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## INTRODUCTION

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The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form. *Ruling the Void* is about this problem. It deals with the problem of parties, of governments and of political representation in contemporary European democracy, and stems from a wider concern with the fracturing politics of popular democracy. It deals with how the changing character of political parties impacts upon their standing, legitimacy, and effectiveness, and thereby also on the standing, legitimacy and effectiveness of modern democracy. Although focused on Europe, and highlighting problems that are of particular relevance to Europe, the implications of the argument run much more widely.

The position that is developed here owes much to E.E. Schattschneider's *The Semi-Sovereign People* (1960) and to his contention that control over political

decision-making sometimes lay beyond the reach of the ordinary citizen. This was a familiar theme in the political science of the 1960s, and was echoed in different ways, and differently contested, by a variety of critical scholars in the so-called pluralist-elitist debate. But although that particular debate has since been put to rest, Schattschneider's thesis continues to be highly relevant – although now in a stronger and less hesitant form. Indeed, almost a half-century later, it seems that even semi-sovereignty is slipping away, and that the people, or the ordinary citizenry, are becoming effectively *non-sovereign*. What we now see emerging is a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component – easing away from the demos.

As I try to show in this book, much of this has to do with the failings of contemporary political parties. I am not suggesting that there has been wholesale failure here. Rather, I am seeking to draw attention to an ongoing process in which there are party failings, in which democracy tends to adapt to these failings, and in which there is then a self-generating momentum whereby the parties become steadily weaker and democracy becomes even more stripped down.

#### DEMOCRACY AND INDIFFERENCE

When I first began to consider the notion of non-sovereignty, I associated it primarily with indifference: indifference towards politics, on the one hand, and indifference towards democracy, on the other. Indifference has always been one of the more neglected elements in the study of the relationship between citizens and politics, and its importance seemed to be badly underestimated by much of the literature on political trust and mistrust that emerged in the late 1990s. From

my reading, the real problem at issue here was not trust as such, at least in the sense of there being a problem of popular mistrust of politicians and governments; rather, it was one of interest, or lack of interest, such that the sense of hostility that some citizens clearly felt towards the political class seemed less important than the indifference with which many more citizens viewed the political world more generally. To put it another way, whether politicians were liked or disliked, trusted or distrusted, seemed to matter less than whether they were seen as having a real bearing on citizens' life situations. Of course, the dividing line between indifference and hostility is not always very pronounced, and, as Alexis de Tocqueville once observed in the case of the old French aristocracy, it is easy to breed contempt for those who continue to claim privileges on the basis of functions they no longer fulfil. But even if indifference does lead on to hostility or lack of trust, it remains an important phenomenon in its own right, and hence it is also important to recognize that politics and politicians might simply be deemed irrelevant by many ordinary citizens (see also van Deth, 2000).

Indifference to politics and politicians was not just a problem on the ground, and was not simply confined to what could be seen in the realm of popular culture and attitudes. It was also compounded by the new rhetoric being employed by various politicians in the late 1990s, as well as by a growing anti-political sentiment that could be seen in the specialist literature on policymaking, institutional reform, and governance. Here too it seemed that politics as a process was often being denigrated or devalued, and that indifference to politics was deepening still further. Within the world of the politicians, the most obvious case was that of Tony Blair, who famously set himself up as being a leader above politics and political partisanship. 'I was never really in politics,'

he claimed in a BBC2 television interview broadcast on 30 January 2000, during his first term as prime minister. 'I never grew up as a politician. I don't feel myself a politician even now.' Blair was also at pains to caution against the belief that politics could solve problems. For him, the purpose of the new 'progressive' agenda was not to provide solutions from above, but to help citizens to search for their own solutions – 'to help people make the most of themselves'. Politics in this sense was not about exercising the 'directive hand' of government, but about the synergy that could be generated by combining 'dynamic markets' with 'strong communities'. (Blair, 2001). In an ideal world, it seemed, politics would rapidly become redundant. As one of his close cabinet colleagues, Lord Falconer, was later to remark, 'depoliticizing of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people' (Flinders and Buller, 2004).

At one level, this was a simple populist strategy – employing the rhetoric of 'the people' as a means of underlining the radical break with past styles of government. At another level, however, it was an approach that gelled perfectly well with the tenets of what were then seen as newly emerging schools of governance – and with the idea that 'society is now sufficiently well organized through self-organizing networks that any attempts on the part of government to intervene will be ineffective and perhaps counterproductive' (Peters, 2002: 4). In this perspective, government becomes subordinate and deferential, and no longer seeks to wield power or even exercise authority. The relevance of government declines while that of non-governmental institutions and practices increases. In Ulrich Beck's terms, the dynamic migrates from politics with a capital *P* to politics with a small *p* – or to what he sometimes calls 'sub-politics' (e.g., Beck, 1992: 183–236).

