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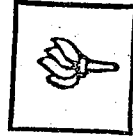
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Developments in West European Politics 2

edited by

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and
Martin Rhodes**



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permits the system to take blows and criticism from perceived 'performance deficits' but not to collapse. Many of these ideas are derived from the seminal work of David Easton (1979), particularly the valuable distinction between 'specific' support and 'diffuse' support for the democratic system as a whole.

Recent developments in terms of voter turnout figures and perceived waves of inchoate dissatisfaction amongst the voters of Western Europe have given rise to increasing doubts about the ability of politicians to meet the changing demands of their electorates and to ensure that 'performance deficits' are effectively confronted. The data, however, are not straightforward to interpret, particularly in a cross-national context. In the 1990s, overall voter turnout does appear to be declining in most West European countries compared to previous decades since 1945, but it is not a uniform trend across the whole continent. It is more a case of 'trendless fluctuation' than a linear development, with substantial cross-national variations.

The type of election does, however, appear to be significant in terms of turnout. National elections still attract good turnouts, whilst by-elections, local, regional and European Parliament elections, along with referendums on various themes, are much more unpredictable with regard to rates of participation. Three other factors have been cited as potential influences on the level of election turnout: the type of electoral system in operation, whether compulsory voting is employed and the degree of 'competitiveness' of the election.

The IDEA study of voter turnout (IDEA, 1999) concluded that all three of these potential influences had some impact. The single transferable vote (STV) electoral system in operation in Ireland and Malta tends to produce high turnouts, particularly in the latter (see Tables 5.1 and 5.2 below), but other types of proportional representation electoral systems do not consistently achieve the same level. Compulsory voting in some form exists in Belgium, Greece, Italy and Luxembourg, although the enforcement of these rules and laws varies widely, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about their impact. Countries with compulsory voting do tend to have high turnout levels but not dramatically higher than those countries without any compulsion such as Denmark. The IDEA report also concluded that there was a clear link between the 'competitiveness' of the election and the level of voter turnout, meaning elections where the result is uncertain and likely to be close. In this context, the appeals of the parties may resonate more strongly with the voters and encourage more of them to turn out to vote. This may help to account for the rise in turnout in Germany in 1998, the fall in turnout in the United Kingdom in 1997, and the further steep decline in voter turnout in the United Kingdom in 2001.

Chapter 5

Participation and Voting

DAVID BROUGHTON

For many political theorists, the main justifications of liberal democratic political systems are inextricably rooted in assumptions of government by the people and government for the people. These aims are supposed to be fulfilled by means of a variety of procedures of accountability, crucially regular and free elections at different levels of the political system. Mass participation via election turnout is seen as providing a vital contribution to ensuring that the political elite remains responsive to the wishes of the electorate based on the active participation of a critical citizenry in the political process. This will ensure that decisions taken in the name of the people broadly reflect the wishes of the people. In the absence of such sustained civic engagement, the fear has always been that political apathy at the bottom will most likely lead to authoritarian and arrogant attitudes at the top.

However, Scharpf (1999) has recently argued that European governments need to rely much more on output-oriented democracy (government for the people) rather than input-oriented democracy (government by the people) since there are legitimacy problems at both national government and European Union levels rendering the latter increasingly unworkable. This has been brought about by the loss of the problem-solving capacities of national governments via the dual and interrelated processes of economic globalization and European integration. Increasingly, the policies of national governments are being constrained by external forces beyond their control and the transfer of powers away from national governments (to both below and above national level) further limit the room for manoeuvre. The task for national governments in terms of shaping public opinion is to ensure that this increasing interdependency is not experienced as a 'delegitimizing disappointment' (Scharpf, 2000a, p. 120).

In addition to specific involvement in the political process, different aspects of political participation are seen as being a 'good thing' since they generate overall support for the whole democratic system, ensuring the existence of a reservoir of goodwill. This can be called upon to combat the 'bad times' of economic recession, for example, and it

For some people, a declining turnout at elections should not be regarded as a problem. They assert that this development is in fact a sign of satisfaction on the part of voters, not dissatisfaction. There is a broad 'culture of contentment'. No longer are elections seen as fundamental conflicts over basic issues of civil and political rights through which ordinary people can be mobilized and engaged. Instead, elections are increasingly dominated by obscure technocratic debates over the fine details of public policy for which the vast majority of people have neither time nor interest. There is therefore no 'crisis of disengagement' but simply a rational development of civil society towards relying upon a generalized, overall trust of political elites rather than a reliance on frequent individual participation as the principal means of holding politicians to account. Critics of this thesis point to the roots of this development being firmly embedded in negative changes in the mass-media treatment of serious politics, producing an increasing number of 'information deficits', despite the easy accessibility of vast amounts of data from new electronic sources. Such critics spy a trend towards a lazy cynicism on the part of the media, leading to ill-formed, critical mass perceptions of politicians as being out-of-touch, untrustworthy and incompetent. For such critics, it is impossible both to be ignorant and free, harking back to classical theories concerning the place and responsibilities of the ordinary voter in a democratic political system.

