The Democratic Contribution of Group-Led Mobilization in the UK

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Abstract

The evidence of greater interest group mobilization (while 'parties decline') is usually assumed to be compelling: it is a cliché to refer to the explosion in the number and support levels of groups. It is further assumed that this is an indicator of democratic health, but this is contestable. The idea that a citizen is better engaged with the political system by group affiliation (as opposed to party affiliation – and activity) deserves detailed examination. An empirically-based assessment of the 'group contribution' (as opposed to 'first principles' approval) needs to examine the consequences of expanded group numbers.

Recent years have witnessed the decline of 'classic secondary associations' and the growth of *tertiary associations* (Putnam, 2000) AKA *protest businesses* (Jordan and Maloney, 1997) that essentially offer checkbook participation. Drawing on interviews with campaign group leaders and survey evidence with groups, this paper addresses the extent to which groups should be valued as representative institutions? It explores the consequences of group-led supply-side mobilization that almost exclusively generates 'thin' checkbook participation. Is checkbook participation an adequate substitute for a fuller participatory role? Is such vicarious participation democratically useful? Rather than 'little democracies' in which civic skills and social capital are generated, are groups actually venues of very little democracy?

Introduction

Traditionally political parties were seen as superior mobilization and participatory vehicles. Schattschneider (1942: 1; 193) famously argued:

> … political parties … have been the *makers* of democratic government … political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties … By every democratic principle the parties, as mobilizers of majorities, have claims on the public more valid and superior to those asserted by pressure groups which merely mobilize minorities.

However, Schattschneider's confidence in the merit of party-based activity is now widely questioned – political parties are increasingly viewed as 'damaged democratic goods'. Across several measures support for parties is waning and Norris (2002) refers to the rise of 'critical citizens' who are 'less loyalist and deferential towards mass-branch parties'. Mair (2006: 12) forcefully demonstrated that parties are 'failing' in the most fundamental way: *i.e.* no longer engaging ordinary citizens at past levels. Voter turnout is down, there is less 'partisan consistency', partisan identification is weakening, and party membership is declining. Mair (2006: 16) notes that, '… within the great majority of west European democracies, most, and sometimes even all of the individual national elections that are marked by record low turnout have occurred since 1990 ... however small the overall shifts in turnout might be, they are nevertheless clustering together in a remarkable fashion'.[1] He (2006: 17-18) further notes that electoral volatility peaked in the 1990s '… not only do more than half of the record national highs in volatility fall in this period (since 1990), but it is also noteworthy that no other decade comes even close to matching this clustering'. Finally, Mair and van Biezen (2001) demonstrated that the ratio of party membership to the electorate in *each* of the 13 established European democracies fell '… markedly between the beginning of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s'. Over the period the average fell from 10 to 6 per cent (cited in Mair, 2006: 20).[2] This trend receives further confirmation from the data on the absolute numbers of party members in the

[1] In the 1945-2005 period, the highest General Election turnout was in 1950 (83.9%) and the lowest in 2001 (59.4%).

[2] Mair (2006: 20) found that in the early 1960s in the 10 long-established European democracies (with reliable membership data) the average membership ratio was 14 per cent. By the end of the 1990s drawing on data from 20 democracies the average was 5 per cent.

10 long-established European democracies. In all these cases the absolute number fell, '… 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'. (The Labour Party peaked in 1952 at 1,014,000 and now stands at, or below 200,000[3] [*Guardian Unlimited*, 12th June 2007 suggested a fall to 177,000 in 2007.]. The Conservative's highpoint was in 1953 at 2,806,000 and by 2006 was circa 250,000. The ballot on David Cameron's *Built to Last* mission statement suggested 247,394 activists were eligible to vote. [from 24dash.com 2006; see also Scarrow, 1996 and 2000]).[4] Mair (2006: 20) concluded, 'Throughout the old democracies … parties were simply haemorrhaging members'.[5]

While political parties have been 'suffering' groups appear to have been 'flourishing'. There has been an expansion in the number of groups and membership levels: **i.** the 2006 Directory of British Associations[6] lists some 7755 organizations, 48 per cent of which were formed between 1966-1995; and **ii.** many familiar brand-name groups such as Amnesty, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have all generated memberships in excess of 100,000 (at it's membership peak in 1992/93 Greenpeace

[3] This figure probably includes those whose membership had lapsed in the previous 6 months. *The Guardian* (April 12, 2004) reported that UK parties claimed the following memberships: Conservatives 300,000; Labour 248,294; Liberal Democrats 70,000; Scottish Nationalists 16,122; Plaid Cymru 8,750 and Greens 6,000. A grand total of 649,166.