Anti-political sentiments were also becoming more evident in the more specialized policy-making literature of the late 1990s. In 1997, Alan S. Blinder published an influential article in *Foreign Affairs* expressing his concern that government in the United States was becoming 'too political' (Blinder, 1997). Blinder, who was then a leading professor of economics and deputy head of the Federal Reserve, and hence a weighty contributor to this debate, suggested extending the model of the Federal Reserve in particular, and that of independent central banks in general, to other key policy areas, in such a way that decisions on health policy, welfare provision and so on would be taken out of the hands of elected politicians and passed over to the control of objective non-partisan experts. According to Blinder, the solutions that politics could offer were often sub-optimal, and hence the role of politicians in policy-making should be marginalized, or at least confined to those difficult areas in which the judgement of experts would not be sufficient to legitimize outcomes.

Similar arguments were then emerging in the European context. In 1996, for example, Giandomenico Majone argued that the role of expert decision-making in the policy-making process was superior to that of political decision-making in that the former could better take account of long-term interests. Politicians, by definition, worked only in the short-term, or at least were only capable of committing themselves in the short term, and hence to cede control of policy-making to politicians, allowing decisions to be dominated by considerations of the electoral cycle, was to risk less than optimal outcomes: 'the segmentation of the democratic process into relatively short time periods has serious negative consequences when the problems faced by society require long-term solutions'. The solution, echoing Blinder's advocacy of the Federal Reserve

model, was to delegate powers to institutions 'which, by design, are not directly accountable to voters or to their elected representatives' (Majone, 1996: 10, 3). Majone described these institutions as 'non-majoritarian',<sup>1</sup> with more than one beneficial effect in decision-making. In particular, experts had many advantages over politicians when it came to dealing with the complexities of modern law-making, and with the many technical problems that often stymied or confused elected politicians. As traditional forms of state control were replaced by more complex regulatory frameworks, expertise rather than political judgement was likely to prove more valuable and effective (Majone, 2003: 299). Here too, then, politics was becoming devalued, with the potential contribution of politicians themselves to the policy process being seen as irrelevant or even damaging.

By the late 1990s, in short, it seemed that neither the citizens, on the one hand, nor the policy-makers, on the other, were keen to privilege the role of political or partisan decision-making. Even the new breed of third-way politician seemed ready to take a back seat. As far as politics was concerned, and perhaps even as far as the democratic process more generally was concerned, expert reason was deemed superior to interest. But while the various sources of evidence did indeed point to widespread indifference to politics and politicians,

1. There is some sleight-of-hand in this definition. Majone (1996: 12) comes to the notion of non-majoritarian institutions via a reference to Lijphart's (1984) distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies, and hence, by implication, his idea of non-majoritarianism is equivalent to Lijphart's idea of consensus. This is not in fact the case, however. In contrast to Lijphart's idea of consensus democracy, which depends on elections, parties and political accountability, Majone's non-majoritarian institutions are depoliticized and expressly removed from the electoral and partisan process. For Lijphart, the contrast with majoritarian democracy is consensus democracy; for Majone, it is expert rule, or non-democracy.

they seemed to offer a much less robust foundation for the notion of indifference towards democracy as such. Indeed, the extensive debates about constitutional reform at that time, in public forums as well as in the more theoretical literature, gave the impression of a burgeoning interest in democracy, with more attention being paid to how democratic systems worked and to what they meant in reality, than probably at any stage in the previous twenty or thirty years. Democracy was on the agenda in the late 1990s, and, far from being treated with indifference, had become a research priority within both empirical political science and political theory. Already in 1997, for example, David Collier and Steven Levitsky were able to document some 500 different scholarly uses of the term, a number that has probably increased even more substantially since then, while the catalogues of academic publishers were beginning to brim over with new titles on the subject. Democracy was also becoming more of an issue on the everyday political agenda, with debates on institutional reform taking on a substantial role in a large number of western polities, appeals to 'participatory governance' issuing from the World Bank and other international organizations, and discussions of the reform of the European Union and discussions of the degree of salience that would have been almost unimaginable ten years before – as, for example, could be seen in the discussion of the European Commission White Paper on Governance in 2001, with its attention to participation and openness. By the end of the 1990s, democracy – whether associative, deliberative, or reflective; global, transnational, or inclusive; electoral, illiberal, or even just Christian – was at the centre of animated debate. At these levels at least – that is, institutionally and within the academy – indifference did not seem to figure.