For some, this development towards a lack of involvement of ordinary people in the political process amounts to a crisis of popular democracy, demonstrated by survey-based analysis of 'diffuse angst', a failure of the mobilisation capacities of political parties as shown by the decline in emotional attachment to parties and party membership, and an overall sense of weariness, disbelief and widespread cynicism about politics and politicians. This overall mood is best summed up by the widely used German word, *politikverdrossenheit*.

This chapter will set out recent trends in participation and voting in Western Europe to consider whether there is indeed a 'crisis of disengagement', using data from election turnouts and survey responses testing attitudes to politicians and wider political society. The first task is to examine what has been happening in national election turnout in Western Europe since the initial consolidation of the post-1945 democratic political systems.

Electoral turnouts since the Second World War

Table 5.1 sets out the average turnout figures at national elections by decade for 19 West European countries (the current countries of the

Table 5.1 Average voter turnout since 1945

Country/percent	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s*
Austria	95.3	93.8	92.3	91.6	83.8
Belgium	93.1	91.3	93.0	93.9	91.5
Denmark	81.8	87.3	88.4	86.7	85.0
Finland	76.5	85.1	78.2	73.9	67.4
France	80.0	76.6	76.5	71.9	68.5
Germany	86.9	87.1	90.9	87.3	79.9
Greece	n/a	n/a	80.4	83.5	78.1
Ireland	74.3	74.2	76.5	72.9	67.3
Italy	93.8	92.9	92.3	89.0	84.5
Luxembourg	91.9	89.6	89.5	88.1	87.4
Netherlands	95.4	95.0	83.5	83.5	76.0
Portugal	n/a	n/a	87.5	78.0	65.2
Spain	n/a	n/a	72.6	73.4	74.6
Sweden	78.7	86.4	90.4	89.1	85.4
United Kingdom	80.3	76.6	75.0	74.1	69.6
Norway	78.8	82.8	81.6	83.1	76.3
Switzerland	69.0	64.2	52.3	48.2	43.8
Malta	78.1	90.3	94.0	95.4	96.2
Iceland	90.8	91.3	90.4	89.4	86.4
Average**	85.0	86.7	85.2	83.6	79.1

Notes: * includes 2000-1; ** excludes Switzerland.

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

European Union along with Norway, Switzerland, Malta and Iceland), and there is also an overall average figure for the countries taken together (except Switzerland) in order to test for a broad trend over time. Switzerland was omitted from the average turnout figure as it appears to be a stark 'outlier' in terms of the degree to which its turnout has declined over time. In addition, the reliance on local direct democracy in Switzerland rather than national parties to make major policy decisions sets it apart from the other countries. Data for Greece, Portugal and Spain are only given for the time period that their elections were openly democratic in nature and duly comparable.

The table entries are the percentage turnouts produced by dividing the figure for registered voters by the total vote. This decision means that ineligible members of the population such as non-citizens are excluded but it also means that people are omitted who are in fact eligible, but who are not on the registration list. This seems acceptable in

Western Europe with generally high levels of voter registration, even given potential problems in terms of a declining level of registration over time. In the United Kingdom, for example, eligible voters 'disappeared' from the lists allegedly to avoid paying the poll tax in the early 1990s. This decision concerning the use of data on registered voters would be much more problematic if the United States was included in the study with its wholly voluntary registration process and the various differences between the individual states in terms of the laws of registration which have also changed over time.

Finally, we will deal with national elections producing national governments in this chapter rather than Presidential, sub-and supra-national elections and referendums for ease of data and contextual comparability.

The first point to note from Table 5.1 is that average turnout across the chosen countries has indeed fallen over time, although not by much. The pattern is marked by the initial consolidation in turnout in the 1950s, the slight average increase in the 1960s, followed by a slight decline between the 1960s and the 1970s, another slight decline in the average figure in the 1980s, followed by a more noticeable decline of 4 per cent on average between the 1980s and 2001.

However, the overall average figures need to be 'unpacked' in more detail. For example, in Denmark, turnout is actually higher in the 1990s compared to the 1950s and it appears to have only suffered small declines in Sweden, Norway and Iceland too since the 1960s. Is there something different about the Scandinavian countries in that their turnout figures appear not to reflect the decline in turnout elsewhere in Western Europe? A further complication is that Finland would not appear to be 'typically Scandinavian' in this particular sense in that its turnout figure has fallen in a manner similar to other countries outside the Scandinavian group.