[4] Parties appear so keen on increasing citizen contact that the Labour Party has launched *The Labour Supporters Network* (LSN) which is described as '… a way for people to register their support for Labour without having to join the party. It's free to register and enables our supporters to be kept up to date on the latest events and news from Labour' [http://www.labour.org.uk/labour_supporters_network, accessed 1 August 2007.

[5] Mair (2005: 8) argues that citizens are '… becoming involved in other areas of social and political behaviour'. He quotes Pattie *et al*.'s (2004: 107) point that the focus on the fall in participation in conventional political institutions – rather than broader activity – has lead to an exaggerated sense of the 'public exit from civic behaviour'. (The Report of the Rowntree Power Inquiry, *Power to the People* (2006) also stressed the 'myth of apathy' – arguing that the decline is in the area of electoral and formal politics rather than in general.) Norris (2002: xi) rejected the civic erosion thesis, maintaining that caution should be exercised with regard to Golden Age visions of a time when all town hall meetings were packed, all voting booths overflowing etc. Pattie *et al* (2004: 51-52) found that over 75% of their respondents engaged in one or more political actions (in the previous 12 months) and the mean number of individual actions was 3.6. When chequebook involvement (simply donating more) was excluded from the analysis the mean remained high at 2.7. Pattie *et al.* (2004: 80) concluded that '… contrary to the claims of political apathy, people frequently participate in activities designed to influence political outcomes'.

[6] The Directory of British Associations (CBD: 2006) '… includes information on national associations, societies, institutes and similar organizations in all fields of activity which have a voluntary membership'.

had over 400,000 members), while others such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) have (respectable) membership levels around the 50,000 mark. A relative newcomer such as the Countryside Alliance has over 100,000 ordinary members and 250,000 associate members and the textbook examples of the National Trust for England and Wales has 3.5 million members and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) just over 1 million. Hall (2002: 25) suggests that the average number of associational memberships in Britain grew by 44% between 1959 and 1990.

These data support the argument that party systems have found it difficult to deal effectively with citizens' expectations and a changing class structure. While parties have assimilated new issues within their programmes, the public do not fall neatly into two, three or four partisan camps. Many issues cross-cut constituencies and groups with narrower niches excel at capturing the *intensity of interest* of a fragmented public. Such a perspective sees the strength of parties and groups as inversely related (Schattschneider, 1942; Almond and Verba, 1963; Lawson and Merkl, 1988; Schlozman and Tierney, 1986). Thus a widespread view emerged that the mobilization of a large number of groups – particularly campaign groups, public interest groups, citizen groups – has offset the undesirable consequences of reduced party activity. For example, Saurugger (2007: 388) makes the optimistic claim that, 'In situations where political parties do not supply adequate access to citizens, allowing them to participate in the decision-making process, organized civil society (read interest groups[7]) can offer opportunities for such participation'.

[7] For example, Friedrich (2007: 11) cites Nanz and Steffek's (2005: 382) deliberative tradition-type definition of a civil society organisation as '… a non-governmental, non-profit organizations that has a clearly stated purpose, legal personality and pursues its goals in non-violent ways. Apart from activist organizations this definition includes social partner (i.e. trade unions and employers associations), consumer associations, charities, grass roots organizations and religious communities'. As he (2007: 12) concludes, 'On purely empirical grounds there seems to be no reason not to call these organizations 'interest groups' …'.

Changing Expectations of Groups

In the post-Putnam social capital era groups are seen as delivering for democracy on two main counts (and several other subsidiary, but important, ways). First, they are regarded as offering effective representation and securing overall public policy outcomes that better 'fit' to citizens' preferences (cf the mid-20th century pluralist celebration of groups). Second, there is now a strong expectation that groups should offer opportunities for face-to-face interaction to enhance social integration and democracy. Groups in this view should be Tocquevillian 'schools of democracy' that engender cooperation, accommodation, trust, reciprocity; inculcate members with pro-democratic values, attitudes and beliefs; deliver opportunities for social and political participation; and act as vehicles of self-government within which citizens can meaningfully participate in decision that affect them.

