

Chapter 8

Parties and High-Intensity Participation in the Future



THE RESULTS OF THIS ANALYSIS OF TRENDS in party activism over a decade of British politics are fairly clear. High-intensity participation is in decline, despite valiant attempts by New Labour to reverse these trends in the 1990s. The Labour party provides the best indicator of this development since our data for the party cover the period 1989 to 1999. A single measure encapsulates the trend. In the 1989–90 survey just over 50 percent of party members devoted no time at all to party activities in the average month (Seyd and Whiteley 1992: 228). By 1999 this figure had grown to 65 percent of the membership. In the earlier survey nearly 10 percent of members devoted more than ten hours to party activities, but by 1999 this figure had become 6 percent. If comparable data were available for the Conservatives it would be unlikely to show a different picture.

What are the implications of this development for the British political system? To use a cliché, is the party over? These are the topics for discussion in this final chapter. We begin by examining a literature that challenges party dominance, both from normative and empirical points of view, to see what light it throws on these developments. This leads into a section in which we discuss the implications of the trends for the Westminster system of government as well as for party structures in advanced industrial democracies more generally. Next we look at some scenarios for the future, considering what different models of party organization are available and what models are likely to be adopted in the future.

In the final section we turn attention to wider questions of the analysis of political participation. What are the implications of these findings

for theories of participation? In particular what are the implications for controversies over rational actor and social psychological models of political behavior? In this section we return to the wider concerns that motivated the analysis of this book in the first place.

Challenges to Party Dominance



Declining confidence in parties is not unique to Britain: criticism of parties as representative institutions has become so extensive in liberal democracies that the phrase “party crisis” has become commonplace. Hans Daalder (1992) detected four distinct strands in the phrase’s usage: first, a denial of party, in the sense that parties are seen as a threat to the good society; second, a selective rejection of certain types of party, such as the mass party organization; third, the rejection of certain types of party system, such as the two-party or multiparty system; and, fourth, the notion of the redundancy of parties, as other actors and institutions take over the roles hitherto performed by parties.

Antiparty sentiment of the type that fits Daalder’s first three categories has never been strong in Britain (Scarrow and Poguntke 1996). The emergence and growth of parties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not occur, however, without opposition. From the earliest days there were critics who were concerned that factional or party interest would replace the national interest and that as a consequence individual, rational judgment would be replaced by collective, irrational judgment.

John Stuart Mill (1861), for example, argued the need for political institutions and procedures that would enable the individual representative to arrive at political decisions unaffected by particular interests. Other writers such as Sir Henry Maine (1885), A. V. Dicey (1885), Moisie Ostrogorski (1902), and J. A. Hobson (1907) warned of the dangers of the party system and, in particular, of the powers of the party caucus (Birch 1964: 75–81; Meadowcroft and Taylor 1990). Criticism of the party system from a liberal point of view continued to be expressed in the twentieth century, with both Hollis (1949) and Mayhew (1969) arguing that Parliament’s powers had been subordinated to the parties. However, this particular liberal critique was submerged by the development of collectivist politics starting in the 1920s, which was well documented by Samuel Beer (1965) in his classic study of the British party system.

In addition to this liberal critique of collectivist organizations, other criticisms of the institutions of party have emerged in the twentieth century. First, there is the managerialist critique, which argues that particular areas of policy-making, such as economic planning, defense, education, and budgeting, are too complex and specialized to be left to party politicians and should, therefore, be kept out of politics (see, for example, Shonfield 1965). The Labour government's decision in 1997 to make the Bank of England solely responsible for bank interest rates is one such example of this thinking and was the culmination of a campaign to remove this aspect of economic policy from the direct influence of party.

Another example was the Conservative government's belief in the 1980s and 1990s that local economic regeneration and service delivery should be removed from the influence of party-based local authorities and given to quangos, which are independent of party. Urban development corporations, training and enterprise councils, and single regeneration budget partnerships were institutional means of downgrading the impact of party in the locality.

The managerialist thesis may have validity, but it tends to ignore the problem of bureaucratic rent seeking (Tullock 1967; Mueller 1989: 229–46), a process by which managerial elites substitute their own private interests for the interests of the wider society. More generally, the call to make issues nonpolitical is open to the criticism that it is merely a device for removing legitimate points of view from the political agenda.