Most other countries have seen turnout declines such as Austria, the Netherlands, and Portugal, although none of them have seen the collapse in national turnout in Switzerland mentioned above (down by more than 25 per cent between the 1950s and the 1990s). Of these countries, the clearest decline is seen in the case of the Netherlands, whose turnout peaked in the 1950s at an average of 95.4 per cent but in the elections of the 1990s this figure fell to an average of 76 per cent.

Wattenberg (2000, p. 72) also notes the relative consistency in turnout in most of the Scandinavian countries and attributes this particular development to political parties in those countries continuing to strongly mobilize their respective voters to turn out. The decline of party loyalty and party identification in other countries has resulted in less reliance on parties providing cues as to how to translate opinions into voting choices. The decline in ideological differences between the major parties

also reduces the starkness of the choice facing voters. The decline in long-standing party cleavages has led directly to a smaller percentage of the population being mobilized. A good example of this is in the Netherlands where three separate religious parties (two Protestant and one Catholic) joined together to form the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in 1980. This resulted from the declining hold of the respective parties on their particular religious sub-cultures (Ten Napel, 1999).

Having broadly considered the changes in turnout rates in the post-war decades, we now want to look specifically at the two most recent national elections in our 19 countries.

Trends in political participation in the 1990s

Table 5.2 sets out the turnout figures for the last two national elections in our 19 West European countries in order to provide the most recent

Table 5.2 Voting turnout at the last two national elections

Country	Last election		Previous election		Change*
	Date	Per cent	Date	Per cent	
Austria	03/10/99	80.4	17/12/95	86.0	-5.6
Belgium	13/06/99	90.6	21/05/95	91.1	-0.5
Denmark	20/11/01	87.0	11/03/98	85.9	+1.1
Finland	21/03/99	65.3	19/03/95	68.6	-3.3
France	01/06/97	68.0	28/03/93	68.9	-0.9
Germany	27/09/98	83.0	16/10/94	79.0	+4.0
Greece	09/04/00	75.0	22/09/96	76.3	-1.3
Ireland	06/06/97	66.1	25/11/92	68.5	-2.4
Italy	13/05/01	81.4	21/04/96	82.9	-1.5
Luxembourg	13/06/99	86.5	12/06/94	88.3	-1.8
Netherlands	06/05/98	73.2	03/05/94	78.7	-5.5
Portugal	10/10/99	61.0	01/10/95	66.3	-5.3
Spain	12/03/00	68.7	03/03/96	78.1	-9.4
Sweden	20/09/98	81.4	18/09/94	88.1	-6.7
United Kingdom	07/06/01	59.4	01/05/97	71.5	-12.1
Norway	10/09/01	75.0	15/09/97	78.0	-3.0
Switzerland	24/10/99	43.2	22/10/95	42.2	+1.0
Malta	05/09/98	95.4	26/10/96	97.2	-1.8
Iceland	08/05/99	84.1	08/04/95	87.4	-3.3

Note: * Change is: (turnout at the last election) - (turnout at the previous election).
Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).

data for further comparative analysis. The table also notes the percentage change in turnout between the last two elections for each country.

We can see that in 16 of the 19 countries in the table, turnout fell compared to the immediately previous national election. In only four countries did turnout rise. The overall average turnout for the period 1992-96 was 78.6 per cent; for the latter half of the decade between 1997-2001 the average turnout was 75.8 per cent. It would seem, therefore, that turnout is indeed declining across the continent. However, we need to examine the data in more detail before drawing any conclusions about overall developments.

Some of the declines (and indeed two of the increases) in turnout are very small and could therefore represent specific and contingent 'blips' in turnout which will be reversed at the first national election of the new century. In addition, it is possible to reverse a declining turnout, as shown by Germany between 1994-98 when the turnout for elections to the Bundestag further recovered from the 'blip' of 1990 when the country was still grappling with the initial momentous consequences of unification earlier that year. In the past, Germany has recorded consistently high turnouts at postwar national elections, reaching a peak of 91 per cent in both 1972 and 1976, remarkable in a country without compulsory voting.

The six countries in the table (Austria, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom) which did suffer a noticeable decline in turnout between the last two national elections could provide us with clues to more general developments in turnout rates. On most usual criteria, however, this is a very 'mixed' group of countries.

For example, the decline in turnout in Portugal and Spain might be encouragingly related to their increasing democratic 'normality' after dictatorship in which both countries are seen more and more as being full members, not just of the European Union but of the European democratic mainstream. The main problem facing the Netherlands and Sweden is more likely to be related to maintaining their comfortable economic health and adapting their tried and tested political systems to the new challenges of globalization than any fears about the basic underpinnings of their societies. The decline in turnout in the United Kingdom in 1997 (to its lowest level since 1935) may well have been a reflection of an election result long assumed and discounted before polling day and an incisive reflection of the state of the incumbent Conservative government. Similar concerns about low turnout were frequently voiced in the run-up to the 2001 election in the UK and often for the same reasons, with the difference that the Conservatives were now in opposition.

