Personal Politics: Democracy, Participation and Collective Action

Greg Power
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June 2006
Introduction by the Carnegie UK Trust

*Personal Politics: Democracy, Participation and Collective Action* is one of two publications commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust to inform the launch of the Trust’s new Democracy and Civil Society Programme. Carnegie’s interest in strengthening democracy and civil society goes back many decades. Our founder had a passionate interest in the promotion of democracy and human rights and several of our sister foundations in the United States and Europe are working in this field.

Our concern with empowering the voice and engagement of various groups in society has been central to all of our recent programmes; most notably the Carnegie Third Age Programme, the Carnegie Young People Initiative and the Carnegie Rural Community Development Programme. The Carnegie Young People Initiative, for example, is the only specialist ‘think-tank’ in the UK focusing solely on young people’s participation in decision making, helping shape public policy and practice through research, innovative pilot projects and networking. The Trust has also for many years funded both experimental grass roots democracy building projects across the UK and Ireland, and a wide variety of local, national and international non-governmental organisations.

Our work and investigations suggest that encouraging people and institutions to become more democratic, is a challenge to be addressed systemically and structurally. By this we mean that we need to understand the systems and structures of power and its distribution in our society, if we are to be able to encourage those people and institutions holding power to share it, not least with those who for one reason or another are disadvantaged and disempowered. It is in this context that we commissioned Greg Power to write *Personal Politics: Democracy, Participation and Collective Action*. The report is an analysis of recent thinking on democratic engagement and change in the UK and Ireland. It aims to shed new light on the future challenges for tackling the democratic deficit.
When commissioning this work, we identified three questions that we wanted the report to address:

1. What can we learn from changing patterns of political behaviour amongst political systems and citizens?
2. How successful have government responses been to addressing the lack of citizen engagement in formal politics?
3. What is the role of independent foundations in informing future policy on strengthening participation and representation?

As an independent foundation, we have been keen to work collaboratively with others in this field. The Rowntree Trusts’ Power Inquiry and the Hansard Society’s Puttnam Commission on Parliamentary Democracy being two recent examples where we have been actively involved. We recognise that our strength lies in our independence and non-party political approach to such issues and we also acknowledge the experiences of others.

Our second report commissioned alongside Personal Politics, is a review of Civil Society, produced for the Trust by the LSE Centre for Civil Society. It too puts the importance of participation alongside representation and accountability at the centre of its findings, and aims to broaden our understanding of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland. This report will also be published in June 2006.

A central feature of our Democracy and Civil Society programme, is the Carnegie Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society. The Inquiry is chaired by Geoff Mulgan, former founder of Demos, No 10 Policy Head and now director of the Young Foundation.

Our developing plans for the Programme will be available online at carnegieuktrust.org.uk.

Finally I would wish to express the Trust’s thanks to Greg Power for the time and energy he dedicated to producing this excellent report.

Charlie McConnell
Chief Executive
About the Author

Greg Power is Director of Global Partners, an organisation promoting democracy, governance and human rights in countries around the world. He was formerly a special adviser to Robin Cook and Peter Hain, and has written widely on democratic issues and parliamentary reform.

Author’s note
This paper was originally commissioned by the Carnegie UK Trust as a review of publications and policies dealing with issues of democratic participation in the UK and Ireland. This publication is a shortened version, with much of the background that informed the original paper now removed, and the central arguments brought to the fore. However, it remains essentially a literature review. Rather than making specific proposals to address the problems of political disengagement it highlights possible areas for further work. It is hoped that the document still provides a coherent analysis of the issues around democratic participation. I am grateful to the Carnegie UK Trust for their support and their decision to publish this revised version.

Introduction
The publication of the Power Inquiry report in February 2006 raised issues of democratic engagement and reform high onto the political and media agenda. The report provides much evidence of the changing nature of political behaviour, the decline in turnout, falling membership of political parties and low levels of trust in politics. It argues that the current structure of democratic institutions is more suited to the nineteenth century than the beginning of the 21st century and is alien to citizenry that is more individualistic, independent and assertive.

Undoubtedly the report has brought new life to these issues, but it treads familiar ground. Concern about low levels of engagement has been a theme of ministerial speeches for some time, and especially since the precipitous drop in turnout at the 2001 general election. Meanwhile academics and think tanks have churned out numerous pamphlets in recent years about the problems of democracy and the possible ways forward.

The real value of the Power Inquiry will be if it acts as a catalyst for change. Despite the amount of time and effort given over to the subject by politicians and policy analysts, they have had very little success so far in altering patterns of political engagement.
The significant constitutional change since 1997 sought to update our institutions, but retained the top-down political architecture and styles of representation that have existed for the last century. Politics still relies on the same actors and institutions behaving in largely the same way as always.

This pamphlet - another addition to the ever-expanding canon of work on democratic disengagement - seeks to identify where, post-Power inquiry, efforts can most usefully be directed to achieve tangible change. It should be stated at the outset that this paper does not aim to provide all the solutions. Such comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of a study of this length. Rather, its purpose is to highlight where the gaps might be, and where further work is needed.

It argues that whilst politicians and the policy community have displayed much interest in the subject, their approach has been too general. Policy has been based on the headline trends in democratic participation which are well-known, and there has not been enough assessment of the specific causes and consequences within that headline activity. Policy makers are still struggling to grasp the defining characteristics of political disengagement, and have therefore had limited impact in dealing with it.

In the first place, the changing patterns of political behaviour reveal a complex patchwork of activity where, aside from the decline in general election turnout and party membership, it is not easy to discern linear trends. Chapter one shows that people claim to be as interested in politics as ever, and other types of political action are increasing. This mixed picture means that it is difficult to identify the precise causes of change - ‘political’ behaviour cannot be analysed in isolation, it is the product of wider social trends. Disengagement is as much a cultural problem as a political one. But the failure to identify a specific causal relationship makes policy responses difficult, and the tendency has been to opt for generalised prescriptions instead.

As chapters two and three highlight, the amount of time and effort going into addressing disengagement suggest that politicians and the policy community are equally concerned. But the nature of their responses has differed. Politicians have tended to look for technical fixes which do not alter the existing balance of power, such as finding new forms of consultation, using citizens’ juries, or deliberative panels to involve the public in the
decision-making process. All welcome innovations, but not enough to match the scale of change in public political behaviour.

The policy community, meanwhile, has tended to argue for much more radical and wide-ranging reform. The arguments for such upheaval are compelling, but rarely do they engage with the politics of how to implement such change. Lacking detail they provide a persuasive description of how things should be, but very little sense of how we get there.

It is unsurprising that neither approach has altered the public perception of politics, nor changed patterns of behaviour. And this has resulted in a default setting for policy, which is to rely on broad-based schemes designed to encourage greater participation in as many ways as possible, especially at the local level.

Achieving meaningful change requires policy that is specific and targeted. But it also means greater attention being paid to the causal relationships that affect political behaviour. Chapter four suggests three areas for further investigation that appear to have dropped through the cracks between the political approach to disengagement and that of the policy community.

Firstly, the new patterns of behaviour need to be understood as part of a wider cultural change rather than as a specifically political problem. The decline in collective activity and rise of individualism is not peculiar to the democratic sphere. As such, the search for solutions to political engagement needs to go beyond the political realm, and this has two aspects. The first is to build on the existing work on the ‘new citizens’ by providing a more detailed analysis of the incentives that motivate citizens and politicians to behave as they do and, in particular, the cultural, institutional and social factors that influence them. Understanding those wider motivations for ‘political’ activity would also mean putting the solutions in that wider context, and attempting to use cultural and social forces to shape patterns of behaviour. Here much could be learnt from DFID’s Drivers of Change programme and the emphasis it places on formal and informal rules, power structures, vested interests and incentives within institutions to effect political change and help the poor.

The other aspect is to find ways of embedding politics in everyday experience. Too many recommendations require significant movement by the public towards the institutions of politics. The emphasis must be on building democracy from the bottom-up, and adapting
political mechanisms so that they capture the political element in routine activity. The key is to start where the people are – moving the political processes towards citizens, rather than the other way around.