## INDIFFERENCE AND RENEWAL

Which leads me to my first puzzle. This massive renewal of interest in democracy coexists with indications of an opposite kind. In the political discourse of the twenty-first century we can see clear and quite consistent evidence of popular indifference to conventional politics, and we can also see clear evidence of an unwillingness to take part in the sort of conventional politics that is usually seen as necessary to sustain democracy. How do we square these developments?

There are two possibilities. The first is that they are in fact related, and that the growing intellectual and institutional interest in democracy is in part a response to the expansion of popular indifference. In other words, we get a lot of discussion about democracy, its meanings, and its renewal, at the moment when ordinary citizens begin to pull away from conventional forms of democratic engagement. Making democracy relevant comes on to the agenda at the time when it otherwise risks becoming irrelevant. However, while the timing suggests that this may be the case, the actual content of the discussion suggests a different story, and this leads to the second possibility. For, far from seeking to encourage greater citizen participation, or trying to make democracy more meaningful for the ordinary citizen, many of the discussions of institutional reforms, on the one hand, and of the theory of democracy, on the other, seem to concur in favouring options that actually discourage mass engagement. This can be seen, for example, in the emphasis on stakeholder involvement rather than electoral participation that is to be found in discussions of both associative democracy and participatory governance, as well as in the emphasis on the sort of exclusive and reasoned debate that is a hallmark of deliberative and reflective models of democracy. In neither case is much real scope

afforded to conventional modalities of mass democracy. It can also be seen in the new emphasis that is placed on output-oriented legitimacy – with criteria such as efficiency, stability or continuity – in discussions of the European Union polity, and in the related idea that democracy in the EU requires ‘solutions that are “beyond the state” and, perhaps, also beyond the conventions of western-style representative liberal democracy’ (Shaw, 2000: 291). In other words, while there may be some concern with the problem of popular indifference to democracy, the idea of making democracy more mass-user friendly does not seem to be a frequently favoured answer. For Philip Pettit (2001: §46), for example, who discusses the issue of democratic renewal in the context of deliberation and depoliticization, the issue comes on to the agenda because ‘democracy is too important to be left to the politicians, or even to the people voting in referendums.’ For Fareed Zakaria (2003: 248), in his more popular account, renewal is necessary because ‘what we need in politics today is not more democracy but less’.

Hence the second possibility: the renewal of interest in democracy and its meanings at the intellectual and institutional levels is not intended to open up or rein-vigorate democracy as such; the aim is rather to redefine democracy in such a way that it can more easily cope with, and adapt to, the decline of popular interest and engagement. Far from being an answer to disengagement, the contemporary concern with renewing democracy is about coming to terms with it. In other words, what we see here is a wide-ranging attempt to define democracy in a way that does not require any substantial emphasis on popular sovereignty – at the extreme, the projection of a kind of democracy without the demos at its centre.

Part of this process of redefinition involves highlighting the distinction between what has been called ‘constitutional democracy’, on the one hand, and

'popular democracy', on the other, a distinction that overlaps with and echoes Robert Dahl's (1956) earlier contrast between 'Madisonian' and 'populistic' forms of democracy.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, there is democracy's constitutional component – the component that emphasizes the need for checks and balances across institutions and entails government *for* the people. On the other hand, there is the popular component – which emphasizes the role of the ordinary citizen and popular participation, and which entails government *by* the people. These two distinct functions coexist and complement one another. However, though conceived of as two elements within a 'unified' sense of democracy, they are now becoming disaggregated, and then being contrasted with one another both in theory and practice. Hence, for example, the notions of 'illiberal' or 'electoral' democracy (Diamond, 1996; Zakaria, 1997) that have emerged since the collapse of the European communist bloc in 1989, and the attempt to understand those new 'democracies' that combined free elections – popular democracy – with restrictions on rights and freedoms, and the potentially abusive exercise of executive power. As many studies of these new democracies in particular seemed to indicate, popular and constitutional democracy were no longer necessarily bound together.