However, in Austria the decline in turnout may much more be a

reflection of disenchantment with the 'carve-up' of Austrian politics for so long by the Social Democrats and the Austrian People's Party in a series of long-lasting grand coalitions. Growing electoral support for the populist appeal of the Freedom Party under Jörg Haider has been another consequence. It is therefore in Austria that the system seems to be under some pressure from a grumbling and disenfranchised electorate, all too ready and willing to voice its complaints about the actions of self-interested and unresponsive political elites.

Important questions of accountability, legitimacy, political trust and the potential for the opening of a 'democratic deficit' at national level (as well as at EU level) could, however, be profitably examined in other countries as well. For this, we need to consider survey responses to relevant questions drawn from the twice-yearly Eurobarometer surveys of the European Commission and those of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP).

In order to gain some insight into mass attitudes towards political systems and the actions of politicians, a number of different questions have been employed in these surveys. Two main areas have been repeatedly examined. Firstly, the extent of overall satisfaction with democracy in the countries of the European Union has been measured, and, secondly, the amount of agreement with a set of statements which test attitudes towards politicians, the role of elections and the perceptions of the influence which ordinary citizens are able to exert on politics.

Satisfaction with democracy in EU countries

The first step is to look at changes over the most recent decade in the satisfaction of the European Union electorate with the way in which democracy works in their respective countries. Substantial and unidirectional changes over time in the direction of less satisfaction would provide evidence of increasing disenchantment with the workings of the different national political systems. Table 5.3 contains the responses to the same question asked in the Eurobarometer surveys at four time-points between 1991-2000 (for earlier results from 1973-93 derived from the same question, see Andeweg 1996, pp. 148-9). The question was: 'on the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in (our country)?'

The table contains some interesting results. We should note in particular the consistently low level of satisfaction with democracy in Italy, and yet Italy has a consistently high rate of electoral turnout. There is some confusion in different sources over whether Italy has a 'compulsory' system of voting, given that it is based on strong social norms

rather than potential legal sanctions as in Belgium. The value of tracking change over time can be clearly demonstrated in the case of Belgium, where there was a collapse in satisfaction with Belgian democracy between 1994-97, with a strong recovery in 2000. This is unsurprising given the revelations surrounding the Dutroux child murder case and the very public failure of both the police and the overall judicial systems in 1996 (van Ooterve, 1998). Consistently high levels of satisfaction with the workings of democracy are present in Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Ireland, whilst more changeable responses are recorded in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom.

In Germany, the data in the table were aggregated from separate West and East German samples, with the West German people usually being much more satisfied with German democracy than their East German counterparts. One specific reason for this is the differing interpretations of 'democracy' in the West and the East of Germany derived from different ideological cultures. Based on a variety of survey evidence, this is particularly clear in terms of choosing between freedom and equality, along with attitudes towards the value of indirect, representative democratic institutions as opposed to the desirability of involving citizens directly in the political process via referendums (Rohrschneider, 1999).

The strong dissatisfaction in Spain in the mid-1990s is likely to be linked to the corruption scandals that enveloped the last years of the PSOE in national power up until 1996. The United Kingdom sample includes a separate sample for Northern Ireland, whose respondents were clearly and consistently much less satisfied with the workings of democracy than those on the British mainland as the struggle for some kind of sustainable peace settlement in the province continued to prove elusive.

There are a number of critics of this particular Eurobarometer question who claim that it is not clear what this question is actually measuring (Holmberg, 1999). It is certainly possible that respondents are actually thinking of immediate policy concerns and making short-term evaluations of the present government's performance (either positively or negatively) rather than answering a more general question about 'democracy'. Democracy as the best political system available is largely unquestioned in most of the European Union. The respondents are therefore likely to be thinking much more about regime performance than fundamental democratic principles.

The 'satisfaction' question is useful for our purposes though as a general indication of satisfaction with democracy, particularly because it has been asked regularly over time, thus permitting us to track change. It is nevertheless important to supplement such general data with more precise questions that break down the overarching theme of

Table 5.3 Satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in EU member states

Country/percentage of respondents*	October-November 1991	June-July 1994	October-November 1997	April-May 2000
Austria	n/a	n/a	39	56
Belgium	53	43	66	37
Denmark	73	78	79	21
Finland	n/a	n/a	48	32
France	43	47	49	35
Germany	61	52	54	43
Greece	34	66	60	46
Ireland	57	28	70	19
Italy	20	77	67	62
Luxembourg	77	72	74	20
Netherlands	63	34	27	18
Portugal	75	55	54	45
Spain	57	67	40	23
Sweden	n/a	n/a	40	34
United Kingdom	60	49	25	31
Average**	50	52	47	39

Note: * Percentages will not total to 100 because 'don't know' or 'no reply' responses are excluded. ** Average is population-weighted. Source: Eurobarometer.