However, (the empirical) questions remains about the extent to which groups can in practice *deliver democracy*. In the US Rosenstone and Hansen (1993: 126) identified declines in participation in political parties **and** groups. While Putnam (2000) argued that the US has been subject to civic erosion (or the 'Bowling Alone' thesis). Paradoxically recent years have witnessed the proliferation of groups and the simultaneous decline of *meaningful* citizen involvement. Classic secondary associations have been superceded by *Protest Businesses* (Jordan and Maloney, 1997; Skocpol, 2003). Mass membership organizations (Greenpeace or FoE) may make an important contribution to the policy-making process, but according to scholars such as Putnam (1993, 2000) do little to enhance political or social integration. The vast majority of supporters of these pseudo 'membership' groups and supporters limit their involvement to signing a cheque or a direct debit instruction (automated payment). Members are simply financial patrons of professionalized pressure and lobbying. These groups are elite dominated and few supporters attend meetings, there is no face-to-face interaction and supporters may lack voting or other (internal) democratic rights.

From a democratic standpoint such participation appears suspect. Two major participation studies – Verba *et al*. (1995) (US) and Pattie *et al.* (2004) (UK) – found that chequebook participation was a very popular form of political involvement – with the public. Verba *et al* commented, '… [f]or many people, political activity consists of giving money and nothing else'. While Pattie *et al.* found that: donation was the most popular activity – 62% of the respondents had donated money and 30% had raised funds for a group. In short, the critique is that these organizations offer *astroturf* as opposed to *grass-roots* participation (Cigler and Loomis, 1991 & 1995) or what Barber (1984) labels *thin democracy*, which '… neither the pleasures of participation nor the fellowship of civic association ... a politics of static interests, never a politics of transformation; a politics of bargaining and exchange, never a politics of invention and creation ...".

However the internal nature of modern organizations themselves can be seen as causing a further participatory retreat. Thus the (democratic) contribution of groups in generating participatory habits is less effective than might be assumed because in practice groups have found that *less internal participation is actually an attractive quality in generating large-scale support*. In short, it may be that group membership has become a devalued democratic currency as the role of the 'member' is reduced to that of financial donor? An exaggerated respect accorded to parties as democratically useful institutions may have been replaced by a too uncritical faith in groups. Thus the question remains: To what extent can groups *deliver democracy?*

The Importance of the Supply-Side Dimension

The core premise is that groups are not neutral conduits for spontaneous political activity, but crucially, groups *stimulate* participation. As Nagel (1987: 3-4) puts it:

> While spontaneous popular action warms the heart of any good democrat, a moment's reflection shows that the people initiate little of what we normally call participation … Acts of participation are stimulated by elites – if not by government, then parties, interest groups, agitators, and organizers'.

Groups utilize professionalized recruitment and marketing strategies – media technology, direct mail, the internet and 'direct dialogue'. Checkbook participation is not spontaneous, but reflects, in Schier's (2000) terms, targeted *activation* strategies rather than mobilization. He (2000: 43) sees activation as the 'unsavoury' offspring of mobilization:[8] 'Those who respond to activation strategies are often an unrepresentative lot' (see below). *These changes have transformed the implications, and nature, of group support*. 'Segmented mobilization', or his preferred term 'activation', involves targeting a specific sub-set of potential participants who are most likely to join. It reflects the more efficient use of organizational resources permitted via modern technology and communication systems. The stress on groups supplying membership attempts to explain the large increases in membership for some public interest groups: support is not an autonomous indicator of public concerns. The ten-fold increase in membership of the RSPB in the UK between 1971 and 2007 from 98,000 to 1 million reflects its professionalized recruitment and fund-raising techniques. Rather than an independent pro-bird change in public attitudes. Law concludes that: '… most of the current million members of the RSPB are … recruited through direct mail and other modern marketing techniques.' Groups seek to lower the cost of participation and to increase potential members' positive evaluation of the group 'good'. The group can affect predisposition towards group goals; economic ability to pay; frequency of the consideration of joining; the perception of monetary and time costs; the value of collective goods and collective bads; and perceptions of personal efficacy. These are factors that groups seek to manipulate.

It is worth emphasising that these professionalized public interest groups are particularly important in the argument about participation because they produce the large numbers of 'members' that appear so impressive in discussions about the decline of party and the creation of alternative modes of participation.

[8] Schier (2000: 24) identifies three large factors accounting for the decline of widespread mobilization strategies in favour of activation strategies, '(1) the decline of party influence in the electoral process and among voters, (2) the proliferation of interest groups since 1960, and (3) transformations in the technology of politics …'.