Thus, the important conceptual distinction between the popular and constitutional components of democracy has become more important in practice. And with this development comes also a relative weighting process, in which the popular element becomes downgraded with respect to the constitutional element. Once democracy is divided into its popular and constitutional elements, in other words, it is the popular that loses ground. For Zakaria, for example, who has always been one of the

2. See also the more recent discussions in Mény and Surel (2002), Dahl (1999), and Eisenstadt (1999).

clearest voices in this area, it is the presence of the constitutional rather than the popular component that is essential for the survival and well-being of democracy, and the reason democracy has proved so successful in the western hemisphere: 'For much of modern history, what characterized governments in Europe and North America, and differentiated them from those around the world, was not democracy but constitutional liberalism. The "Western model" is best symbolized not by the mass plebiscite but the impartial judge' (Zakaria, 1997: 27). In this view it is not elections – or not elections as such – that make for democracy, but rather the courts, or at least the combination of courts with other modes of non-electoral participation. Indeed, as some of the literature on good governance seems to imply with respect to the developing countries, a relatively clear formula is already available: *NGOs (non-governmental organizations) + judges = democracy*. While an emphasis on 'civil society' is acceptable, and reliance on legal procedures is indispensable, elections as such are not of the essence (see also Chua, 2003).

A similar logic can be seen in various approaches to constitutional reform in the advanced democracies and to reforms within the EU context in particular, in that here too democracy can be redefined in a way that downgrades the importance of its popular component. As Michelle Everson (2000: 106) has noted in her discussion of Majone's work, for example, 'non-majoritarian thought ... forcefully claims that its isolation of market governance from political forces serves the goal of democracy by safeguarding the democratically set goals of the polity from the predatory inclinations of a transitory political elite.' In this case the opposition is unequivocal: in one corner, the goals of the polity, objectively defined; in the other, the claims of a transitory – because elected – and hence predatory elite. The one is

sustained by the networks of good governance, the other by the crude power and ambition of electoral politics. There is clearly no contest here. In other arenas, and in the context of different processes, the story appears the same. In their review of new modes of delegation, Mark Thatcher and Alec Stone Sweet (2003: 19) underline the growing importance of 'procedural legitimacy', which 'relies on a process of decision making by NIMIs [non-majoritarian institutions] being better than the insular, often secret, deliberations of cabinets and executives'. In this case, the benefits of transparency, legality and stakeholder access are held up against the limits and distortions induced by partisan politics, and are seen to lead to a process offering 'a fair and democratic substitute for electoral accountability'. The shift becomes even more pronounced with the import of the modalities of New Public Management into political organizations and the public sector. Here, the forms of accountability not only do not include the electoral channel, but also override the criteria implicit in the public sector as such, being governed instead by values of cost-efficiency, fair procedure, and performance (see, for example, Peters, 2003: 125).

This, in turn, leads to a second puzzle: If democracy is being redefined to downgrade its popular component, then why is this happening, and why now? In other words, why did this particular shift begin to appear less than one decade after the much heralded 'victory of democracy' (e.g., Hadenius, 1997), and at a moment when, for the first time in history, democracy was being acclaimed as 'the only game in town' (Linz and Stepan, 1996)? Why, just as democracy seemed to triumph, did there emerge a concern to limit its scope?

There are, of course, a number of different but related answers to this question – including the impact of the

end of the Cold War, the decline of the 'embedded liberalism' that moderated the spontaneous tendencies of the major capitalist economies for three decades after 1945,<sup>3</sup> the declining purchase of party government, and the more general fallout from processes of globalization and Europeanization. For now, however, I will focus on one answer, and suggest that the shift from popular to constitutional democracy and the concomitant downgrading of politics and of electoral processes are at least partly the consequence of the failings of political parties. As parties fail, so too fails popular democracy. Or, to put it another way, thanks to the failings of parties, popular democracy can no longer function in the way in which we have come to understand and accept it, and in the way it has always functioned up to now. In going beyond parties, democracy also passes beyond popular involvement and control.

#### REDEFINING DEMOCRACY

Some twenty years before *The Semi-Sovereign People*, Schattschneider famously proposed that democracy without parties was unthinkable. The phrase itself comes from the opening paragraph of his *Party Government* (1942: 1) and is worth citing in its full context:

The rise of political parties is indubitably one of the principal distinguishing marks of modern government. The parties, in fact, have played a major role as *makers* of governments, more especially they have been the makers of democratic government. It should be stated flatly at the outset that this volume is devoted to the thesis that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. As

3. For the notion of 'embedded liberalism', see further Ruggie (1982). [Ed.]

a matter of fact, the condition of the parties is the best possible evidence of the nature of any regime. The most important distinction in modern political philosophy, the distinction between democracy and dictatorship, can be made best in terms of party politics. The parties are not therefore merely appendages of modern government; they are in the center of it and play a determinative and creative role in it.