Secondly, the connection between levels of participation and political legitimacy needs to be re-assessed. The understandable response to lower levels of engagement is to promote greater participation. And greater public involvement should be a central feature of any strategy to enhance democracy. But what if the changed patterns of behaviour cannot be influenced by policy initiatives and levels of political activity remain as they are? There is a more immediate and pressing concern about the legitimacy of our representative institutions. For the foreseeable future all the key decisions that affect people’s lives will be made by institutions of representative democracy. Reform must not only seek to improve levels of participation, but at the same time improve the quality of, and ensure public faith in, representative democracy.

This means exploring innovations in co-governance which involve the public and politicians sharing decision-making responsibilities. There have been several well-publicised experiments around the world, such as the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, that provide models on which to build. At the same time the role of the MP needs rethinking, political representation needs to change, so that it is characterised by dialogue, responsiveness and partnership rather than hierarchy and deference.

Thirdly, almost every analyst of political disengagement comments on the extent to which the worst off in society are also marginal to democracy. Class, education and income are key determinants in how far a person is likely to engage with the political system. In other words, those who need help most from the state are least likely to be able to influence it. Despite this, there have been very few specific policies to engage the hard-to-reach groups, and instead the overwhelming majority of participation initiatives tend to attract those who are already active.

Long-term legitimacy will not simply derive from restructuring the processes of democracy, it must also be about outcomes. The links between social and political exclusion need to be more explicitly mapped, and policies built from this analysis. And the extent to which policies improve equality of political influence should be a central measure
of government success. At present, very little is measured, there are almost no indicators of how far government policy has met its objectives in the democratic sphere - the most convincing would be the extent to which they can succeed in involving the most neglected groups.

These three suggestions for further work will not resolve the difficulties in dealing with disengagement, but they may provide a richer analytical base from which to start. They identify areas that have been largely overlooked by politicians and policy-makers. Meaningful change will require structural reform that combines new forms of participation and representation and, most significantly, delegates power to the public. Gordon Brown has captured the problem succinctly, suggesting that we need to find the constitutional equivalent of independence for the Bank of England. In other words only by giving some power away will our democratic institutions enhance their influence and legitimacy. This is self-evident to students of democracy - the task is to convince politicians that it is also in their interests to do so.
1 Trends in Political Participation and Engagement

The assumption that political activity and interest is in terminal decline is not borne out by the evidence. It is true that some forms of traditional political activity have declined. Turnout at general elections in the UK and Ireland has fallen in the last two decades, traditional organisations such as political parties and trades unions have been losing members for some time and levels of trust in politicians and political institutions are at very low levels.

Yet other forms of political activity remain steady, and some are increasing. The number of people voting at local elections, despite always being low, has increased in the most recent elections in the UK and Ireland and more people voted in the 2004 UK European Parliamentary elections than at any time since the Parliament was created in 1979. Levels of political interest show few signs of decline and by some measures are going up. Although trust in politicians and political institutions is low, it has been lower in the recent past and, despite that, satisfaction with democracy is at relatively high levels. In addition, more people appear willing to go on a demonstration, sign a petition and boycott goods, than they were in the politically more turbulent 1980s.

The issue for politicians and policy-makers is less about trying to cope with a pattern of linear decline, than understanding the causes and consequences of increasingly complex political attitudes and behaviour. This chapter provides a brief overview of the trends and highlights some of those issues. In particular it looks at three aspects of political behaviour; firstly, the extent to which the public’s stated desire for greater political involvement exaggerates levels of potential participation; secondly, the extent to which new patterns of behaviour are characterised by individual rather than collective activity; and, thirdly, the differential engagement in political activity according to social and economic factors.

Participation in elections

The most commonly cited statistics in any discussion of political participation are those of electoral turnout. This is for two main reasons. Firstly they are one of the few tangible records of public action in the political sphere. Other measures of non-electoral engagement tend to rely on asking individuals how they did behave, or would behave in the future. As many political scientists acknowledge, this is often an unreliable guide to future, and even past, activity. There is a human tendency to over-estimate one’s willingness to engage in civic activities, leading to an inflation in the figures. The second reason is that recent electoral figures provide the starkest indications of a decline in political activity.
In the UK there has been a general, but not linear, decline in the number of people voting since 1950 when turnout peaked at around 84%. Between the 1950s and the 1990s turnout bobbled between 70% and 80%, but fell by six points in 1997 and dropped sharply to 59% in 2001. In 2005 the turnout increased marginally to 61.5%. In Ireland the drop has been just as dramatic, but over a longer period of time. Turnout hit a post-war high in 1969 at almost 77%, but since then has been steadily declining, and in 2002 the turnout of 62% was the lowest since the foundation of the state.

Election turnout UK and Ireland 1945-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNITED KINGDOM</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>IRELAND</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td></td>
<td>Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>81.9%</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
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<td>1955</td>
<td>76.8%</td>
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<td>71.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>78.7%</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>75.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>76.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>72.2%</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>76.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>78.9%</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>75.4%</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
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<td>66.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59.4%</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>62.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
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Source: IDEA
In every country in Europe, apart from Malta, turnout is lower now than it was thirty years ago, but in few countries has the fall been as precipitous as in the UK and Ireland and in northern Europe, and especially Scandinavia, turnout is typically over 80%.

It is too soon to tell whether elections to the recently-created devolved bodies in Scotland, Wales and London will suffer the same sort of decline, as there have been only two elections for each one. But they all start from a low base and the signs are not good. Less than half voted in the 2003 Scottish elections, dropping to 49% from 58% in 1999. In Wales, a turnout of 38% in 2003 was down from 46% in 1999. And in London turnout for the mayoral election was 36% in 2004, up two points since 2000, and was also 36% for the assembly, up three and a half points on 2000.

Other indicators of traditional political activity tell a similar story. Membership of the main political parties has been falling for some time, but perhaps more significant as a predictor of electoral participation is the number of people who identify strongly with one or other of the political parties. In the last two decades there has been a marked decline in the strength of party identification, from 46% identifying strongly with a political party in 1987 to 32% by 2000. This matters because, as the British Social Attitudes Survey highlights, it appears to have a direct relationship to the extent to which people trust the political system, and therefore how likely they are to engage with it. Crucially, party identification is a very strong indicator of whether an individual is likely to vote or not.

Satisfaction and trust in the political system appears also to be at a low ebb, although the pattern here is not one of straightforward decline. Between 1979 and 2004 satisfaction with government has swung between 10% and 57%. It reached its nadir in the aftermath of Black Wednesday in the early 1990s, and remained below 20% almost until the 1997 general election. Its highest points were reached immediately after the Falklands War where it peaked just over 50%, and after the 1997 election when it reached 57%. The government’s current rating sits somewhere in the mid to high 20’s. Interestingly, after seven years in office, satisfaction with Prime Ministers Thatcher, Major and Blair was all at similar levels.

However, when the public is asked whether they trust the government of the day to put the national interest before their own party interest the trend is clearer. As party identification has declined so too has trust in party political government, from almost 40% in 1974 to less than 20% in 2003. In Ireland there is a similar story, with four in ten believing that politicians do not care about the opinions of ordinary people, and even fewer believe that politicians are honest.
New patterns of political behaviour

Perversely, despite the low levels of trust in politicians and the political system, in both the UK and Ireland there is a general sense of satisfaction with democracy, which has gone up over the last thirty years. And not all forms of democratic engagement are suffering the same level of decline as that for the traditional representative institutions.

In the first place, interest in politics has remained fairly steady over the last thirty years. According to MORI figures, 60% were very or fairly interested in politics in 1971, 60% again in 1991, 59% in 2001 and 61% in 2005. The BSA surveys, using different questions, have lower levels of interest but show trends going up from 29% to 37% between 1986 and 2004.