Central to supply-side thesis is that groups 'recruit' specific types of members and in many instances do not simply 'receive' members. The 'science' of recruitment means that the identification of a particularly distinctive subset of citizens can be very detailed. Groups target individuals most likely to join. They buy lists of *warm names* – individuals whose lifestyle or purchasing habits suggest that they may be predisposed to join. As Shaiko (1999: 184) highlights a target list could include a the names of individuals '… with the following characteristics: white, female, married with grown children out of the home, Gold Card holder, home owner, registered Democrat, household income over $100,000 purchases merchandise through catalog mail-ordering, contributes money to political campaigns, wears glasses, reads *Newsweek*, and drive a foreign car'. Groups also swap lists with other kindred organizations. Verba *et al.* (1995) note that frequently individuals become active 'because someone asked'. However, it is not simply a question of being asked, but more importantly who is being asked. Groups target specific individuals and the asking is skewed. Organizations seek an attainable membership: not simply the predisposed, but those who have the necessary disposable income to fully indulge such predispositions. In most cases a subpopulation is selected because it resembles the existing membership and is susceptible to an appeal that clones the existing membership population. Elsewhere we (Jordan and Maloney, 2006) reported evidence from our survey of what we term the *concerned unmobilized*: i.e. citizens that exhibited strong support for the environment, but who were not members of any environmental organization. We found striking difference in the likelihood of citizens being asked to join an environmental organization on the basis of their socio-demographic profiles. In short, those with the most resources were more likely to be invited to join. For example, 12% of those with household incomes below £20,000 said that they had been asked to join an environmental organization (but refused). The figure for those earning in excess of £20,000 was almost double: 23%. Thus a self-reinforcing process of *segmented mobilization* witnesses groups recruiting on the basis of their existing membership profiles. Organizations get the membership they seek and the democratic implications are clear. Group leaders and entrepreneurs decide who to invite to participate. That is those most likely to join – why waste the

recruitment effort and scarce organizational resources on those unlikely join. If only 5,000 people are seriously interested and can afford to buy an Aston Martin – why send brochures to all potential car purchasers?

Remedying a 'Democratic Deficit'?

The Protest Business-type characterization that sees supporters mobilized, recruited and organized by business-like groups has been underscored in research by Bosso (2003) and Skocpol (2003) in the US and Evans (1995) and Lowe (2001) in the UK. Bosso (2003) suggested that 'In the main … mature advocacy organizations closely fit the notion of a "protest business"…'. Evans' work on Charter 88 and Lowe *et al.*'s on the CPRE are consistent with the "We Act – They Support" model. Checkbook participation has become the norm. It is also seen by groups are the most efficient way to mobilize and more crucially from a civil society perspective many citizens see such limited involvement as *attractive*. As we argued in detail in Jordan and Maloney, (2007: 160-161) on the demand-side, most members/supporters '… are content to embrace a politically marginal role and contract-out their participation' to groups and many do not see membership of groups as a means of being 'active in politics'. Survey evidence from the early 1990s of AIBS or FoE supporters found that very few saw their involvement as a means of being 'active in political issues': circa 70% of FoE and Amnesty members said it largely or wholly irrelevant in their decision to join (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). This view was echoed by group leaders interviewed several years later. For example, a RSPB representative stated that:

> … most (members) want to support nature conservation financially through their subscriptions and through appeals. So I think they really see us as the organization that acts on their behalf to ensure that wild birds in the places that they live are looked after and protected. So 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 ...

For many supporters 'inactivity' is a 'benefit' and they would consider leaving organizations that sought to impose the 'cost' of active participation in group

activities.[9] The CPRE representative interviewed argued that their group positively encourages active involvement, but many members view this as an additional (possibly an *exit*) cost. The representative said the organization treads very carefully in trying to activate supporters:

> 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 ... My remit has been to develop a supporter base as opposed to a member base. It's much easier to recruit people who just want to pay money than recruit individuals into an organizations where they potentially see it as a time-related activity which they don't have time to do basically ... 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".

A corollary of checkbook involvement is weak internal democracy. If fact, many groups are unashamedly oligarchical. The Ramblers' Association's democratic proposition is, 'Join our group if you support our policy positions' – not, 'Join us and determine our policies …'. While a CPRE representative stated bluntly:

> … they (members) don't make policy, the policy is made within the organization, but they are the sort of watchdog to make sure that what we're doing is sound … We're a particular organization that believes in a particular set of values, 'Come along and join us if you agree with us'. It's not a case of tampering with our message or changing our message to suit potential supporters. We believe in a particular cause and its 'come and join us' on that basis.