As always in the writings of this period, of course, democracy in this case was both popular and constitutional; it was the democracy of elections as well as of checks and balances, and the democracy of mandates, popular accountability, and representative government. It was this all-embracing sense of democracy that Schattschneider found unthinkable except in terms of parties, and the sheer conviction of his opinion has led to his proposition being cited by party specialists ever since. Thus, for example, it is argued that despite all the problems facing parties, and despite different and cumulative challenges, they will continue to survive, as Schattschneider suggests, as long as democracy survives. This is one of the key motifs in Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg's assessment, which begins by asking readers to 'think Schattschneider's unthinkable' and to consider what might happen should parties fail, and concludes on a more sanguine note by reaffirming that 'it remains difficult to think of national governments functioning without parties playing a significant role in connecting the various elements of the political process' (2000: 275). But if we take account of the different components of democracy, and then think Schattschneider's proposition through to its potentially logical conclusion, we may arrive at a different answer. In other words, while Schattschneider's proposition is usually taken to mean that the survival of democracy will guarantee the survival of parties (and since the

survival of democracy is guaranteed, this means that the survival of parties is also guaranteed), we can also read it the other way around, suggesting that the failure of parties might indeed imply the failure of democracy, or, adopting Dalton and Wattenberg's terms, that the failure of parties might imply at least the failure of modern (representative) government. If democracy, or representative government, is unthinkable save in terms of parties, then perhaps, in the face of party failings, it does indeed become unthinkable, or unworkable.

Without parties, and still following Schattschneider, we are then left either with no real democracy and no real system of representative government, or with what is still called democracy, now redefined so as to downgrade or even exclude the popular component – since it is this component that depends so closely on party. Without parties, in other words, we are left with a stripped-down version of constitutional or Madisonian democracy; or we are left with other post-popular versions of democracy, such as Pettit's republican polity (1998: 303), or those systems of modern governance that seek to combine 'stakeholder participation' with 'problem-solving efficiency' (Kohler-Koch, 2005). These are certainly not unthinkable forms of polity, but they are systems in which conventional popular democracy plays little or no significant role, and in which neither elections nor parties remain privileged.

When democracy in Schattschneider's terms becomes unthinkable, in short, other modes of democracy move to the fore. Hence the contemporary intellectual interest in the theory of democratic renewal, and hence the more practical interest – represented by Amy Chua and Fareed Zakaria, among others – in proposing new forms of institutional politics. These and other similar approaches share a common concern to find or define a notion of democracy that, first of all, works; second, is



accepted as legitimate; and yet, third, no longer places at its centre the notion of popular control or electoral accountability.

But in what sense are we without parties, and in what sense are they failing? My argument is that they are failing in two related ways, and I will go on to look at these at greater length. First, as is now well established, parties are increasingly failing in their capacity to engage ordinary citizens, who are voting in smaller numbers than before and with less sense of partisan consistency, and are also increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to parties, whether in terms of identification or membership. In this sense, citizens are withdrawing from conventional political involvement. Second, the parties can no longer adequately serve as a base for the activities and status of their own leaders, who increasingly direct their ambitions towards external public institutions and draw their resources from them. Parties may provide a necessary platform for political leaders, but this is increasingly the sort of platform that is used as a stepping stone to other offices and positions. Parties are failing, in other words, as a result of a process of mutual withdrawal or abandonment, whereby citizens retreat into private life or into more specialized and often ad hoc forms of representation, while the party leaderships retreat into the institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. Parties are failing because the zone of engagement – the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of attachment to their political leaders – is being evacuated.

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## THE PASSING OF POPULAR INVOLVEMENT

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In this chapter I focus on the evidence of popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics and discuss the emptying of the space in which citizen interaction with political representatives might be expected to be at its closest and most active. This is a relatively familiar process, which has already been dealt with, sometimes in greater detail, in the scholarly literature as well as in more popular commentaries. However, what is often missing from those treatments is the awareness of just how pervasive and wide-ranging the process actually is. Moreover, while some aspects of popular withdrawal have received ample attention, others have not, and hence the whole gamut of features has not been brought together in one overall and accessible assessment. This chapter aims to do that, and to indicate the breadth and variety of the modes of disengagement, even if some of these are clearly less substantial than others. Here and elsewhere in this book, I assume that withdrawal and disengagement are symptomatic of a growing indifference to conventional politics – that is,