This interest appears to be revealing itself in other types of political action. The number of people signing a petition, writing to a politician, or going on a demonstration are higher now than they were in the 1980s. The British Social Attitudes Surveys show how these activities have altered over the last twenty years, the vast majority of which have increased, with some fluctuation, since the 1980s. In Ireland, although fewer people are likely to sign a petition (26%), or take part in a demonstration (6%), other forms of civic activity are flourishing with 30% ‘very active’ at community level.

However, more recent analyses have highlighted two other forms of activity not captured by earlier research, namely, donating money and ‘political shopping’ – or ‘credit card activism’.

**Political participation 1986-2002**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed a petition</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted MP</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gone on a protest or demonstration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted media</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted Government department</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: British Social Attitudes (2003)
The Citizenship Audit\(^{13}\) suggests that people are more likely to give money to a civil society organisation than they are to vote as a means of influencing political outcomes and, in defining political activity as the intention to influence ‘rules, laws or policies’ they claim it stands as the most common form of political activism. According to their survey 62% donated money to an organisation, in the previous 12 months.\(^{14}\) It is also the highest ranked activity in Ireland where 61% donated money or paid membership.\(^{15}\) More tangible action came in the form of boycotting or purchasing goods and products for political reasons. Pattie et al found that almost a third (31%) had boycotted products (up from 4% in 1984)\(^{16}\) and 28% bought goods for political ends.\(^{17}\)

Clearly the pattern of political behaviour is changing, with the public as interested as ever in politics and some forms of participation increasing. But the figures should be treated with caution for three reasons.

Firstly, they do not suggest that a fully participatory democracy is about to flourish if only our political institutions were more responsive. There is a well-documented gap between intention and action when it comes to political activity. For example, research by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister into community involvement shows that although 82% support more community involvement, only 26% want to be personally involved, and in practice only 2% actually do so.\(^{18}\) Similarly, when questioned about willingness to pursue certain political activities, there is a significant gap between those that ‘would’ and those that ‘have’. So although 72% are willing to sign a petition only 52% did so whilst 46% would contact a politician, against 24% in reality.\(^{19}\)

There may be very good reasons for these discrepancies such as the absence of the right issues or opportunities. Even so it would be unwise to regard figures indicating the public’s willingness to be engaged as the compelling argument for institutional reform – although 61% voted at the last election, 70% have since claimed they did.\(^{20}\)

The second, conspicuous aspect of these figures is the individualised nature of much of this participatory activity. The public is becoming more active in areas such as ethical consumption (the buying or boycotting of goods on political principle), writing letters, donations, and petition-signing.\(^{21}\) It is a form of political engagement that requires little effort or engagement with other participants, and has a greater emphasis on individual, rather than collective action.
This phenomenon has been described as that of the ‘atomised citizen’ where the traditional mobilising agencies of civil society play a less important role in articulating and aggregating public opinion. Such a trend has wider implications for the structures of democracy which rely on the legitimacy of collective action and public faith in collective decision-making. Although certain forms of participation may be increasing, the new patterns of engagement appear to be distanciing the public from the ultimate collective act of choosing a government during a general election.

The third dimension is that political participation, across the board, is largely determined by social and economic well-being. In the 2005 general election 70% of the top social classes (AB) voted, against only 54% from the bottom social classes (DE). Significantly, the gap between the classes is growing. Whereas the difference was 13% in 1997, it was 15% in 2001 and 16% in 2005. In Ireland there is a similar pattern where only 58% of the unemployed voted, compared with 75% of those in work.

Levels of interest in politics tell a similar story. As mentioned above, overall levels have remained fairly steady for the last thirty years, and according to some measures are now going up. But this masks the fact that interest has declined to below 20% in social groups D and E, but is at almost 70% in classes A and B.

Whichever measure of political engagement is chosen there is a clear gap based on education, income and profession. Those with a degree-level education are far more likely to trust politicians (37%) than those with no formal qualifications (22%). Furthermore, degree-holders are more than twice as likely to sign a petition than those with no formal qualifications, almost five times as likely to give money to a campaigning organisation, five times as likely to go on a demonstration, and three times as likely to contact a politician.

Of those with a household income of less than £10,000, 20% participate in no political activities, compared with only 6% of those with an income over £70,000. Age also has an impact with the elderly least likely to be engaged in any form of participation.
Pattie et al sum up their findings thus,

“Political non-participants are more likely to be among the elderly, the poor, those with the fewest number of years in full-time education, Asians, and those who watch a great deal of television. By contrast the politically very active are more likely to be found among the middle-aged, those employed in professional occupations, the religious, those with a household income of £30,000 or more per annum, those who remained in full-time education to the age of 19 or beyond, and those who watch no television at all. So political voice is concentrated among those with the greatest resources, defined in terms of those with skill and income.”

Those at the bottom of society are becoming increasingly marginalised from any form of political activity. Whilst the better-educated, better-resourced and better-connected are enjoying greater influence, it is arguably at the expense of those who need it most.

**Conclusion**

Although the headlines about public attitudes suggest that political activity is falling through the floor, this is confined to one aspect of political activity, namely, voting at general elections. Turnout at local elections has not suffered the same drop, and although political trust is low, it has been lower in the recent past. The public are still interested in politics, but appear to be looking for new ways to engage.

However, none of the trends are uniform. Although the public appear to be interested in other forms of political participation, this should be treated warily. Firstly, it is not clear how far the gap between political intention and political action will be narrowed. Secondly, new patterns of political activity are often at arms-length. Participation is increasingly about paying for others to be engaged than doing it ourselves, and so membership does not have the same mobilising effect as it once did. In the words of Robert Putnam the fear is that ‘the role of the citizen is coming to be defined more as spectator than as participant.’

Thirdly, the trends in political participation highlight the imbalance between different social classes and sections of society. The development of new forms of participation has not helped the worst off find their political voice, and they are just as exclusive (and perhaps moreso) than traditional political activity. Those who suffer from economic and social exclusion are increasingly suffering from political exclusion as well.
Personal Politics: Democracy, Participation and Collective Action

Chapter two looks in more detail at the policy community's criticism of government and the themes of future political engagement initiatives. This chapter assesses the government response to the changing patterns of political participation across the UK and Ireland, from London as well as from Edinburgh, Cardiff, Belfast and Dublin. It argues that in each of the institutions the rhetoric of greater participation has flown higher than the reality. Ministers have been attracted by democratic innovations in different parts of the world using more deliberative mechanisms or experiments with 'co-governance'. So far, however, the translation into policy has been patchy and sporadic, and the overriding tendency is still to rely on traditional forms of top-down consultation. The chapter looks at the reasons for this apparent gap between rhetoric and reality, and argues the need for a clearer overarching strategy in which government seeks to engage the most hard to reach groups by genuinely relinquishing decision-making power to them.

The rhetoric of political empowerment

Over the last few years departmental ministers have set out in numerous speeches what the government is, and should be doing to improve civic and political participation. What is striking is not just the number of speeches devoted to these themes, but the fact that greater participation in the policy making process seems to be an issue for almost every department. In practice, there are three principal departments shaping policy; the Home Office, with responsibility for promoting citizenship and community cohesion; the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), which is placing increasing emphasis on devolving as
much power as possible to the local level; and the Department for Constitutional Affairs, which oversees electoral and constitutional arrangements. The announcements and analysis from each tends to reflect their departmental priorities, but it is possible to draw out several common themes.

The underpinning theme most frequently cited is the changing nature of the state and citizen empowerment. In Alan Milburn’s words, in response to a more demanding and independent citizenry, government has to move from the “paternalistic statism of the last century” to a system that works in partnership with the public. Labour has promoted the idea of the “enabling state,” which empowers citizens to take control of their own lives. As David Blunkett has put it, government needs “a more enabling, facilitating role, to help individuals and communities see a way forward – not by doing things for them but by doing things with them, as a means to lasting change”.