The critique of the democratic contribution of organized interests is not limited simply to the interest group universe. Newer entities with more normatively progressive/positive neologisms – *e.g.* NGOs or civil society organizations – suffer many of the same democratic flaws. As Saurugger's (2007, forthcoming, 2009) Michalowitz's (2004), Sudbery's (2003) and Warleigh's (2001) research has demonstrated NGOs are not necessarily superior to 'old-fashioned' interest groups on the internal democracy dimension. In his study of NGOs in the development policy area active at the EU level Warleigh (2001) found that most groups were 'wanting' in

[9] Of course for some active participation is a benefit of membership.

terms of their internal democratic procedures. He (2001: 631) argued that the 'internal governance' of many NGOs:

> … is far too elitist to allow supporters a role in shaping policies, campaigns and strategies … Almost all of their officers considered citizens who send them money or volunteer their services to be 'supporters' or 'friends' rather than members. Decision-making about lobbying or campaigning was heavily centralized, and shaped entirely by the relevant officers … NGO officers were often perplexed when asked about their accountability … no interviewee considered that his/her NGO was primarily accountable to its supporters.

Sudbery (2003: 90) quoted a senior representative of the European Environment Bureau (EEB), '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'. Finally, Warleigh (2001: 623) noted, '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'.

Even in organizations where internal democratic procedures are institutionalized: internal democracy does not always thrive. In many large-scale organizations there may be elections for office holders and AGMs, but only a miniscule proportion of the membership will want to *consume* such involvement. Amnesty International, UK has some 150,000 members (and 100,000 supporters), however, around 500 members attend the AGM. The RSPB's AGM attract under 1,000 members.

In practice groups have found that *less internal participation is actually an attractive quality in generating large-scale support*. Organizations with active internal 'noise' about group direction may be distracted from direct policy impact. Many large groups "sell protest" and these organizations see supporters as providing the necessary resources for them to get on with the professional business of campaigning. Large-scale groups seek to limit membership involvement for many reasons. Lansley (1996: 222-223) identified the following six factors. First, *size* creates logistical problems. It is impracticable (and impossible) to involve large numbers of members in a group's

work. By necessity groups are drawn to staff-run/dominated structures. Secondly, *the degree or complexity* or the depth of professionalization. The division of labour in large-scale groups will be predicated on specialization. Thirdly, Lansley says, Michels' ([1915], 1959) 'iron law' also operates in these groups. As they have evolved into large organizations ('who says organization, says oligarchy') *differentiation* and *specialization* have seen some players recognized as carrying out key tasks and duties and gaining power and control. Fourthly, the *organizational structure – i.e.* the degree of centralization or decentralization – is important. Groups that have a regional structure comprising local branches and chapters have greater room for member involvement: *i.e.* the CPRE – although in many cases this does not lead to a policy-making role in the organization. Fifthly, the *ideological commitment* of members is relevant. If members actively seek out groups or join because of a strong commitment to the cause then there may be greater pressure on the leadership to either pay close attention to their concerns or to offer internal democracy. If the ideological commitment of members is weak, or if the group has used sophisticated marketing techniques to recruit members, then members may make little demands on the organization. Sixthly, legal restrictions or organizational constitutions may limit the degree of membership involvement.

In addition to those factors noted by Lansley (1996) there are several other reasons why organizations seek no strings attached financial support rather than an active democratically-imbued membership. Servicing a membership can be a drain on organizational resources – members are more expensive than supporters or donors. Moreover being a supporter- as opposed to a member-based organization circumvents the problems of internal democracy and policy interference. Finally, and importantly, the growth of patronage has undercut the need for members.[10] Cigler and Nownes (1995: 82-84) found that 50 per cent of the public interest groups they surveyed received 50 per cent of their funds from patronage. The figure for membership fees was 36 per cent. Greenwood (2007: 343) notes that at the EU level '… the

[10] 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.

Commission spends approximately 1 percent (€1bn) on funding groups and almost the entire (300) citizen interest group universe (excluding Greenpeace) mobilized at the EU level receives some EU funding. Some groups are close to being almost entirely solvent on the basis of EU money (*e.g.* 80-90 percent of the funding of the European Network Against Racism and the European Social Platform comes from EU institutions and Social Platform organizations receive 60-90 percent of their funding from EU sources)' (Greenwood, 2007: 343-344). Interestingly, even city-based associations are heavily dependent on nonmembership income. Kriesi (2006) reported that in six medium-sized European cities[1] on average only 38 per cent of voluntary associations' income came from membership dues and 10 per cent from donations. Some 12 per cent came from government sources and a further 8 per cent from sales of services.

