Many people do not react well when faced by opposing views. They find it very challenging, preferring instead to believe that most people agree with them. When faced by opposing views they can clam up and go into a spiral of silence. Examining the cognitive maps of our fellow citizens shows many approach politics with a set of limiting coping devices, a degree of caution and, in some cases, where the context is uncertain, some trepidation.

The Hibbing and Theiss-Morse study is unusual in its focus on what citizens make of politics. Van Wessel (2009) produces some interesting and parallel findings in a small-scale study of twenty Dutch citizens. There is scope for a significant amount of further empirical work. An important new direction in political science has a base and we need to move off in the direction provided by these studies if we are to understand and respond to the issue of anti-politics. While we are waiting for that further research, let me offer some first thoughts on a reform strategy informed by an understanding of the perception of citizens.

The negative response to politics may be a very human reaction to the way politics works. But we cannot be sure of that understanding unless we spend more time researching with citizens. We can confidently say that a viable sense of political citizenship has been lost by many of our fellow citizens, but we need to be a lot clearer and better informed about what to do about it.