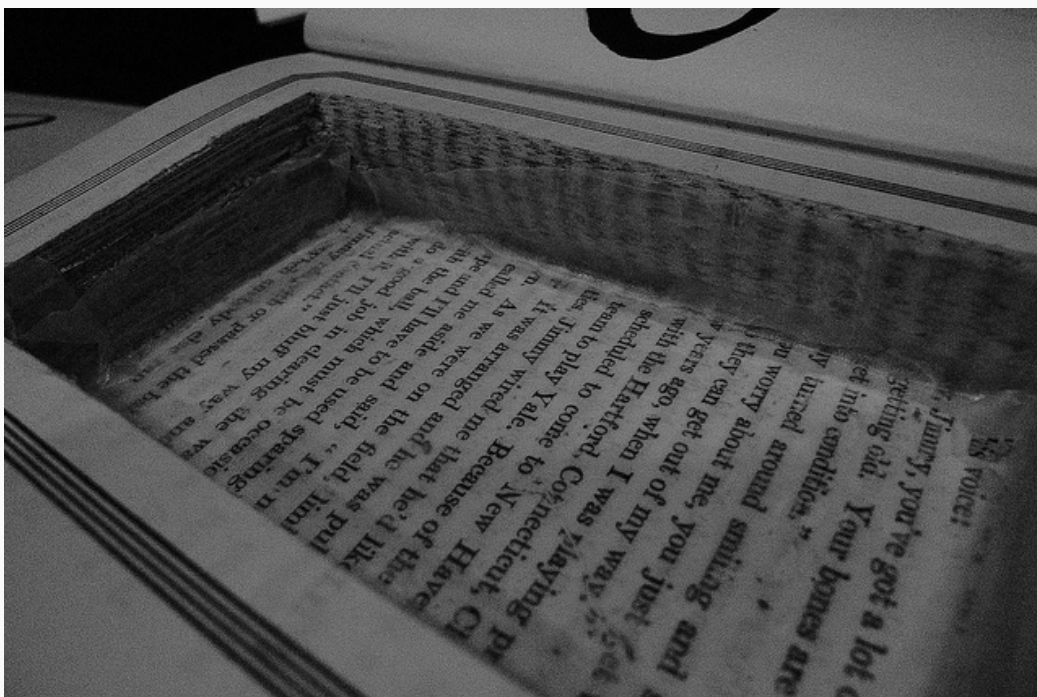


‘Supply side’ deficiencies in our parties, parliament, and local government each contribute to our democratic malaise

By Democratic Audit UK

*Explanations for the decline in political disengagement often focus on what can be loosely termed the ‘demand side’, with the electorate seeming to foot the blame of not fully understanding the complexities and limitations of our democratic system, but is this right? **Colin Talbot** argues that more attention should be paid to the ‘supply side’, particularly the hollowing out of main political parties, our centralised parliamentary system, and the structural changes to local government since the abolition of the committee system.*



Hollowed out? (Credit: [lauren](#), CC BY NC 2.0)

My colleague Dave Richards and Martin Smith have just published an excellent [piece in The Political Quarterly](#) attacking what they call the ‘demand side’ explanation for the declining engagement in party and formal politics – falling turnout, declining party membership, falling big party share of the vote, rise of insurgent ‘anti-politics’ parties like UKIP, etc.

The ‘demand siders’ essentially blame the electorate, who have been affected by socio-cultural changes like ‘click and collect’ instant gratification and rampant individualism to demand more and more from our political system whilst being unwilling to foot the bill. This creates an ‘expectations gap’ which politicians can’t possibly fill in a world of scarce resources and hard choices, but that doesn’t stop the people blaming the politicians and ‘the system’ or ‘the establishment’, however unfair that may be. Matthew Flinders, for example, goes so far as to call the electorate ‘decadent’ in their expectations.

This ‘demand side’ approach reminded me a Brecht ‘poem’:

“Some party hack decreed
that the people
had lost the government’s confidence

and could only regain it with redoubled effort.

If that is the case, would it not be simpler,

If the government simply dissolved the people

And elected another?"

"The Solution" ["Die Lösung"] (c. 1953), as translated in Brecht on Brecht : An Improvisation (1967) by George Tabori, p. 17

The alternative view is that the real problem lies on the 'supply side' – essentially that the 'British Political tradition' which supports an elitist, top-down, secretive and insular form of politics which has become increasingly untenable in the modern world.

I agree with most of what they say but I think there are some crucial elements missing from their analysis of the 'supply side' (at least as spelt out in this article of theirs – but see end of this post below).

The first is the hollowing out of political parties. Through the first half of the 20th century both main parties became increasingly mass parties with at least some formal structures for feedback between the political elite and their mass memberships. Labour was of course much more developed in form, if not always in content (as [Ralph Miliband suggested](#)). From the late 50s and 60s onwards that process went into reverse.

The political elites became more and more detached from their 'base' and, despite a brief attempt to reverse this in Labour (the 80s Bennite movement), the national political parties became increasingly hollow shells in which the membership were told what party policy was by party bosses. It is hardly surprising then that members became increasingly disillusioned and left in droves. De-democratisation of mass parties was a central cause of declining membership, not the other way around (shades of [Michels and the Iron Law of Oligarchy](#)).

[I think Dalton, Farrell and McAllister's [Political Parties and Democratic Linkages](#) (2001 OUP) is useful here. See also [this fascinating analysis](#) of how Labour has lost its working class links by Oliver Heath. This is also the fertile territory in which UKIP has grown – see [Revolt on the Right](#) by my other colleague Rob Ford and Matthew Goodwin.]

The second is the role of Parliament. The trajectory here is slightly different in timing and sometimes direction, but the massive imbalance that developed between the power of the executive and parliament is key.

As the state grew through the 20th century and the executive (by which I mean Ministers and Mandarins combined) acquired more and more power. This also hollowed out any link to individual MPs who weren't Ministers, and their constituency parties, and how real policy got made. The Minister-Mandarin policymaking core acquired immense power over an enlarged state, with no corresponding increase in Parliamentary scrutiny. This is being slightly off-set by the changes since 1980 but Parliament is still incredibly weak, removing another potential democratic link.

As the recent analysis by King and Crewe of 12 '[Blunders of Our Governments](#)' points out, one key factor in all of them was what they call a lack of 'deliberation' (i.e. decisions taken by small groups), lack of Ministerial accountability and a weak Parliament. (For a quick review [see here](#)).

Thirdly, local government. Arguably local government was, in the past, more "parliamentary" than central government – in that in the old pre-cabinet days the 'body corporate' actually ran the Local Authority through the committee system, including minority parties.

(A bit like the way Congress took over the executive functions at some stages in the US federal government).

The move from Committee to Cabinet to Mayoral has undermined the 'supply side' of local politics, turning it into a warped variant of executive dominance in Westminster. This has damaged links between local MPs, Councillors,

constituency and ward parties and the electorate.

Moreover these three trends have been mutually reinforcing – undemocratic parties undermine the role of non-Government MPs, a weak Parliament devalues local constituency parties, ‘presidentialised’ local government further weakens party membership, and so on.

Dave and Martin might have covered this [in their latest book](#), which I haven’t read yet, in which case apologies.

Note: this post originally appeared on Colin’s personal blog and is reposted with permission. It represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit, the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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