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 Crenson and Ginsberg (2002: 147) argue, 'The new politics of policymaking attempts to open itself "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 this was partly driven by the professionalization of public agencies. While Saurugger (2007: 397) notes similar 'civil society' trends. The more efficient groups are at:

> … representing their interests in a constructive, precise and coherent manner, the more influence they exert. These activities, however, require major expertise on the group's and movement's side which contributes to modeling the style of militancy and leads to greater internal professionalization. Thus, the organizational structures of civil society have reformed to match better the perceived access structure of the European political system … 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" (Saurugger, 2007: 397-398).[11]

[11] While Grande (2002: 130) makes the point that professionalized representation in the EU could be '… justified for reasons of system effectiveness, but the democratic quality of their activities is dubious

In this respect it appears that the groups have responded to the changing policy-making context. Affecting outcomes appears to require less membership muscle and more policy expertise and professionalism. Or as Bosso (2003: 410) puts it, 'It may be cynical to say so, but what use are 'members' when lawyers, scientists, and policy experts are far more valuable in day-to-day policy debates … members *as such* are little more than organizational wallpaper, a collective backdrop for professional advocacy'. Finally, Skocpol (2003: 134) neatly summarises the recent general trends:

> … the very model of what counts as effective organization in US politics and civic life has changed very sharply. No longer do most leaders and citizens think of building, or working through, state and nationwide federations that link face-to-face groups into state and national networks. If a new cause arises, entrepreneurs think of opening a national office, raising funds through direct mail and hiring pollsters and media consultants … Organizational leaders have little time to discuss things with groups of members. *Members are a nonlucrative distraction*.

In short, why spend a great deal of organizational resources seeking and servicing members, when patronage permits fully focussed professional lobbying?

Supply-Side Participation: Can it be all 'bad'?

The story so far has presented a bleak interpretation of the role of organized interests – interest groups, civil society organizations, NGOs etc. – in terms of their representative and participatory credentials. Few are paragons of participatory democracy. However, do these organizations have any redeeming representative or participatory features? Clearly, they do not have a fully empowered membership because of the absence of formal *voice*. However, the *exit* option can be seen as a significant threat and maintains a link between leaders and followers. Hirschman (1970: 21), writing about organizations generally, noted:

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from the perspective of both representative and participatory models of democracy' (quoted in Saurugger, forthcoming, 2009).

> … the exit option is widely held to be uniquely powerful: by inflicting revenue losses on delinquent management, exit is expected to induce that 'wonderful concentration of the mind' akin to the one Samuel Johnson attributed to the prospect of being hanged.

Some may view this *democratic form* as superficial. However, many protest business organizations are involved in a fierce competition to attract and retain supporters/members.[12] Loyalty is particularly important to these groups because there is high membership turnover: significant proportions of 'their' support operate on a revolving-door basis. These groups make membership easy and *easy entry may mean easy exit*. As Euchner (1996: 124) notes, 'members' need to '… be recruited over and over again'.[13] This competition could be presented as ensuring responsiveness and effective representation *of* supporters' interests. If the leadership gets too far out of step with supporters, there may be no followers left to lead. The perspective adopted here echoes Salisbury's (1992) view that interest groups are distinctive because members or supporters can potentially exercise control of leaders through 'exit'. Many groups take great care to try and prevent supporters/members from taking the exit decision by engaging in internal polling (and other opinion gathering methods) to help shape policies. Warleigh (2001: 631) reported that the NGO Stonewall regularly surveyed members on their opinions about specific issues. He argued that the surveys '… were used to fine-tune campaigns (but not to choose their subject or objectives)'. The former Director of RSPB, Baroness Young, summarized the organization's perspective:

> We have always regarded ourselves not as an organization that is run by its membership but an organization supported by its members. Our role is to say, 'right, what needs to happen for the conservation of our environment and *how can we sell it to people*? … [but] we will not actually get into a policy area unless we have got a clear 'bird route' through it. So we will not, for example, pick up a general pollution issue if it is not a pollution issue that has a major

[12] In the interest group marketplace in order to be successful groups attempt to occupy a particular niche position in distinction to their competitors. In many instances this market niche leads the organization to seek a narrow membership. The more 'exclusive' membership may be attracted to the group because it is *purer* than some large-scale organization that may have to make internal (and external) compromises to aggregate interests, or maintain an advantageous position in the policy-making process.

[13] As Dunleavy (1991: 54) has noted, public choice accounts tend to perceive 'group joining as a one-off problem'. In fact, the rejoining decision often appears to 'undo' the initial decision to join.

> bird impact. That is the way we keep our agenda reasonably tight … but it also gives us our legitimacy with our membership in getting into these wider areas (quoted in Rawcliffe: 1998: 229-230) (emphasis added).