Second, there is the view that when government suffers from the periodic alternation of parties this results in abrupt changes of direction in policy outcomes. The adversary politics thesis, argued particularly by Finer in the 1970s, suggests that party government leads to bad government (Finer 1975; Gamble and Walkland 1984; Debnam 1994). However, work by Rose (1984) suggests that there was little support for this thesis in practice, since many of the key policy changes occurred within administrations rather than between them. This is true of such issues as the shift to monetarist macroeconomics by Labour in the 1970s and the drive to privatize state-owned industries developed by the Conservatives under Thatcher. Both are examples of policies that did not figure in the respective manifestoes of the parties when they took power or in the early years of their administrations but that later became key policies of these governments.

Third, there is the belief that parties have sought to maximize their control of civic society and have done so by appointing their placemen

onto a wide range of public bodies. In today's quango state the opportunities to do this are considerable. The Committee on Standards in Public Life (HMSO 1995) heard expert witnesses who argued that ministers make ten thousand appointments each year, some two thousand of which are executive positions in the NHS, development agencies, and other quangos. These carry out executive functions on behalf of the government, and the vast majority of them operate at the local level (Weir and Beetham 1999). Some sixty-five thousand people occupy such appointed positions, very many of them placed there by parties (Marr 1996; Weir 1995). It is argued that such patronage provides opportunities for cronyism and corruption. On the other hand it is not clear whether any system of recruitment for such a large number of unelected positions could avoid this criticism.

Fourth, there is the argument that representation suffers because parties seek to control political debate and to capture all political issues, making discussion of issues impossible beyond the specific narrow parameters they have set down. Specifically, it is argued that debate does not extend beyond the white, middle-aged, male perspective of British party elites. The Equal Opportunities Commission published a report citing poll evidence that seven out of ten women felt political parties did not pay sufficient attention to issues of importance to them (*Guardian*, February 19, 1997), and the United Kingdom Action Committee on Islamic Affairs reported that the two million Muslims felt that issues such as state funding for Muslim schools, a ban on religious discrimination, and the outlawing of incitement to hatred against Muslims were being ignored by party politicians (*Guardian*, February 21, 1997).

On the other hand in the new Russia there is a women's party, and in many countries there are prominent Islamic parties. While it may be true that parties neglect the interest of minorities such as British Muslims or even majorities such as British women, the option is always open to political entrepreneurs to form a new party, or a faction within an existing party, to move those interests up the political agenda.

It is perhaps Daalder's fourth category—the redundancy of party—that has most relevance to contemporary debate in Britain. As the discussion in chapter 4 indicates, economic, social, and cultural changes in British society have served to weaken traditional political attachments. The decline in manufacturing industries and the growth in the professional and service sectors of the economy, the breakup of traditional working-

class communities, the expansion of numbers in higher education, and the growth of the mass media have all affected individuals' political identification. Both the Conservative and Labour parties owe their origins, development, organization, and electoral support to Britain's class-based, industrial society.

As Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue, Britain's party system in the 1960s, along with that of the rest of western Europe, reflected the cleavage structures of the 1920s. However, as voters' political attachments become weaker and as party identification declines, voters in aggregate are becoming increasingly volatile. Thus opinion polls reveal rapid shifts in party support, and at by-elections voters behave in a less predictable manner than was true twenty years ago (Butler and Butler 1994: 234).

It is also claimed that individuals now look increasingly to interest groups and the new social movements rather than to political parties as more effective mechanisms for conducting a dialogue with their rulers. According to Richardson, changes have occurred in the market for participation, and "citizens now have an active marketplace for participation in which to shop" (1994: 17). Group formation is on the increase, and a more specialized and customized market exists in which "parties are now somewhat *passé* amongst an increasing majority of citizens" (22). Other organizations than parties are now setting the political agenda, and Richardson concludes that "interest groups and social movements have come to present a major challenge to parties as channels of participation and for the resources which citizens are willing to donate" (26).¹