This desire to involve individuals in the decision-making process is a central feature of Labour’s pursuit of public sector reform, principally by providing greater ‘choice’ of hospitals and schools, but also by involving citizens more directly in the management of such services. As Milburn noted when he was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, appointing people to the boards of local bodies combined with greater use of innovative consultation mechanisms such as citizens juries would allow the public to determine policy priorities. And having been successfully used at the local level, he argued the next challenge is to “apply these methods right at the centre of government”.

The second, closely related, theme is about social justice, ensuring that these changes benefit those who need influence most. Again this is partly an argument about service provision, and finding ways to enable those most affected by public services to influence their provision. But there is also a concern about the links between social and political exclusion. Charlie Falconer, secretary of state for Constitutional Affairs, highlighted the extent to which the lower socio-economic groups were disengaging, leaving a “significant minority without a clear voice in and to government. This is a challenge we simply have to meet if people are not to be, in effect, disenfranchised.”

His argument was that our democratic institutions needed to make the process of engagement easier through a combination of constitutional reform to enhance the credibility of public institutions and strengthen public engagement with decision-making, alongside new forms of engagement with the boards of New Deal Communities or Foundation Hospitals.
The third theme is the decentralisation of power, so that decisions are taken closer to the communities affected by them. This has two dimensions, firstly, devolution to Scotland and Wales, and secondly decentralisation to local government and neighbourhoods.

In the first instance the new institutions in Scotland and Wales were established with an emphasis on openness and accountability. In Scotland, the Parliament and Executive have emphasised the importance of engaging the public in both institutions’ core activities. In addition, the Civic Forum was set up to “promote active participation in policy debate from all parts of Scottish civil society” through the provision of information, promotion of debate and strengthening links between civil society and political institutions. Similarly in Wales, it had been an objective of the Wales Office to “promote more well-informed and effective participation by citizens in decision-making” and to “strengthen the co-operation between statutory, voluntary and community sectors and to respond to communities’ own perceptions of their needs and priorities.”

In both countries there is an explicit intention to engage those at the bottom in the political process.

In England, Scotland and Wales there has been a desire to invigorate local democracy. The general tenor is what David Miliband, cabinet minister for local communities, has most recently called “double devolution.” That is the delegation of power not just to town halls, but beyond to neighbourhoods and individuals. This means a “new settlement between central government, local government and new forms of local governance,” to ensure that power is exercised at the lowest possible level. As Miliband put it, “power devolved means energy released.”

The final theme, reflected in much of the above, is the interest in the use of new techniques to engage with the public. There is a range of new mechanisms being piloted around the world, and most comprehensively assessed by Graham Smith for the Power Inquiry, but government interest has tended to focus on one or two, most notably those that Smith describes as deliberation and co-governance. The most popular deliberative mechanisms are forums such as citizens juries or citizens panels, which allow a small number of people to take evidence and investigate a specific area of policy. Their collective conclusion is rarely binding on the minister that commissions the work, but they provide an additional dimension to the decision-making process and have been used successfully at several levels of government.
However, it is the idea of co-governance, and specifically the example of ‘participatory budgeting’ in Porto Alegre, that crops up repeatedly in speeches. The process, as used in Brazil, allows members of the public to determine local and regional spending priorities. Through a series of local assemblies, individuals and neighbourhoods work with elected officials to identify the needs of a particular area and set the budget accordingly. Its strength has been the sheer number of people involved, but significantly the forums have succeeded in engaging marginalised groups, especially women and those on low incomes. As such, a variety of ministers appear to be interested in how such mechanisms can be deployed in the UK.

**Policies for political empowerment**

Although the four themes of empowerment, social justice, decentralisation and innovation are fairly consistent in government pronouncements, the extent to which they have been reflected in government policies, or indeed achieved their objectives, is less clear. The cross-departmental interest in the problem is reflected in a patchwork of departmental initiatives, creating an overlapping and sometimes confusing approach to the issue of political engagement.

There has been extensive constitutional change since 1997. The government has introduced a series of reforms, including devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, the Human Rights Act, the Freedom of Information Act, new electoral systems for Europe and the devolved bodies, and legislation establishing the Electoral Commission to supervise party political funding for the first time. Yet, the main purpose of these changes has been to update and make more transparent a creaking political system. With the exception of devolution, which is dealt with below, the reforms have not made government noticeably more responsive. Efforts at engagement have been pursued more by other departments, principally from the Home Office and the ODPM.

**Citizenship and community**

The Home Office, with its focus on citizenship and community cohesion has launched a series of initiatives over the last few years which have sought to develop citizenship skills amongst children and adults, promote volunteering amongst young people and bring together diverse communities. Although many such initiatives have been aimed at the poorest areas, involvement in the schemes is heavily self-selecting. In addition, there has been a tendency to support or find links with existing schemes. It is undoubtedly the intention of the schemes to engage with the least involved, but it is not clear how far they have succeeded in achieving those aims. As a result of the government reshuffle in May
2006, the Home Office’s responsibilities for community and civic renewal were moved to the renamed Department for Communities and Local Government (formerly ODPM) under the direction of Rt Hon Ruth Kelly. At the time of writing it is too early to tell the implications of these changes, but steps to group these functions within one department seem a sensible one.

The most recent innovation led by the Home Office is the Together We Can project. In theory, Together We Can should link the work of several government departments, including DFES and ODPM, to promote local civic activity around citizenship and democracy, regeneration and cohesion, local safety and health and sustainability. Its purpose is to give individuals the ability and confidence to engage in the political process and promote community organising. To this end, the emphasis is on giving people the skills so that they can help themselves. However, it is not clear how far this initiative will reach the most disengaged groups. The project appears to rely on existing interest, and while the proposed resources (including an innovative website which will direct like-minded people towards each other) are undoubtedly a positive development, it appears likely to benefit those who are already actively engaged.

Local co-governance
For its part, the ODPM has edged closer towards mechanisms for ‘co-governance’ in the promotion of political engagement at the local level. The department’s objective of greater citizen influence over local decision-making, especially in relation to locally provided services, has seen increased use of local partnerships which involve members of the public. This sort of local involvement has taken a variety of forms including the boards for local strategic partnerships, the New Deal for Communities, Sure Start and (although beyond the remit of ODPM) foundation hospitals and health action zones. The evidence suggests that members of the public are enthusiastic about engaging in these sorts of activities, and citizen involvement in the decision-making process is undoubtedly welcome.

However, this form of ‘co-governance’ has its limitations. The extent to which individual members of the public are capable of wielding influence on a board that is otherwise dominated by professional and political interests is questionable. As Graham Smith notes, “in practice citizens are often marginalised on partnership boards – power imbalances tend to favour the interests of institutionalised partners.”

It is a weak form of co-governance because the balance of power remains with institutional interests. Yet the other main part of the ODPM strategy may offer a route to a more fully realised idea of co-governance, namely the desire to delegate powers down to the lowest
level. In early 2005 the department published a series of papers on citizen engagement and neighbourhood renewal, ideas that have been added to by subsequent announcements and speeches. The thrust of the proposals is to develop ‘neighbourhood arrangements’ where, working in conjunction with local councillors, a neighbourhood could be given the power to establish bylaw, agree contracts with service providers, or even apply ASBOs. The documents offer the potential for community ownership of assets such as village halls, community centres and libraries, and for delegated budgets to be administered by the ward councillor. In addition, there are suggestions of individualised budgets, and other discretionary funds where users determine spending priorities.

These neighbourhood initiatives could not yet be described as exercises in co-governance, the proposals are worded very cautiously and it is unclear when or how such arrangements will be introduced. Yet they offer the potential for genuine delegation of power and potentially greater public involvement. It appears the department is edging towards the sorts of incentives that are likely to encourage citizen participation, but, despite the rhetoric of decentralisation, is still wary of delegating the powers that would develop a new form of local co-governance.

