

Disappointed? That's a sign you're doing democracy

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*There has been surge in party membership in the weeks following Brexit and **Will Brett** welcomes the renewed engagement as a possible first step towards rebuilding the consent required for a functioning representative democracy. However, he warns that party politics requires patience and a willingness to compromise, and makes a plea to new members not just to participate, but to stick it out even in the face of disappointment or frustration.*



There are a lot of people joining a lot of political parties at the moment. For decades, party membership levels declined to the point where it had become deeply weird to carry a card. The Brexit referendum and associated chaos has changed all that. The Liberal Democrats are boasting over 15,000 new members; at one point Labour was putting on 100,000 new members a day; and no doubt the Conservatives enjoyed a significant uplift as people sought influence through a leadership election that in the end never materialised.

Clearly, many people are feeling more engaged in politics. And yes, that is undoubtedly a good thing. The suffocating level of mistrust in government and politics is partly why we have ended up where we are, wallowing and flailing about in deep political crisis. Brexit has all sorts of social and economic causes. But at root, it is a collective 'they don't like it up 'em' from the British people to a political class that is seen, almost literally, as [a different species](#). If we are ever going to rebuild the consent required for a representative democracy to function properly, we will need people to be more engaged in politics. And a big increase in party membership could be the first step towards doing just that.

But what's this on my Facebook feed? A member of my family has joined three – three! – political parties simultaneously. "It now seems that the only way you can have any influence on how things go from here is from within these rapidly changing structures with their 'One Member One Vote' electoral systems," he says. After finding himself on the losing side of the Brexit argument, he wants a stake in the future of the country.

Of course, he won't have much influence on anything – at least in the short term. For a start, parties forbid membership of rivals so he may well be expelled from all of them. What's more, the Tories are now not having a

leadership contest, and Labour have changed the rules so that new members can't vote in theirs. He will not have a vote in anything this summer, and disappointment will be inevitable.

That disappointment will echo throughout the British liberal middle classes as they collide, for the first time in a while, with representative party politics. Brexit has fired them up, because in recent decades politics has not really touched them. For 30 years at least, decisions by government have had only a marginal impact on their lives and livelihoods. Many Remainers will in the past have been thoroughly turned off by the managerial, hypocritical and downright weird aspects of democratic politics. But materially speaking, that disconnect has not been particularly significant. They have been doing perfectly well, thank you very much.

With this referendum, politics has exploded into their lives. Suddenly, their prospects are not so rosy. Their work looks less sustainable, their assets less secure, and their children's futures less predictable. Suddenly it matters what the rest of the country think, and what sort of politics that implies.

And so they turn to political parties to see if they can do something about it. But here, they encounter a problem. Because they are used to getting what they want, and in politics you rarely – if ever – get what you want.

Involvement in party politics is unlike almost every other aspect of modern life. It requires vast reserves of patience, and a ready willingness to compromise. As a member, you must embrace self-denial and accept the ubiquity of disappointment. When thinking about who should lead your party you must ignore your personal preferences and decide who you think will most likely lead your party to victory. And if your party adopts a policy position to which you are opposed, you ought to accept and support that decision in public even if you are working privately to change it. You are a soldier in an army whose purpose is to win elections. Your responsibility is to victory, not to yourself.

If all that sounds unappealing – well, in many ways it is. But that is the beauty of party politics. There is an ascetic element to it; like a monk in penance, you have to take pleasure in disappointment, because disappointment is the sign that you are doing real politics. Anyone who thinks politics is about expressing your beliefs and single-mindedly fighting for them, without hesitation or compromise, has missed the point.

After years of telling anyone who would listen how important it was for people to get involved in politics and join political parties, it would be churlish to say 'no, I didn't mean *that* type of engagement.' But I didn't. Because the current wave of engagement could end up doing more to undermine democratic politics than to bolster it.

Last week there was a social media campaign urging Labour members who joined in the last six months – and who therefore will not get a vote in the leadership election – to register a complaint with the Citizens' Advice consumer helpline. The theory was that Labour had breached trading standards rules by promising, and then denying, a vote in an election in exchange for the membership fee. But membership of a political party is precisely *not* a consumer and trading standards issue. It is the opposite of that. This campaign was encouraging people to see their membership as a transaction between themselves and a remote institution. That path can only lead to further disillusionment and disengagement.

So, a plea. To all those hundreds of thousands of people who have joined political parties in the last few weeks – please, stick it out. Do not quit at the first sign of discomfort. Instead, recognise that discomfort for what it is – the essence of democratic politics itself. Once you have chosen your party (and you do have to choose just one party), stay with it. By all means, fight for your beliefs from within that party. But do not cast it off as soon as it rubs up against your much-cherished self. It is bigger than you. And that is what makes it worth joining in the first place.

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