'satisfaction with democracy' into some of its key dimensions. We attempt this in the next two tables (5.4 and 5.5) when we consider the responses of European voters to a range of statements dealing with such themes as corruption amongst politicians and the perceived extent of citizen influence on politics.

Attitudes towards political society in Europe

Table 5.4 contains the responses to six statements drawn from a Eurobarometer survey in 1997 that attempt to tap attitudes to political society. We can analyse the data in terms of a rough 'pessimism/optimism' index that shows that the Danish respondents are the most optimistic based on the results to five of the six questions. Unlike the respondents in most other EU countries, the majority of Danes do not agree that corruption amongst politicians is increasing or that there is nothing that can be done to change things in Danish society. They are, however, more pessimistic about changing things in the world around them.

The French share a similar hope to the Danes about the possibility of changing society, whilst retaining a strong scepticism about corruption amongst politicians and the relative positions of the rich and poor in French society. The Italian respondents were similar to the French in their responses: strongly agreeing on the position of the rich and poor, but nevertheless optimistic that things could be changed in Italian society. The Luxembourgers were happier with the provision of public services than their counterparts in the rest of the European Union, and the Dutch were happier than most with the way their government, public bodies and public services operated. The Swedes were the most optimistic about their ability to change things in society.

We then considered (Table 5.5) data drawn from the International Social Survey Programme of 1996 that unfortunately only contained data from eight EU member states. On this occasion, the differences between the countries in terms of the four statements cited were not so striking as in Table 5.4 above. Few respondents thought that the average citizen had much influence on politics (a percentage range of 12 to 31 per cent agreed), whilst, with the exception of Dutch and French respondents, a majority of voters thought that even the best politicians did not have much impact. The Dutch and the Irish strongly retain their faith in the value of elections as a means of getting governments to pay attention to key issues, although there was strong support for this sentiment in each of the eight countries. Few respondents in any of the countries however thought that elected representatives tried to keep their promises once elected. This was particularly low in Italy (with only 11

Table 5.4 Attitudes toward society, March–April 1997

Country/percentage agreement among respondents.	Corruption among politicians is increasing	The way government and public bodies work is getting worse	I have little control over what is happening in the world around me	Public services look less and less of people like me after the interests get richer and the poor get poorer	The rich are getting richer and the poor change things in our society	Average*
Austria	68	91	85	66	42	68
Belgium	96	91	85	81	94	91
Denmark	34	60	74	50	51	51
Finland	69	91	85	57	22	52
France	87	76	83	63	49	87
Germany	90	85	87	80	28	91
Greece	86	84	73	80	53	95
Ireland	87	73	82	68	44	91
Italy	71	87	87	88	44	88
Luxembourg	66	77	87	74	46	86
Netherlands	47	51	72	44	24	78
Portugal	84	77	71	50	16	79
Spain	70	61	71	74	33	74
Sweden	78	79	32	65	16	88
United Kingdom	84	82	89	76	47	84
Average*	75	72	74	66	35	75

Note: * Average is not population-weighted.
Source: Eurobarometer.

per cent agreeing), with the Dutch and the Irish again leading the pack of 'optimists'.

We can conclude from the data contained in Tables 5.4 and 5.5 that many European voters perceive that corruption amongst politicians is increasing, that the processes of government and public bodies are getting worse, that public services are not serving their interests, the rich in society are getting richer and the poor poorer, that the average citizen does not have much influence on politics, that even good politicians are constrained in terms of the impact they can have and that few respondents expect that promises made by politicians will be kept in office. Yet, many respondents believe that they can change things in their respective societies and that elections retain their importance as a means of holding a government to account for its actions.

These ideas feed into the wider debate concerning the links between civic engagement, social capital and social trust. Social capital refers to the networks and norms of civil society that enable society and its citizens to perform more 'productively' in terms of community institutions, reciprocity and mutual trust. There appears to be no direct link between a person's degree of social trust and their confidence in government. However, social trust does indirectly affect levels of political confidence mediated through the performance of representative institutions. This conclusion is derived from the work of Putnam (1993) and Newton and Norris (2000).

In this context, and given these attitudinal results, the relatively small decline in voter turnout noted in Table 5.2 above in the 1990s could be regarded instead as a considerable success rather than a failure. The results also suggest that European voters are clear-eyed in terms of their expectations of what politicians can and do achieve and that the strong cross-national faith in the value of elections as an effective means of accountability remains largely undiminished.

The overall attitudinal picture is certain, however, to be subtly shaded and nuanced both by specific attitude and country. We would need to ask exactly the same questions again at one more point in time at least to gain further insight into the structure of these particular attitudes and to see whether they changed over time in reaction to particular events or personalities in particular countries. We can nevertheless still consider the main explanations offered to account for these attitudes towards politicians and the political process.