**Devolution and decentralisation**

As highlighted above, it was a stated intention of the newly-created bodies in Scotland and Wales to develop a more participative style of governing. That commitment to participation has seen some interesting innovations. The Scottish Parliament, for example, has a budget of £90,000 to run events which involve the public, and its Petitions Committee, is regarded as one of the most important ways in which the public can engage directly with politicians over policy issues.\(^{44}\)

The number of consultations by the Executive has also increased from 18 in 1983 to 164 in 2001.\(^{45}\) However, according to the Executive’s own research, participation activities are ‘relatively traditional’.\(^{46}\) The effect of relying on traditional methods is obvious, in that they tended to attract responses from practitioners and professionals rather than individuals. Significantly, only 2% of the participation exercises were specifically aimed at trying to engage the ‘hard to reach’ groups and the most under-represented were those from minority communities and lower social classes. There has been a similar experience in Wales where one study\(^ {47}\) found that new mechanisms such as the Equal Opportunities Committee and the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council have created a greater role for representative NGOs, but the pattern of participation is ‘more technocratic than democratic’.
At local government level there are obvious parallels between the nations. The Local Government in Scotland Act places the same sort of emphasis on community planning, and the need to develop local consortiums of interest involving local people. It makes the local authority responsible for ensuring a diverse range of community bodies are involved in the community planning process from business, trade unions and voluntary sector. Yet, again, individuals are mentioned only as an afterthought.\textsuperscript{48}

In Ireland, the emphasis on social partnership - the on-going dialogue between representative organisations of business, trade unions, civil society and government – and the high level of clientilism in local politics,\textsuperscript{49} combined with a weak system of local government, have meant that public participation and engagement has tended to be either through representative organisations for policy-making or at the personal level for the redress of individual grievances. But there is very little in between the two, and few opportunities for individuals or marginalised groups to influence the policy-making process. As Callanan points out, it is relatively easy to get people involved in issues that affect a neighbourhood, but more difficult to involve citizens in longer term policy development.\textsuperscript{50} The development of strategic policy committees at local level serve a similar purpose to the partnerships developed in UK and Scottish local government, but yet again there is little or no individual representation.\textsuperscript{51}

In Northern Ireland the effects of direct rule and the on-off nature of the Stormont Assembly have meant that little concerted effort has been put into improving participation, and key local government functions are performed by appointed boards rather than locally-elected politicians. Although district councils are engaged in consultation and participation exercises, the value of these is questionable, and one of the main routes may be to use the range of civic forums that have developed to promote inter-community relations as a way of ensuring local participation.\textsuperscript{52}

**Conclusion**

Government has clearly recognised, and is seeking to adapt to, the changing patterns of political participation. But movement has so far been slow. Although there have been some innovative uses of new forms of participation, most tiers of government are tending to rely heavily on traditional consultation mechanisms as the main way of engaging with the public. Where they have been used the innovations have proved popular. For example, the creation of a citizens panel as part of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) resulted in 4,400 applications for its 30 places. Use of such panels and citizens juries are undoubtedly
of benefit to the policy process and welcomed by the public. But such examples are still relatively rare, they have not yet become so widespread as to indicate a fundamental change in the nature of public engagement with the political process.

Significantly, government is still failing to reach socially excluded groups. Consultation exercises and the new forms of local partnerships being developed throughout the UK tend to get at those people already engaged in the political process. As such, influence exists for those who want it, provided they are prepared to seek it out and have the time to pursue it.

Genuine delegation of power, and the move towards co-governance, is where there has been least movement. The rhetoric of the enabling state, where government and people work in partnership to decide policy priorities, has not been matched by the genuine delegation of power. Instead the emphasis has tended to be on weakened versions of co-governance which incorporate citizen representation into governing bodies, rather than the wider citizen engagement in the decision-making process. As most politicians acknowledge, it was the promise of real power, political and financial, in the Porto Alegre model that encouraged the poorest to become engaged.

Co-governance combines new participatory mechanisms with existing representative structures, and arguably strengthens both. There are undoubted tensions between some new forms of public participation and traditional representative structures. By circumventing our existing institutions and going direct to public opinion the government may even be further undermining the legitimacy of those institutions. But as a working paper from the think tank Involve notes,

“At present representative democracy and participatory working are cast in conflicting roles, but both have vital strengths in a strong and healthy society, and there is clearly a need to explore ways in which the civic energy apparent in new participatory working, and the experience of decision-making in the public interest from years of representative democracy, can be brought together.”

Without a clear strategy for delegating power to disadvantaged groups it is unlikely that these forms of co-governance can be achieved. The noises coming from ODPM offer hope of change, and there is a commitment amongst ministers and departments in almost every tier of government to tackle the problem of differential disengagement. But there is little by way of an over-arching strategy. And without a conscious strategy to give power away, it is unlikely that it will occur.
3 The Policy Community and the Pressure for Change

If the practical response of governments to new patterns of engagement and its use of new participatory mechanisms have been disappointing, this does not reflect a lack of ideas. There is a lively debate on the subjects of citizenship, voter engagement and democratic renewal amongst think tanks and civil society organisations. This chapter provides a brief overview of some of the work going on within the policy community.

It starts with an assessment of what the Power Inquiry describes as ‘the rise of new citizens’, namely how the public has changed, and what this means for political participation. It then focuses on four general categories of activity around institutional reform, concepts of citizenship, social justice and the media. As in government there is broad agreement amongst think tanks and NGOs on the main aspects of the change in political behaviour, but much variety in interpretation and perceived implications.

The rise of new citizens
The most common reaction from think tanks, NGOs and the voluntary sector has been a concern about the decline of citizenship in all its forms. In trying to understand the phenomenon a number of organisations have attempted mapping exercises to pinpoint how exactly participation in all types of civic activity has changed in recent decades. These have varied from the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisation’s recently launched ‘Civicus Civil Society Index’, The Electoral Commission and Hansard Society’s ‘Audit of Engagement’, Ireland’s Democracy Commission, the IPPR’s Lonely Citizen commission and the ESRC-funded Citizen’s Audit carried out by Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley.

The most wide-ranging assessment of the changes in political participation and their implications for democracy came with the report of the Power Inquiry in February 2006. In its central chapter the report provides a compelling overview of the changes to society in the last century. It argues convincingly that the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy has created a better educated, more affluent and less deferential citizenry that wants more control over the decisions that affect their lives. But, faced with political institutions remarkably similar to those which existed at the end of the nineteenth century, the public is slowly withdrawing from traditional political activities and finding other more responsive and rewarding ways of engaging in politics.
The Power Inquiry’s main argument is that the public is just as active as it has always been and can be re-engaged by a series of institutional reforms — an argument examined in more detail below. But others are more sceptical. For example, the IPPR’s *Lonely Citizen* commission was more concerned about the erosion of social capital from the dramatic decline in active citizenship. Its two main concerns are that people, in general, are less active than they used to be, and that where they are active, they are more inclined to act as individuals than as part of a group. The concern for politics is the decline of what Pippa Norris has described as the decline of “mobilising agencies”. It is personal contact that is most likely to encourage individuals to participate in social and civic activity, but the decline of traditional mass-membership organisations such as the trade unions, churches and political parties has removed that contact and therefore made civic activity less ‘normal’.

Instead new forms of membership have taken their place. Although the much-cited growth of members in the RSPB, Greenpeace and the National Trust appears to buck the trend, they do not perform the same role as traditional mass organisations. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley are pessimistic about the implications, arguing that credit card activism means that pressure groups themselves no longer represent large and encompassing groups of active citizens. And as a briefing paper for the Power Inquiry points out, although there is much evidence that the decline of these mobilising agencies has significantly affected activity, “it is one of the least acknowledged factors in the development of Government policy” in this field.

However, the debate on the future of political parties is starting to develop within the policy community, especially with the recent moves towards state funding of political parties. Parties are now starting to look at what they might learn from other parts of civil society. Gordon Brown has shown a particular interest and has talked about the need for a ‘progressive consensus’ where political movements go beyond traditional party boundaries. Single issue groups have arguably been more successful than parties in articulating public concerns about the bigger issues. Whilst political debate is increasingly about the respective parties’ economic and administrative competence, pressure group politics is much more about principles and vision. It perhaps lacks policy substance sometimes, but contains ideas powerful enough to mobilise people.

