

Workshop 5:
**Professionalization and Individualized Collective Action: Analyzing New 'Participatory'
Dimensions in Civil Society**

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There are several paradoxes at the heart of participatory politics. Advanced democracies are 'plagued' by the complex problem of basing political decisions on the active engagement of citizens and citizens' organisations. While concurrently groups abound citizens prefer to be passive spectators, or use the market and other seemingly private or nonpolitical arenas as venues for action. The conventional activist – a regular citizen engaged in voluntary associations and collective decision-making – seems to be replaced by *ephemeral* or *episodic democratic monitors*.

Partly in response to the rise of individualized collective action recent years have witnessed the championing of an active civil society as a means of countering this perceived participatory pathology. As Warleigh (2001: 620) notes, civil society has been embraced by both 'right and left' either to '... defeat "big government"' or bring citizens' closer to decision-making processes. Famously Putnam (2000) emphasised the importance of the internal aspects of associational life for the proper functioning of democracies and societal integration. Civil society associations are seen as contributing to democracy on several fronts: fostering a more participatory democracy; Tocquevillian *schools of democracy* that generate pro-democratic values, social integration and social capital; as policy-making partners (e.g. agenda-setting, design, monitoring, evaluation); representative vehicles; countervailing forces (*i.e.* to big business and professional interests); as *surrogates* for those who lack the necessary political resources (e.g. children, human rights, poverty, debt relief, animals etc.). Some estimations of what groups can deliver are not modest and not restricted simply to 'good government'. As Putnam (2000: 290) acclaims: '... social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy'.¹

While the benefits of an active citizenry appear great, the reality is that most citizens don't find political involvement attractive and very willing and positively embrace a marginal role in organised politics. Instead, citizens increasingly leave the floor to professional associations and opt for individualized modes of collective action. This workshop aims to address several issues at the core of this development.

Checkbook participation is widely accepted by many citizens and groups (Verba *et al.*, 1995 and Pattie *et al.*, 2004). Many citizens do not see membership of groups as a means of being active in politics and perceive the passive involvement offered by these groups as a 'benefit' and would consider leaving organizations that sought to impose the 'cost' of active participation (see Warleigh, 2001 and Jordan and Maloney, 2007).² Much (modern) political participation is of an individualistic nature (e.g. donating money, signing a petition, but especially boycotting products or ethical shopping) rather than a collective form (attending meetings, rallies or demonstration) (see Pattie *et al.*, 2004, Michelletti, 2003, van Deth, 2007). Citizens appear to be following two paths to 'escape' political involvement. First, they are content

¹ We are cogniscent that social capital has a 'dark side' and that there are other 'democratic pathologies' associated with groups.

to *contract out the participation function* to the policy influencing professionals and pay for this service. Instead of conceiving of these organizations as mass political bodies 'they' may be better represented as supplier/customer relationships – groups sell protest and ersatz political involvement. Secondly, citizens are increasingly inclined to rely on forms of individualized collective action and are increasingly reluctant – almost by definition – to get involved in institutionalized organizational life.³ These two developments strengthen each other and result in a growing distance between civil associations and citizens.

Checkbook participation paradoxically delivers both more participation and a democratic deficit. Much participation is not spontaneous, but reflects targeted activation strategies of groups 'supplying participation'. Groups seek organizational efficiency at several levels and in recruiting support they target individuals with specific socio-demographic profiles and lifestyles because they have a greater chance of converting their predisposition into membership. Brady *et al.* (1999) identified *rational prospecting* as the first stage of their explanation of citizen political recruitment – *i.e.* who is being asked to join is crucial. Groups target those most likely to join and such skewed recruitment practices inevitably delivers skewed participation.

Many organizations see limiting 'supporter' involvement largely to financial contributions as the most efficient way to mobilize. From a democratic perspective there are tensions between finding the best way to produce the most effective results and dealing with a *bona fida* – active and democratically-imbued – membership (input versus output legitimacy). Many groups have very little sense of this dilemma believing that they are following a pragmatic path in contemporary politics. The professionalization and passivity processes can be seen as being driven by four main (and several subsidiary) factors:

Groups find financial supporters as opposed to members as an efficient way to mobilize; supporters like passivity and when persuaded to join through sophisticated recruitment techniques are only likely to remain members/customers if the demands on them remain financially small;

Groups try to attract citizens (potentially or actually) engaged in individualized collective action. In this way they target the socially and politically most interested parts of the population, while, at the same time, frustrate attempts to offer alternatives for their own 'products' in terms of representing interests and legitimizing decisions.

The nature of the policy making process means that groups are also partly driven to professionalization by the requirements of public agencies. Many groups are unashamedly oligarchic and believe that influencing outcomes can be seen as best achieved via expertise and technical knowledge, than the mobilization of large numbers of members/supporters (Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). As Saurugger (2007: 397-398) notes, 'Organized civil society – organized as groups or social movements – has a tendency to become increasingly professionalized to

² Of course for some active involvement is a benefit of membership.

³ As Michelleti remarks: "... political problems need not solely be dealt with in the political system [...] Rather, the market, the home, and other seemingly private or nonpolitical arenas are also appropriate venues for general responsibility-taking" (2003: 34).

represent the interests of their constituency in an efficient way'. As a consequence, important aspects of the democratic polity are fundamentally changed by this '*Rise of the Unelected*' (Vibert, 2007).

iv. Even when governments seek to encourage civil society by providing patronage the outcome can be counterproductive. Greenwood (2007: 343) notes the EU Commission spends some €1bn on funding groups, almost the entire (300) citizen interest group universe receive some financial support and some organizations get up to 80-90 percent of their funding from the Commission. While the spirit and ethos of such spending is laudably aimed at extending participatory democracy and 'bringing citizens in', it can 'drive citizens out'. The negative externality of patronage is that it can obviate the need for members. If institutional sources are prepared to fund organizations to operational levels of 80-90 percent then members become a luxury, or as Skocpol (2003: 134) acerbically put it 'Members are a nonlucrative distraction'. Why spend a great deal of organizational resources seeking and servicing members, when patronage permits fully focussed professional lobbying?

Type of Paper Encouraged by Workshop and Scholarly Participation

The workshop would welcome theoretical/conceptual and empirical papers that contribute to an understanding of the contemporary trend of professionalization and individualized collective action in civil society organizations. Theoretical/conceptual papers should aim to present fresh or novel approaches, or synthesize existing thinking. Empirical papers should be theoretically informed and concern themselves with advancing the level of understanding through the provision of detailed evidence. The workshop is open to all scholars with an interest in assessing the changing willingness of citizens to get involved in politics and the changing contribution of civil society organizations to democracy. The intention is to organize a workshop that is innovative in two major respects: **i.** it has the potential to involve a stimulating mix of scholars whose share similar thematic research interests in a variety of sub-disciplinary areas (for instance working in the fields of participation, social capital, interest groups, social movements, professionalization, or democratic theory). These scholars rarely communicate directly in seminars or other academic fora and this workshop would bring these scholars together and oblige them to *think laterally* about the research problems they face; **ii.** following from the above, new ways of thinking and conceptualising various dimensions of democratic decision-making processes are likely to emerge as a result of these interactions. If this application is successful, the workshop could act as a catalyst for a new research agenda. Finally, an eclectic mix of scholars is an essential requirement for a comprehensive and fruitful discussion of these topics. It is envisaged that participants would include, leading and emerging scholars in these fields, new entrants to the profession, postgraduates students and scholars from southern and central/east Europe.

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