The main explanations

Norris (1999, pp. 21-5) uses three categories of explanation (political, institutional and cultural) to account for why there appears to be less civic engagement, including voter participation, than in the past:

Table 5.5 Attitudes toward politics, 1996

Country/percentage agreement among respondents	France	Germany	Ireland	Italy	Netherlands	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	Average*
The average citizen has considerable influence on politics	31	16	30	25	18	27	12	14	22
Even the best politician cannot have much impact because of the way government works	43	56	62	51	39	54	54	50	51
Elections are a good way of making governments pay attention to the important political issues facing our country	59	65	79	59	84	70	71	72	70
The people we elect as MPs try to keep the promises they have made during the election	20	18	30	11	29	16	15	24	20

Note: * Average is not population-weighted.
Source: ISSP.

- *Political: the failure of government performance?* This category is based on the belief that relative expectations of government and its performance have changed. The changing role of the state in society from the 1980s onwards, with less emphasis on 'big' government, has interacted with perceptions of economic failure to engender a more distant relationship between the citizen and the state in terms of trust and the willingness to participate politically.
- *Institutional: the failure of constitutional design?* This category focuses upon the perception of a widening of the gap between citizens and the state, with the role of political parties, interest groups and public opinion all undergoing considerable change. The major problem is seen to be the lack of accountability of those in power, with elections increasingly unable to be major influences on the direction of public policy in an era of low incumbency turnover. The 1998 federal election in Germany, for example, resulted in the first complete change of government in the 14 national elections of the postwar period, with previous changes of government having been implemented by changes in coalition partners. In addition, semi-permanent coalitions in some countries are rarely subject to serious electoral sanction (such as in Austria as mentioned earlier) and professionalism from politicians has received much greater emphasis. They are thus much more easily able to ensure their own political survival.
- *Cultural: modernization and changing values?* This category centres on changes in values, a development often summarized as 'post-materialism' and is derived from the work of Inglehart (1977). With the growth in higher education, a more critical citizenry has arisen, one looking for greater participation in decision-making processes and being more and more willing to develop new forms of political participation outside the confines of traditional parties and interest groups. Such people are also interested in promoting 'new issues' such as the environment and increasing opportunities for women. There is now less support for traditional forms of authority and less respect for hierarchical and authoritarian values. This has come about through generational change, producing the perception that 'direct action', such as recent street protests taking place in and around major summit meetings in Seattle (World Trade Organization), Genoa (the 'Group of Eight' leading industrial nations), and Gothenburg (European Council) is an option equally as valid as working within channels of protest mediated by conventional liberal democratic institutions and mechanisms. The rise of Green parties in many West European countries is often regarded as being a direct consequence of this pressure for 'alternative' politics.

These three categories are certainly useful in setting out the key general arenas capable of providing underpinning explanations as to why traditionally structured political participation might decline. It is also important to note that the three explanatory categories above inevitably interact and overlap with one another. Value-change, generational shifts in outlook, growing cognitive abilities, along with subtly shifting socialization patterns and influential concrete experiences all gradually accumulate. They are then both reflected and refracted via the specific institutional context within which the political process is conducted. It is to that rapidly changing context that we now turn.

The changing institutional context of political participation

We saw earlier in Table 5.4 that few European electors had much faith in their ability to control what is happening in the world around them. For many, the increasing economic and political interdependences between countries as one result of European integration and the overall process of globalization render the individual voter a fringe spectator rather than an active participant in most political decision-making. Classical democratic theory was predicated on the existence and pre-eminence of the nation-state; today, this fundamental assumption is increasingly threadbare and outdated. The traditional national democratic institutions founded on this assumption have not yet succeeded in democratizing supra-national representative institutions such as the European Parliament.

Simultaneously, there has been a decline in the ideological input to mass politics. The political control of the Right in many countries throughout the 1980s produced a reaction from their successors that mainly implicitly but sometimes also explicitly accepted many of the policies which had been implemented during that particular decade. There was no serious or sustained comeback for state intervention and control in the 1990s, and the agenda of mass politics today has become dominated by claims of government efficiency and 'output' rather than democratic control. The alternatives offered by the different parties to voters at election time are now often hard to distinguish from one another, with essentially minor variations on the same broad theme based on top-down elite initiatives rather than bottom-up demands from voters.

The precise meaning of the Third Way in the United Kingdom or the Neue Mitte in Germany, for example, is highly likely to remain shrouded in rhetorical flourishes and studied vagueness. The deliberate

opacity of both purposes and ends in terms of such an approach to politics may, however, turn out to be an electorally popular strategy with a 'postmodern' European electorate. It remains virtually impossible to pin down the core content of the Third Way or its indispensable elements. For example, in his speech to the Königswinter conference in Oxford on 25 March 2000, British Prime Minister Tony Blair described the basis of the Third Way or Neue Mitte as 'an active civil society' in which 'people need fixed points of reference; a society without prejudice but not without rules'. People 'want the security of belonging to a community, where bonds of connection exist between citizens' (see the Downing Street website for the full text of the speech, <<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/news.asp>>).