**Post-democracy: the case for institutional reform**

The response of the Power Inquiry to the changed nature of political participation was to propose a slew of reforms aimed at overhauling the UK’s democratic structures.
The argument is that the traditional means of politics are no longer effective in the face of global markets, international institutions and a less deferential citizenry. In the face of such pressure, politics has become more technocratic and less about competing ideas and values. What’s more, the public has recognised the weaknesses, and this is why they are disengaging. In turn, this disengagement is further undermining the legitimacy of the system, and forcing politicians to spend more time talking to each other than to a public audience. The result is an insular and introspective political elite with diminishing relevance for the electorate.

Colin Crouch, who describes the phenomenon in his *Coping with Post Democracy*, argues that democracy, in its fullest sense, reached a peak after the second world war and has been in decline ever since. He suggests that none of the political institutions should take their current positions for granted and runs through a “familiar list of policies” for reform, including citizenship education, reviving local government, reform of the House of Lords, and proportional representation.  

The Power Inquiry adds some additional reforms to that list, such as opening up the party system and giving citizens the ability to initiate legislation. But the majority of their proposals fall into a well-rehearsed range of reforms designed to control executive power, decentralise decision-making, open up the party system and make government more responsive to public opinion.

As a recent publication from Demos argues,

“For our democracies to thrive we must stop discussing them as if ‘the public’ could be herded back into a pen and convinced to follow the routines and obligations of a set of external institutions. Instead, the institutions and their principles must become endogenous – embedded in the fabric of everyday life, influencing the nature of everyday interactions without pre-determining their outcome.”

It is undoubtedly the case that the institutions of democracy do need thorough reform, for all the reasons set out by the Power Inquiry and others. And the Report provides a convincing direction of travel. But its description of how we get there is vague. Given the vastly changed nature of political citizenship that the Inquiry describes, it is not clear how these institutional changes would alter the new patterns of public participation.
The test for advocates of institutional reform is not simply to highlight the principles that would underlie new forms of democracy but to identify the incentives that would cause political actors and citizens to change their behaviour. It is worth remembering that almost half the population do not engage in any political activity - apart from voting. The problem is as much cultural as institutional.

To get to the sort of ‘Everyday Democracy’ being espoused by Demos means that political institutions need to move towards the people – rather than hoping that institutional reform will bring the people back. And this is where the greatest hope for innovation lies, by trying to find reforms that embed politics at a much deeper level, identifying the incentives for political behaviour and finding new and complementary democratic institutions reflect the common experience.

Citizenship and democracy

Another dimension to the changing patterns of participation is the debate about citizenship itself. The general thrust of government, and particularly Home Office, policy is to find ways of equipping and encouraging citizens to become more active. The minister most closely associated with the initiatives is Hazel Blears, whose proposal published by the Fabian Society is for a Citizens’ Participation Agency. Drawing on the positive public involvement in the New Deal for Communities, patients’ forums and other local partnerships, she argues that such an agency would tap into a latent desire for greater citizen involvement in local services.

Few other authors have picked up on Blears’ proposals. Instead the main current of debate, particularly on the left is about the nature of citizenship in the context of public sector reform. The most comprehensive analysis is David Marquand’s book, The Decline of the Public, which argues that the Labour government has introduced market values into the public sector, and in so doing, corroded the public sector ethos which fosters citizenship. Citizens are being turned into consumers of public services. The main implication, for the purposes of this paper, is that whilst citizenship implies a wider stake in all public services, consumerism has a link to only the services which affect you directly. Consumer-citizenship immediately limits your sphere of interest and influence.

Catherine Needham, writing in a similar vein, claims that consumerisation “threatens to hollow out the concept of citizenship, removing all that is political and participatory.” It is also a theme picked up by the NCVO, in their report Civil Renewal and Active Citizenship.
They note the tension in government policy between the “desire to strengthen community ties and to foster values such as mutuality, solidarity and altruism” and the focus on,

“Individuals as consumers, rather than as members of communities … many of the processes introduced to facilitate participation in local government, such as citizens’ juries, focus groups, or deliberative panels, have involved ‘local people as consumers of services rather than citizens discussing wider issues.’”

Despite the swiftness with which this theme has been picked up in the last few years, there is more analysis than prescription at the moment. This is partly because opponents of the theory tend to emphasise the improved performance of public services, and don’t engage in arguments about participation. And proponents verge on the assumption that it is only high-minded civic virtue that is a legitimate motive for people to behave as citizens.

Yet the debate remains more ideological than practical. It may be that as Labour’s public sector reforms continue to unfold so the debate may become less theoretical and develop some tangibility. But as with the example of Porto Alegre, there needs to be a recognition that participatory citizenship is most likely to be the combined result of self-interest and wider social responsibility.

**Social justice and democracy**

Differential engagement with the political process is a theme that runs through publications from government, think-tanks and academics. The first chapter highlighted the extent to which social class, income and education all have a bearing on how likely individuals are to participate in any form of political activity. This debate is also connected with related themes around identity and belonging, that is, citizenship as a state of being, rather than an activity. And here there is a great deal of work about the nature of modern citizenship in relation to immigration, ethnicity and class, although its relevance is limited to political participation.

In most of the work the issue of political inequality informs the arguments, but has yet to develop as a specific area in its own right. The policy community has developed few possible responses to differential engagement or proposals designed to tackle inequality of participation and influence.

However, a related theme has started to develop, namely, the tension between decentralisation and social justice. That is, how to implement national policies designed to help the worst-off and secure national standards of welfare provision, but also delegate policy-making power
to other institutions. This has been recognised by the Scottish Council Foundation and more recently by the IPPR in their Social Justice: Building a Fairer Britain. As the IPPR authors argue, government has “failed adequately to confront the relationship between social justice and democracy” and argue for both greater delegation of control and redistributive policies, with central government imposing minimum standards. They conclude “a more democratic state, particularly a more local state, can be both compatible with and help embed wider social justice, not least through the flourishing of local initiatives and experiments with different policies.”

Of all the categories, this seems most likely to develop tangible policies in the short-term. Because it is based on identifiable objectives, namely engaging and benefiting marginalised communities, its progress can be measured. It will undoubtedly involve experimentation at the local level, but this will need to be co-ordinated and monitored by central governments, and it seems the most likely to route to achieve meaningful co-governance.

**Media and politics**

The issue of democratic engagement has generated much media interest, especially since 2001. Following the election that year the BBC undertook a significant piece of research looking at the causes and consequences for political programming. It argued that the BBC “needs to get back in touch with how the public are feeling, how they are living, their issue-led beliefs, their hopes and fears … [the BBC] … is in a unique position to fulfil the fundamental objective of re-democratising democracy, to make it work and valued.”

What the research failed to do, was look at the extent to which the media contributed to the low of levels of trust and engagement with the political process, although this has been a feature of many subsequent publications. The omission reflected a growing polarisation, which became more pronounced after the publication of the Hutton Report, between the media, who generally blame the behaviour of politicians for lack of engagement, and politicians themselves who blame poor media coverage. The debate, with one or two notable exceptions, has remained stuck in this rut for some time.

The Government-commissioned review of government communications, chaired by Bob Phillis, noted a three-way breakdown in trust between government (and politicians), the media and the public leading to disillusionment, disengagement and declining participation. It urged a reappraisal of the relationship between politicians and the media, and made a
number of recommendations to ensure more rigorous standards, openness and honesty with the public. However, the report itself seemed to think these were forlorn ambitions, noting that “the media is not the government’s opposition, and this illusion is dangerous to the democratic process”, the rebuilding of trust will,

“Be influenced by the reaction both of politicians and the media. . . . If this vicious circle is to be broken and the current relationship between politicians and the media is to change, one of the parties needs to take a lead. . . . the hope was expressed that ‘governments should play it straight and the media should play it fair.’ We believe that whilst this is a laudable aspiration, as things stand it is an unrealistic and unachievable objective.”