Richardson's claim that there is an active market for participation in which interest groups and social movements vie with parties for adherents is certainly the case, but there is little empirical evidence for many of his other assertions. Although it is the case that certain groups, such as the National Trust, the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth, have much larger memberships than do parties, comparisons between these organizations have to be made with care. The barriers to entry have tended to be higher for those thinking of joining a party rather than a pressure group.² Richardson's claim that group formation is on the increase is difficult to verify when no comprehensive audit of groups has been carried out.³ There are many examples of new groups being established, but less attention is devoted to the groups that disappear, so we have no accurate data with which to judge claims about the growth of groups. Richardson's claim that parties are "somewhat *passé* amongst an

increasing majority of citizens" is not confirmed by recent British Election Study data referred to in chapter 1. Finally, his statement that parties as agenda-setting organizations have been replaced by interest groups requires extensive in-depth analysis of policy-making, little of which is available. Parties are just one of many agenda-setting organizations, but their role has not necessarily been subordinated to groups.

Thus some of the claims that interest groups are replacing parties as the major channels of representation may be exaggerated. Nevertheless, the development of organized public protest on issues such as the poll tax, the export of live animals, the building of motorways and airport runways, and protection of the countryside points to the fact that "the politically unaware are turning from a traditional, party-based model of activity, based upon a generality of policy, to a new policy-specific approach—one which lends itself to group rather than party activity" (Kelly 1999: 24).

We have already noted the relative weakness of antiparty sentiment in twentieth-century Britain; nevertheless the behavior of some politicians, ranging from lobbying activities in the mid-1990s to their behavior on the floor of the House of Commons, has contributed to a loss of confidence in politicians, which has been exploited by party critics to develop a more comprehensive case for bypassing, regulating, and weakening parties. Some of the proposals for citizen juries, deliberative polls, electronic town halls, and referendums are intended to do this (*Demos* 1994; Stewart, Kendall, Coote 1994; Bogdanor 1994). Similarly, after recent controversies over the funding of both Conservative and Labour parties, the view has been expressed that the state should fund parties but also should more strictly regulate them (Bogdanor 1997). Finally, some of the demands for the introduction of elected city mayors and for the adoption of a new electoral system have been made with the intention of weakening parties (Hodge, Leach, and Stoker 1997; Gallagher 1996–97).

Thus there are a number of strands to antiparty ideas in contemporary thought. But it is not clear whether any of these strands provide decisive support for the proposition that parties can be dispensed with in the future. Arguments against party all have their flaws, and as arenas for high-intensity participation it appears unlikely that they will disappear in the future. But as the earlier evidence indicates it is true that the British party system is characterized by declining rates of high-intensity participation. To assess the consequences of this decline it is necessary to return to the examination of the functions of parties we began in chapter 1.

The Consequences of Declining Participation within Parties

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That high-intensity participation is declining within British political parties means these organizations will perform their functions less effectively in the future. It might be useful to focus more specifically on the effects of declining activism for party organizations before returning to the more general issues of the role of parties in the political system. Parties recruit members for a number of different reasons, and party members have long possessed important powers. One such power is the selection of candidates, both to local government and also to the House of Commons (Ranney 1965; Rush 1969; Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Potential party leaders have had to impress local party members in order to be chosen as parliamentary candidates in the first place. In addition, party leaders are now elected by membership ballots in all three major parties, so members play the major role in determining the outcomes of these processes.

A decline of grass roots participation means that the mechanisms for selecting candidates will decay. In relation to the Westminster system local parties may show a tendency to select candidates whose opinions are increasingly unrepresentative and therefore unacceptable to a wider electorate. In this situation the center may very well step in to take away the right to select candidates from local parties, and indeed there are signs that this is already happening. However, this in turn will reduce the incentives to participate further.

In relation to local government the decline of high-intensity participation within parties means that fewer individuals will be willing to stand as candidates, and parties will not be able to fight effective election campaigns at the local government level for this reason. Alternatively, there is likely to be a lowering of the quality of candidates willing to come forward as party representatives in local politics. This in turn is likely to weaken the quality of local decision making and representation, adding a further twist to the spiral of decline.

A second problem linked to the issue of political recruitment relates to the socialization of individuals into political activity and as elected representatives. If high-intensity participation declines, the mechanisms for socializing candidates into politics will weaken. There will be fewer people around who know what high-intensity participation of various kinds actually means. Inactive parties will end up not merely recruiting candidates

who have little or no experience in political activity, but they will prove weak arenas for socializing such candidates into the craft of politics, allowing them to learn how to be effective full-time elected representatives.