The whole means of mass representation has also undergone widespread change; new forms of public opinion are much more prominent and extensively used to test the wishes of voters. Opinion polls, focus groups, deliberative democracy, citizens' juries and referenda are all employed to measure the public mood, a far cry indeed from holding public meetings or reading newspaper editorials. These new forms of 'manufactured' public opinion may be statistically accurate and duly sensitive to the swings and roundabouts of public opinion, but they remain uninviting and uninteresting for many.

With the even more recent development of 'e-democracy' and the continuing exploration of the uses of the Internet for voting on-line, the need to get involved publicly in politics as the only route available has receded even further into the past. It will soon be possible to carry out previously public commitments and engagements without leaving the privacy of one's home, participating in the political process via personal computer rather than personal commitment. A final contextual factor to note here has been developments in the mass media and the way they present politics. Despite the ever-increasing and easy availability of information to the mass audience, 'information deficits' remain for many people. Strong emphasis on the 'horse-race' aspect of elections, a seeming obsession with image and style to the neglect of policy substance, and a critical and probing approach which assumes government failure and shortcomings, are all recent developments in the ways in which the mass audience is presented with political events and personalities.

These contextual developments are all potential influences on rates of political participation. The deliberate blurring of ideological boundaries between the parties seems bound to reduce the incentive to vote. If the choice between parties is unclear, the interest of the ordinary voter is unlikely to be sustained. If there appears to be nothing more at stake at an election than a minor redivision of the economic cake, few will pay

much attention. If the media and politicians together cannot find ways of explaining complex technical issues in more comprehensible terms and the latter fail to keep promises or keep well clear of conflicting and self-serving interests, increasing cynicism on the part of voters is only to be expected.

Conclusions

We saw earlier that turnout at national elections in Western Europe in the 1990s had not greatly declined, although the general trend was slightly down compared to earlier decades after 1945. There appeared to be no definitive trend, and instead there were different fluctuations in different countries. However, we also noted that the current attitudes of the European electorate suggested at least scepticism about politicians and their promises, along with the perceived lack of ability of the ordinary citizen to influence the contours of European politics. We also noted the vast changes in the context of political participation, comprising the steady waning of 'ideological input', the substantial redefinition of the ideas and implementation of mass representation and the changing approach of the mass media towards more overt and instinctive criticism of those in power. In this concluding section we want to examine the potential for further change based on these recent developments and to assess whether there is a 'crisis of disengagement' in terms of European political participation. Whether such a development is necessarily a 'bad thing' will also be considered.

Classical liberal democratic theory assumes active citizens, people interested in politics and capable of mobilization by mediating organizations such as political parties and interest groups. The recent evidence suggests that, across Western Europe in terms of partisan attachment for example, most people are simply not engaged in the political process in this way. They no longer feel close to any particular party (if they ever did) and they have more pressing claims on their limited spare time than attending party meetings or conferences.

There also appears to be a general lack of confidence in parties. According to Dalton and Wattenberg (2000a, pp. 264-5) based on the results of the World Values Surveys conducted between 1995-98 in eight OECD nations, parties came last in a list of 15 institutions in terms of the degree of confidence held in them. Some of the other institutions were the police, armed forces, the legal system, the churches, the trade unions, the European Union and the press. The police were the institution in which the greatest average confidence was expressed.

For many, such a result is part of a general weakening of civil society,

with the decline in the articulation of collective demands and social group influence, and the rise of specific individually-defined wants. There has been a substantial loss of social cohesion within society. Politics is no longer conducted by warring camps based on primordial tribal divisions as tightly knit sub-cultures have gradually lost their internal coherence. Accompanying this has been the rise of managerialism and technocratic solutions in politics. Basic rights and freedoms have long been secured, leading to questions at elections asking, 'what is really at stake any more?' For some, the 'end of ideology' has finally arrived, having been initially predicted as imminent fully 40 years ago (Bell, 1960).

The context within which these changes have occurred has also been influential. There has been the simultaneous rise of pressures derived from processes of decentralization and internationalization which have so far escaped any effective attempt to democratize them. No longer does the nation-state control the key affairs and interests of its people. Increasingly, strong supra-national forces are exerting enforceable influence on policy areas previously reserved to the competence of national governments such as industrial and social policy.