There have been many recommendations designed to call the media to account for its activities and improve the reliability of reporting. For example, establishing a media oversight commission or giving the Press Complaints Commission statutory powers of regulation have been mooted. The purpose would be to create a regulatory body that could enforce fines on newspapers for publishing erroneous stories and commit them to printing apologies that have the same prominence in the newspaper as the original story.

However, there seems to be little political appetite for these proposals within government. Politicians are nervous of trying to regulate a media which is extremely defensive about its position and remarkably influential in ending political careers. Any suggestion that newspapers might be formally regulated generates hostile headlines in almost every newspaper. Ministers will voice their concerns in private, but know that as soon as they do so publicly they will be rounded upon by journalists. This matters when one considers that the history of enforced ministerial resignations over the last fifty years has been played out in the press. In recent years, and especially since the early 1990s, the fate of beleaguered government ministers has been determined as much by the media interpretation of their failings as by their political support in cabinet and parliament.

The journalist John Lloyd has noted in his book *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*, the current situation sees the media elevate itself to the status of an elected institution, representing the public interest, just as those claims are looking more tenuous. The danger of the present situation is that the media “fail to make us understand the world. And they fail to make us understand the world in a way which often lets governments . . . off the hook.”
Short of workable proposals most commentaries on the relationship between media and politics tend to reflect Joseph Pulitzer’s comment that ‘A cynical, mercenary demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself.’

Conclusion
The above is a very crude summary of some of the thinking going on with the policy community about the nature of political engagement. The main themes can be even more crudely summarised as:

- Post-democracy – the problem is the system, we need more institutional reform
- Active citizenship – the problem is the people, they need to be more active
- Consumer-citizenship – the problem is the government, they are turning the public sector into a marketplace
- Social justice – the problem is inequality, we need common solutions to tackle political, social and economic exclusion
- The media and politics – the problem is the media – or politicians, depending on your point of view

Most analyses incorporate several of these themes in the same papers. The weakness in much of the arguments, though, is a disconnection from the everyday experience of politics. There is firstly a tendency to assume that everyone is as concerned about the subject as the writers of the various pamphlets, and that once the public recognise how important it is – be that through citizenship education, constitutional reform or a fairer media – they will change their behaviour. Yet there is little analysis of the incentives for patterns of behaviour or how they can be shaped. The strength of the Porto Alegre example is that it combined self-interest and altruism, and appealed to the concerns of both citizens and politicians. So far, few authors have examined those sorts of motivations, or how such lessons might be applied elsewhere.

Secondly, there is very little explanation of how to implement the sorts of far-reaching political change envisaged. Whether it is a new constitutional settlement, a better relationship between the media and politicians, or the need to address socio-economic differences in engagement, many publications set out how it should be, rather than dealing with the detail of how we get there. The benefits of many schemes might seem self-evident...
and generate broad public support, but this is not necessarily going to convince those with the power to change things – usually politicians – to do so. There is little engagement with the politics of democratic reform, and cursory examination of the practical steps needed to get from where we are, to where we want to be.

Finally, many do not address the tensions between increasing participation and improving representation. The strength of co-governance initiatives is that they use innovatory participation mechanisms in conjunction with the traditional practices of representative democracy. Few bring the two together, although this where the most interesting innovations are likely to emerge.

It is perhaps in the nature of the think-tank world that it has a tendency to blue-sky thinking, that is longer on analysis than prescription. Many of these analyses and recommendations will continue to shape the debate about the future of democratic politics. But the most useful pieces of work are the ones that suggest measurable outcomes. Whether this is in examining how democratic innovations might be transported to different settings, dissemination of best practice or tying participation to social and economic objectives, they offer greater hope of tangible change in the short to medium term.
4 Next Steps for Democratic Engagement

Engagement with the political process is changing. Although the public is still interested in political issues it is less likely to express that interest in general elections, and is finding other ways of engaging beyond the ballot box. However, these new forms of engagement are more likely to be carried out by individuals rather than groups, and involve donating money rather than time. As such, the traditional mobilising function of membership organisations within democracy is waning.

The headline trends, though obscure, pronounced differences between social classes. The worst-off in society are far less likely to be engaged in any form of political activity than those in other social groups. This is as true of voting and party membership as it is of newer forms of consultation and engagement. Whereas interest and activity is increasing amongst the higher social classes, it is falling steadily for those at the bottom. Those at the margins of society are becoming ever more politically marginalised.

These changing patterns have prompted new efforts to improve participation and engagement. There are some exciting and innovative experiments going on around the world using deliberative democracy, co-governance and direct democracy. Within the UK and Ireland a number of mechanisms have been tried to create new ways of involving the public in the policy-making process. And, within the policy community there is a lively debate about the state of democracy, and where it should go next.

However, there has so far been little tangible change as a result of all this interest. In particular there is a gap between the detailed analysis of electoral turnout, attitudes to politics and changed patterns of behaviour, and the generalised nature of most of the recommendations for reform.

The policy community has preferred to deal with the overarching themes of democratic malaise and provided some coherent analyses of the bigger social trends. But this has offered little for policymakers in understanding the individual causes and consequences within this bigger picture, nor what to do about it. Politicians, meanwhile, have tended to fall back on broad-based schemes that seek to improve participation in general, rather than discrete policies which address issues faced by specific groups or sections of society. Indeed, promoting greater participation has almost become a default activity for policymakers and politicians hoping to cover as many manifestations of disengagement as possible.
Policy needs to be more specific and targeted. And it needs goals against which its success can be judged. This final chapter argues that there are three sets of questions which have, by and large, been missed and which may provide more substantial and specific policy proposals. Firstly, what are the identifiable factors shaping current patterns of behaviour, and how can we use them to embed democracy? Secondly, what other issues, aside from promoting participation, should policymakers be addressing? Thirdly, what specific and measurable objectives can be used to judge policies for promoting greater participation? These questions are dealt with in the next three sections.

As mentioned at the beginning of the pamphlet, the purpose is not to provide comprehensive or detailed solutions to the problems of disengagement. This goes far beyond the scope of this project. Instead, the intention is to offer potentially fruitful avenues for further enquiry, which may lead to a more detailed understanding of the issues, and from there a different emphasis in the policy response.

1) Embedding democracy amongst ‘new citizens’

Changing patterns of political engagement cannot be viewed in isolation. The new patterns of behaviour are not peculiar to democratic engagement, but are linked to wider social trends and reflect more general shifts in activity. Several reports, including the Power Inquiry, have sought to put democratic practice in the context of this broader change.

Most obviously, the post-war period has been marked by a decline in collective activity – at work, at leisure and in social life – and an increased emphasis on the individual, as a unit of production and consumption. The decline of industry is often cited as a major factor, and it is possible to track the rise and decline of mass political parties alongside that of mass production, and the large cohesive communities it spawned. It was the collective experience of the workplace, above all else, which shaped the labour movement. As mass production has declined so the working experience has diversified, and is now more likely to differentiate us from colleagues than bring us together. And whereas in the first half of the 20th century people joined political parties because of a certain shared history and common experience, now for party members the only point of commonality is often membership of the party itself.

Social and cultural trends have reinforced this. New technologies have appealed to our desire for independence and self-reliance in communication, leisure pursuits and even shopping. Whilst through advertising we are told on a daily basis that various products will...
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differentiate us from the crowd – individuality being the height of aspiration. But all this means that the everyday experience is increasingly characterised by isolation rather than group activity.

Given the extent of change the search for solutions to political engagement needs to go beyond the political realm. And this work needs to operate at two levels. The first is to understand the incentives that motivate citizens and politicians to behave as they do, and why there is such a mismatch between the two. This sort of empirical research would build on the existing analysis of the rise of the ‘new citizens’, but would provide a closer examination of the cultural, institutional and social factors that shape behaviour. Understanding those wider motivations for ‘political’ activity would also mean putting the solutions in that wider context, and attempting to use cultural and social forces to shape patterns of behaviour.