A third effect is linked to fund-raising. The point has already been made that British parties are voluntary organizations with only limited state financial assistance. Consequently, members provide significant sums of money to help the parties maintain day-to-day activities (TSO 1998a). This is likely to grow more important in the future as new legal restrictions on party finance are introduced that arise from recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (TSO 1998a). Parties will no longer be able to rely on a small number of anonymous rich donors to fund their activities but will have to raise funds from diverse sources, including large numbers of small donations from their individual members.

The surveys show that activists give more money to their respective parties than do the inactive members, and this is true for both the Labour and Conservative parties. In 1992 the median financial contribution to the party of inactive Conservative members in the previous year was 20 pounds, and for very active or fairly active members it was 50 pounds. Interestingly, exactly the same figures applied to inactive and active Labour party members in 1999. Thus active members give about two and a half times as much money to their respective parties as do inactive members. Clearly a decline in high-intensity participation is likely to reduce the amount of money that party members give to their respective organizations over time, which will create financial difficulties for the parties unless they are able to recruit many more inactive members to compensate for this reduction.

A fourth effect relates to election campaigning. Legal restrictions on constituency election campaign expenditures create a need for voluntary human resources as a substitute for hiring expensive campaign professionals. It is overwhelmingly members who provide this campaigning resource in both local and general elections. Making personal contact with electors, delivering party literature over and above the one free delivery provided by the state, and persuading electors to vote on election day are all activities that can only be maintained by parties if they have armies of volunteers in all constituencies (Denver and Hands 1997).

Recent research has shown that local election campaigns are increasingly important in influencing election outcomes in the context of an increasingly volatile electorate (Johnston and Pattie 1995; Pattie, Johnston, and Fieldhouse 1995; Denver and Hands 1985, 1997; Whiteley,

Seyd, and Richardson 1994; Whiteley and Seyd 1999). Obviously, a decline in high-intensity participation associated with election campaigning means that the parties will face increasing difficulties in getting their supporters to the polls. If the decline is uniform across parties this should not greatly influence the balance of campaigning on the ground, but if one party manages to counteract this trend while the others do not, this party will obtain a growing electoral advantage at its rivals expense. Arguably this is what happened in 1997, when Labour out-campaigned the Conservatives on the ground by a significant margin (Whiteley and Seyd 1999).

Finally, notwithstanding the steadily increasing centralization of the British state since 1945, local government possesses significant powers to provide services to people. Parties in local government have maintained an independence of their central headquarters, resulting in a variety and diversity of service provision and behavior (Gyford 1983). Local government by its very nature places greater emphasis upon grass roots activity. If this is not forthcoming the quality of representation and decision making at the local level will decline. This may in turn encourage central government to accelerate existing trends toward managerialism in local government, which in turn will reduce the incentives for participation.

Beyond these specific roles, party members have other more general roles. Scarrow (1996: 40–46) itemizes a number of these, including contributing to a party's legitimacy in the community, guaranteeing it a number of loyal and regular voters, providing it with some opinion leaders and links with voters, and finally offering it a source of innovatory ideas and personnel. If high-intensity participation continues to decline all these functions will suffer and the parties will become less able to support them.

These direct influences on the performance of parties in the British system of government caused by declining high-intensity participation are fairly clear. But there are indirect influences that are likely to undermine the ability of parties to perform the more general functions discussed in chapter 1. It will be recalled that these function related to aggregating preferences, expressing a collective will of the voters, in addition to selecting candidates and promoting political communication.

As the discussion in chapter 1 indicates the key function of parties in the Westminster system is to aggregate preferences and to provide reasonably stable government. If the ability of the system to do this declines, it will produce the kind of policy gridlock that has become a regular feature of the political landscape in the United States (Cox and Kernell

1991). Potentially, gridlock in the British system could be worse than it is in the United States because party cohesion is the linchpin that makes executive dominance of the legislature possible and makes the responsible party model work. If this weakens to the point that parties in the House of Commons begin to look like their nineteenth-century counterparts, strong, decisive government would become impossible. New coalitions of support would have to be constructed on every issue, and the system would begin to cycle between unstable majorities of short-lived coalitions in the manner predicted by the social choice theorists (see Schofield 1978; McKelvey 1986).