Accordingly, the supporters could be seen as helping to shape group agendas by the 'law of anticipated reactions'. So there is a sort of group accountability by anticipation. Luttbeg and Zeigler (1974: 209) maintained that while many interest groups do not have formal 'consultative mechanisms, leaders and followers exist in a functionally democratic relationship. That is to say, leaders are limited by the followers' expressed or latent values and expectation' (quoted in Luttbeg: 1974: 6). In a similar vein Truman (1951: 156) argued that, 'The attitudes present in the membership define the tasks of the leaders, and the internal political life of the groups is made up of a continuous effort to maintain leaders and followers in some measure of harmonious relationship'. Many organizations take great care to avoid members taking the *exit* decision. The threat of exit may actually have a significant impact on limiting leadership discretion.

In summary, while internal democracy is atrophied in many organizations, or if groups lack internal democratic procedures, most try to anticipate positions that would cost support. Many policies are drawn in ways that show some sensitivity to the views of members – through the use of market research techniques supporter/member attitudes may feed into policy direction. The former RSPB head, Baroness Young, also unequivocally argued that the public policies which the organization tries to shape have to be 'sold' to the membership/supportership. Her remarks also imply that it is not internal *voice* that is feared, simply *exit*. To a certain extent there is an ersatz democracy predicated on the choice to participate or not, or *which* group to support. There is limited expectation of democratic vitality within groups, but there may be democracy in the choice between groups. Policy may also be determined in part by what leaders think are, will be, or have been the preferences of their constituents. In this respect internal democracy in many organizations is best characterised as more *anticipatory* than *participatory*.

Many (large-scale) supporter-based organizations also have local chapters and branches that activate a small percentage of supporters. In such numerically large organizations this can amount to respectable numbers of citizens. In the UK organizations such as FoE, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, the CPRE and the RSPB have networks of local branches and chapters.[14] The RSPB has 11,900 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). As Foley and Edwards (1996: 48-49) argue, '... decidedly political associations may well play the role attributed to civil associations in the civil society, and may play them better ... social movement organizations, grassroots interest groups, and grassroots political associations of all sorts are far more likely to generate Putnam's activated citizenry than the choral societies, birdwatching clubs, and bowling leagues he is so fond of citing'. On balance it is clear that for large-scale organizations most members' contributions are financial, these supporters are content to embrace a politically marginal role and contract-out their participation and members who wish a more active role may find limited opportunities. However, it is too simplistic to suggest that groups want *only* passive cash-cow members, rather than activists. More accurately it should be seen that groups are prepared to accept membership on that basis, and may welcome more active involvement. But groups may not always be keen to roll out the red carpet for a *policy-making* membership.

As demonstrated above, group recruitment strategies partly determine who is mobilised. Clearly the *persistent problem* for advanced democracies is the continuing socio-demographic unrepresentativeness of participators and supply-side recruitment further accentuates the problems of political inequality. The skewed nature of participation is further exacerbated by the skewed nature of recruitment.

[14] A caveat regarding local chapters and branches is that even where these exist and a small percentage of members are active (*e.g.* Friends of the Earth or Greenpeace) some local groups are merely affiliated to the national group via the brand logo, there is no mechanism for local group members to become involved in national policy formulation. In groups such as Amnesty International (British Section) there are greater opportunities for membership input into policy decisions.

In spite of the political inequality argument sketch above, it is also important to note that supply-side mobilization may have some redeeming features. While much empirical evidence identifies the 'negative' biases of skewed involvement there are some 'positive externalities'. The alleged pathology of unrepresentativeness (and arguments about declines in civic and political involvement) requires more examination than the headlines suggest. First, *Group perform a surrogate function* – acting on behalf of a public that lack the resources (*i.e.* knowledge and expertise) and groups have the niche expertise to be able to effectively criticize government policy. Much group participation seeks *to* advance many causes that benefit constituencies and interests beyond the direct (sectional) interests of participators: 'advocacy by proxy' (Imig, 1994). Individuals are mobilized to act on behalf of client groups (Make Poverty History [MPH], children, mental health concerns). Secondly, there may also be redistributive or progressive elements to skewed involvement. Many resource rich citizens may patronise causes that less well-healed citizens support. For example, in the environmental area many relatively less affluent citizens have strong pro-environmental attitudes, but simply can't afford the indulgence of membership (no matter how small the financial costs may appear). The contribution of their wealthier co-citizens ensures that this interest is represented – somewhat akin to business travellers subsidising the airfare costs in economy. Thirdly, there is also a bias towards increased political knowledge and tolerance among participators. As Verba *et al.* (1995: 507; 529) note, while the resource rich are the most involved these:

> … activists … are better informed and more tolerant of unpopular opinions. Thus, while the process exacerbates political inequality, it may enhance the quality of political discourse and democratic governance … (these citizens) conform to participatory democratic notions of the good citizen. And a participatory system that overrepresents their interest also overrepresents the politically informed and tolerant."[15]

[15] Warleigh (2001: 634) reported that one NGO claimed to have '… a very active membership drawn from predominantly middle class/professional sectors, who professional and political skills were regularly placed at the NGOs disposal'.