The rapid development of interactive and virtual technologies will inevitably alter the boundaries of communication between governments and their voters. Given this, political participation is certain to assume a radically different appearance, with a shifting balance between private and public engagement with politics. This will produce both new opportunities for the engaged and the informed, whilst new barriers to effective participation will be erected against those suffering from 'information poverty'. From perspectives rooted in classical democratic theory and the structured certainties of the immediate post-1945 period, these developments and the speed with which they have taken hold have understandably given rise to disquiet, even alarm. Central to these concerns are worries about the 'quality' of political participation and its link to the 'health' of West European democracy as a whole. Specifically, the extent of the 'democratic deficit' at national level, replicating the one already existing at EU level, has provided the focus for these concerns.

However, as we saw earlier, there has not yet been any major decline in voter turnout at national elections in Western Europe. Elections still exert a pull and retain a hold on most European electors as a widely accepted civic duty and as a social norm, regarded as a continuing and still credible means of holding governments to account. It would nevertheless be wrong for the European political elite to blithely assume that this situation will necessarily continue of its own accord. The 'danger' for politicians is that new forms of active political participation will

arise outside the 'blocked' channels that they control, rendering the scope and nature of public protest and criticism both erratic and unpredictable. The very predictability of the means of articulation of the public mood was something that European governments could generally rely on in the past. They were able to shape the political landscape without great fear that unconventional channels of protest would suddenly catch the public mood and force them to change. The rules of the political game were agreed and clear.

The apparent process of disengagement from traditional political processes may not be a bad thing if it acts to lessen the control of the political elite to set the political agenda and priorities. A critical citizenry is a vital element in the periodic revitalisation of mass democracy and if ordinary people find no palatable home in 'old' parties or interest groups, then a 'renewal from outside' rather than 'civic disengagement' might provide a more accurate description of recent developments. Through this process, new issues can clamber onto the political agenda rather than being taken up and then emasculated by the self-interested imperatives of old political elites. Grassroots activism encompassing broader, more spontaneous forms of participation should keep the political system fresh and responsive.

There will always be a diverse and pluralistic range of political participation activities within West European democracies, and concentrating on turnout at elections will only ever paint part of the overall picture. In particular, there is no cross-nationally applicable and set level of turnout at elections that establishes beyond doubt the legitimacy of a particular government or the effectiveness of the procedures for holding it to subsequent account. However, a low level of turnout of around 50 per cent does generally produce unequal participation by different social groups and a likely class bias in the political process since the more educated members of the electorate tend to vote more regularly (Lijphart, 1997).

It is important to stress that the growth in the numbers of 'critical citizens' and 'disaffected democrats' does not inevitably signify a crisis of 'civic disengagement'. If parties choose to adapt their internal procedures to these new forces of issue articulation, they themselves can be strengthened in the process. Even strong criticism of the political process is not necessarily a sign of disengagement on the part of voters - indeed it may be the reverse.

Popular satisfaction with a political system is mediated both by accumulated experiences and expectations. Governments will consequently always attempt to 'damp down' the 'unrealistic' expectations of voters when the political context in which the governments are forced to operate is changing so rapidly. In this way, the perception of deteriorating

performance on the part of the government can partly be moulded, even if the evaluative criteria of institutional performance necessarily remain subjective and contested.

The delicate balance between criticism and confidence in a liberal democratic political system shifts constantly and sometimes unpredictably. It remains the case that an excess of either will continue to pose fundamental questions affecting the 'performance' of politicians as well as the efficacy and vitality of the links binding ordinary citizens into the workings of the overall political process.

Chapter 6

Party Systems, Electoral Cleavages and Government Stability

PAUL WEBB

The central claim of this chapter is that the mobilization of new and resurgent cleavages since the 1960s has tended to further fragment West European party systems, and in a few cases to polarize them, though not necessarily in terms of left-right ideology. While such developments have often coincided with an increased incidence of minority government and coalitional collapse, it would be quite wrong to infer that party governments have become radically more unstable overall, for Western Europe remains a geo-political region dominated by moderate multi-partyism which is in no sense pathological for democracy.

What do we mean by the terms 'party system' and 'cleavage'? With respect to the former, any 'system' – be it social, political, biological or mechanical – consists of a recurring pattern of interaction between a set of component elements; thus, the term 'party system' refers to a recurrent pattern of interaction between a set of political parties. Moreover, the key dynamics involved in the process of interaction between parties involve both competitive and cooperative behaviour. From this, we may infer that a party system is a particular pattern of competitive and cooperative interactions displayed by a given set of political parties. In addition, it should be noted that parties interact in more than one political arena and at more than one level of political jurisdiction. Specifically, party systems operate in electoral, legislative and executive arenas, and at local, regional, national and European levels of jurisdiction. In view of this, it is apparent that statements to the effect that 'country X has party system type Y' are in reality simplifications which beg questions about which level of political jurisdiction and which arena of party interaction one is talking about. That is, West European countries actually have more than one party system, and quite different patterns of party interaction may be found within these different systems; more succinctly, parties operate within the context of multilevel politics. That