In this endeavour, analysts of democracy would do well to learn from the Department for International Development’s Drivers of Change programme. This innovative approach to helping the poor looks at the role of underlying structural factors in effecting change. Its the interaction between agents and institutions that shapes behaviour, and specifically the “formal and informal rules, power structures, vested interests and incentives within … institutions.” It provides a model for understanding of the factors shaping political behaviour and the policies that might influence them.

The second level would identify ways of embedding political activity within the experience of daily lives rather than hoping that citizens, in an effort to be more engaged, will dramatically change their current routines. Too many recommendations require significant movement by the public towards the institutions of politics. The emphasis must be on building democracy from the bottom-up, and adapting political mechanisms so that they capture the political element in routine activity. The key is to start where the people are – moving the political processes towards citizens, rather than the other way around.

The characteristics of ‘new citizens’ have been explored by the Power Inquiry and others and they all make useful recommendations for ways of re-engaging them by making politics more responsive and democratic. However, those recommendations need to be supplemented by reforms that connect more directly with the analysis. A broader conception
of democratic activity would seek to understand why patterns of citizen (and politician) behaviour changed in the first place. Not only to find the incentives to shape future behaviour, but also to capture and channel existing activity into the political process.

2) Promoting participation and representation

There are well-founded concerns about the effect of low engagement on the continued legitimacy of collective decision-making, and thus the basis of democratic politics. But it is not necessarily the case that the promotion of greater participation will secure that legitimacy.

Promoting greater citizen activity should, of course, be a central feature of efforts to reinvigorate democratic politics. However, given the scale of change described above there is no guarantee that these efforts will have the desired effect. It should be remembered that almost half the population does not regularly engage in any way with the political process, other than through the act of voting. It should be remembered voting remains the single most popular political act. Whilst opinion polls show that around 70% of people would participate in mechanisms such as referendums or participatory budgeting, as mentioned earlier, 70% of the public also think they voted at the last general election. The gap between intention and action described in chapter one suggests caution is needed in anticipating potential levels of participation, especially in the short-term.

And the question of legitimacy in the short-term is an important one. For the foreseeable future, all the key decisions that affect people’s lives will be made by institutions of representative democracy. Reform must not only seek to improve levels of participation, but at the same time improve the quality of, and ensure public faith in, our representative institutions.

This means addressing the tension between greater participation and effective representation. Many innovations aimed at improving participation do so by going direct to the public, and by-pass existing democratic structures and their representatives. They therefore highlight the weaknesses of the representative bodies, but fail to address them. Greater public participation should enhance the democratic process, but it also needs to complement existing political structures.

Representation also needs to change. It is clear that traditional forms of delegated representation are no longer suitable for an individualised citizenry used to direct influence in most aspects of their lives. Yet this individualism strikes at the heart of the democratic
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process. Democracy is, after all, the mother of collective processes. The key question for policy-makers must be how to secure the legitimacy of collective decision-making in an age of individualism.

In this context political representation needs to be characterised by dialogue, responsiveness and partnership rather than hierarchy and deference. There are existing parts of representative democracy that reflect these characteristics and enjoy popular support, such as the constituency work of MPs. But the role of the MP and that of parliament in general needs to be rethought so that it provides direct engagement and deliberation with voters.

Again the example of co-governance initiatives, and especially Porto Alegre, highlights the extent to which such exercises can reinforce the legitimacy and role of the representatives, by increasing personal contact between voters and politicians, and improving public understanding of the decision-making process. But so far there has been relatively little exploration of how political representation could be enhanced and extended to secure that continued legitimacy.

3) Reaching the hard-to-reach

In the long-term legitimacy will not simply derive from restructuring the processes of democracy, it must also be about outcomes. And of all the objectives for policy in promoting greater participation, the most significant aspect is ensuring equality of access to influence from all sections of society. It also provides a tangible measure against which policy can be judged.

As was highlighted earlier, social class, education and income are key determinants in how far a person is likely to engage with the political system. Those who need help most from the state are least likely to be able to influence it. And while this is acknowledged by almost every politician and author who has commented on the subject there has so far been very little by way of tangible policy designed specifically to rectify matters.

Instead there appears to be a hope that general government support for participation initiatives will somehow capture the ‘hard to reach’ groups. However, as Graham Smith points out,
Without an over-arching strategy that sets measurable targets for engagement, it is likely that they will continue to fail. In the first place, the links between social and political exclusion need to be more explicitly mapped, and policies built from this analysis. And the extent to which policies improve equality of political influence should be a central measure of government success. At present, very little is measured, there are almost no indicators of how far government policy has met its objectives in the democratic sphere - the most convincing would be the extent to which they can succeed in involving the most neglected groups.

The government is too reliant on forms of engagement that are likely to reach only those who are already engaged. Across UK government departments, in the devolved administrations and in Ireland, engagement initiatives are based around interaction with civil society organisations or those with the time and the inclination to become involved. Few offer the hope of genuine co-governance, and with it the promise of real influence over the crucial decisions that affect the quality of people’s lives.

It is the delegation of real power to communities, and the opportunity to influence spending decisions which attracted poorer groups into the process. In Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting appealed to participants’ self-interest, but at the same time brought them into wider decision-making structures with broader considerations. In the UK and Ireland much political rhetoric has been devoted to localisation and delegation, but efforts have so far been half-hearted and politicians, in general, have been wary of ceding control of such decisions, especially relating to financial matters.

Achieving social and economic objectives as part of an engagement strategy means relinquishing some power, but this will not happen without a central strategy. If people are to become involved and stay involved they need to know they are having an influence on outcomes. Even if the final decision is not theirs, they need to understand how that decision was made. This points to co-governance initiatives that improve contact between people and the political system and give them real influence. It is in these sorts of initiatives that the ‘enabling state’ is most likely to develop.

“Open access and equal opportunity will not necessarily lead to participation by politically-marginalised or hard-to-reach groups – just because an opportunity is available does not mean that participation takes place … therefore this basic principle has to be supplemented by a second consideration – social inclusion.”

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Conclusion

At the time of writing the issue of democratic engagement is high on the political agenda thanks to the media interest generated by the Power Inquiry. The generally positive response from the political parties is obviously welcome. Yet the political response has again been characterised by talk of modifying existing political structures to lift public faith in politics rather than to improve participation. It reflects the tendency of the political classes to want to preserve, as far as possible, the existing structures of power. And it still involves the same actors and institutions behaving in largely the same way as always. This is not a tenable long term strategy when faced with a more assertive, independent and demanding citizenry that is gradually disengaging.

As this pamphlet has shown, the new patterns of political behaviour are complex, with few linear trends. Developing policies to address them is equally complex. They need to achieve not only a change to the structure of our political institutions, but a change in their culture so that they are more responsive, communicative and deliberative. Most difficult of all, policy needs to find ways of connecting directly with the public and shift the public understanding of political engagement. None of this will happen quickly, but it is hoped that the three areas outlined in this chapter provide a base from which to approach these questions.

It may be that Gordon Brown has captured the problem most succinctly. He has taken a much greater interest in democratic reform in the last couple of years and is said to be searching for the constitutional equivalent of giving independence to the Bank of England. It appears to be a recognition that only by giving some power away will our democratic institutions enhance their influence and legitimacy. It remains to be seen whether these objectives can be achieved. It appears to be a recognition that only by giving some power away will our democratic institutions enhance their influence and legitimacy. It remains to be seen whether these objectives can be achieved. The solutions may be self-evident to students of democracy - the task is to convince politicians that it is also in their interests to do so.
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Head Office
Comely Park House
80 New Row
Dunfermline
Fife KY12 7EJ

Tel +44 (0)1383 721445
Fax +44 (0)1383 620682

Email Charlie@carnegieuk.org
www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk

London Office
Second Floor
Downstream Building
1 London Bridge
London SE1 9BG

Tel +44 (0)845 456 1697
Fax +44 (0)845 456 1698

Email info@carnegieuk.org

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