Conclusion

Much discussion of the role of groups has a caricature feel. On the one hand there is celebration of the democratic merits of old fashioned, cosy, (bottom-up) organizations where, in theory at least, there is policy making initiative at the local level and meaningful accountability of leaders to members. This is seen as 'good', as is the *comparatively* structureless participation of turning out on big demonstrations such as MPH in 2005. On the other hand there is the less 'respectable' Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) participation that is seen as self-interested, or involvement that is 'thin' – simply monetary – *i.e.* chequebook participation. Both the latter are poorly regarded compared with 'real' participation. However, contemporary attitudes to groups are somewhat inconsistent. As Schudson (1998: 280) noted that:

> … sociologists have drawn attention to civil society – all those myriad associations between the state and the household; they have emphasized the importance of the local, the face-to-face, and the many sites in which public conversations can take place. These … are inherently good while the professionalized, staffed, nationalized, computerized operation of the thousands of associations that get typed as special interests are always bad. These two images of civic life have yet to be reconciled in American political and social thought.

Loomis and Cigler (2002: 24) note, 'For a $15-$25 membership fee, people can make an "expressive statement" *without incurring other organizational obligations*' (emphasis added). The italicised section is important: it suggests that participation rights are not being denied to frustrated members and that a 'lack' of such rights may not be itself an important or pivotal (dis)incentive. Chequebook participation may be limited, but it is purposive *i.e.* '... it reflects some degree of unhappiness with the way things are' (Salisbury: 1992: 216). It is purposively directed at funding protest, even if it is not about directly joining in the 'fun'. Cheque writers may see little utility in personally taking to the streets and may realize that the only prospect for a successful outcome is to fund a group. Richardson (1995: 135) argues that credit-card participation could be a form of '… surrogate activism in which individuals support a particular cause – often single issue – but leave the formulation and delivery of the campaign to organizational professionals or to the few genuine activists within the

organization'. While Maloney (1999) notes that tasks are 'contracted out' by supporters to staff and that this may not necessarily lead to social alienation, intolerance and distrust as feared by social capitalists.

The social capital model assumes that the internal aspects of groups are crucial for social integration, the inculcation of pro-democratic attitudes and values and for generating a greater citizens appetite for social and political involvement. Warren (1996: 241) sets out the normative assumption that participation is developmental:

> Theories of radical democracy hold that if individuals were more broadly empowered, especially in the institutions that most directly affect their everyday lives, their experiences would have transformative effects. Individuals would become more public spirited, more tolerant, more knowledgeable, more attentive to the interests of others and more probing of their own interests. And institutions that make collective decisions in radically democratic ways will tend to generate new forms of solidarity, cooperation and civic attachment.

While Sanders (1997: 347) points out, 'When democratic theorists suggest remodelling our politics, it is in the direction of making them more deliberative'. The deliberative 'turn' that has built on the participatory turn and perceives active involvement as a requirement of a good citizen, [Oscar Wilde's alleged answer to the why he was not a socialist was, 'I prefer to keep my evenings free.']

Finally, Conover *et al.* (2002: 60) note:

> Philosophers accord deliberation a special place in democratic theory. And they envision citizens who accord deliberation a special place in their lives. But in fact, the citizens of modern liberal states have neither a special time nor a special place for the practice of democratic discussion …

In parallel, the argument is that the public may not value group participation to the extent, and for the proposes, that participatory optimists assume. Much of the weight placed on the interest group system in terms of delivering for democracy is actually by observers who want decision-making to be bottom-up, active and deliberative. Those dissatisfied with the 'democratic malaise' that is often associated with electoral and party aspects of politics may in their reaction exaggerate the (potential)

participatory nature of modern associations.

Groups do involve large numbers, but their role is a shadow of that sought by participatory enthusiasts. The ‘low-cost’, ‘light’ participation offered by many organizations may be a poor substitute for ‘real’ involvement, but it may suit both the group and the (under)mobilized. Democratic theorists may judge participation by the degree of personal involvement and while the role of modern groups may fall way short of such aspiration, it may be defensible. Much group participation seems to be chosen because it is undemanding in terms of personal effort. Groups provide limited participation albeit on a large-scale; they activate support by individuals for collective ends (however hard Olson [1971] demonstrated it would be); and provide policy expertise that can challenge government. *These are merits – for all but participatory utopians and evangelists.*

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