On the other hand the ability of the parties to adapt to new circumstances should not be underestimated. Over the past twenty-five years considerable changes have occurred in the prevailing political ideas in Britain, and the parameters of both Labour and Conservative party politics have shifted considerably. The Labour party came close to the electoral abyss in 1983, but in 1997 it was elected to government with its largest parliamentary majority ever. Its electoral success was the result of fundamental changes in both its program and structure over a ten-year period. A significant part of Labour's electoral appeal in 1997 was that New Labour had discarded old political baggage.

Similarly, adaptations to Conservatism have occurred. During its period under Thatcher, the Conservative party adopted a very distinctive ideology. However, in response to its worst electoral defeat since 1832 in 1997, it is now engaged in a process of transformation in which "new" Conservatism is also being asserted. First, William Hague, the former Conservative leader, and then his replacement, Iain Duncan Smith, have sought to follow in the footsteps of Blair by rebuilding his party from the ground up as a means of working toward a future electoral victory.

These developments show the resilience of parties in the face of considerable turbulence in the political landscape. Our focus has been on high-intensity participation among grass roots party members. But to what extent will membership parties remain important in the future? Would it be possible to retain the distinctive cohesive features of the responsible party model in the absence of an activist membership base? Are membership parties essentially nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century institutions, as has been claimed (*Demos* 1994; Mulgan 1994)?

Recently formed parties in Britain have attempted to either dispense with or downplay the role of activists in their organizational structures. The Social Democratic party, established in 1981, was founded by a splin-

ter group of the Labour leadership (Crewe and King 1995). Dissension in the Labour party, particularly over the issue of European integration, was the principle cause of their split with the party in the first place. The traumatic experience of being a minority frequently attacked by rank-and-file Labour party members encouraged the new party leadership to want a top-down organization capable of keeping a tight rein on members. The Referendum party, formed in 1995 by the millionaire businessman Sir James Goldsmith, did away with members altogether and recruited only supporters. So in the new century are party members no longer necessary? We set out to answer these questions by examining possible future models of party structures.

Models for the Future of Parties



There are perhaps four possible models for parties as political organizations in the future. First, there is the extinction model, in which parties die out and are replaced by an ill-defined mixture of Internet democracy, town meetings, and interest groups. The second is the leadership model, which relies on a charismatic leader like Ross Perot or James Goldsmith and has a heterogeneous group of supporters but little in the way of a permanent organization and no activist base of any great significance. The third is the plebiscitary model, a structure in which there is an organization and a membership but in which power is concentrated heavily in the leadership and the role of the members is merely to endorse fairly general policy statements and to periodically legitimate the leadership in plebiscites. Finally, there is the participatory model, which has an organizational structure characterized by genuine grass roots participation in which members exercise influence over policy-making and the leadership.

The extinction model can be dismissed fairly easily. There are few social science laws comparable to those in the natural sciences, but it is a reliable proposition that no advanced industrial democracy can work without parties. If parties did not exist, they would have to be invented because of the functions they perform. We have reviewed these earlier, but easily the most important functions are those of aggregating interests and distributing costs so that parties combine many diverse interests into broad programs that can be supported by large numbers of people and share out the costs of these programs among the wider society.

Olson (1982) points out in an insightful analysis that special interest

groups often seek benefits for themselves while aiming to distribute the costs associated with this among the wider society. Thus the strategy of interest groups is to concentrate benefits narrowly and to distribute costs widely. Such groups can afford to be irresponsible about the costs of their demands. In contrast, parties that seek to govern are in Olson's terminology encompassing organizations that have to consider both the costs and benefits of collective action when seeking to represent society as a whole.

Parties are different from interest groups in that they cannot hope to concentrate benefits on a minority group while distributing the costs among the wider society if they hope to win office, because winning power means obtaining the support of a majority of the voters. Thus collective action by parties is much more efficient and socially inclusive than is collective action by interest groups. This analysis implies that, if parties do not exist to perform these functions, democracy will become paralyzed by a cacophony of special interests, each of which seeks benefits from the state while simultaneously trying to ensure that someone else pays for these benefits.

More direct forms of democracy, such as Internet democracy, also face difficulties. The first is the problem of social exclusion; while Internet access is growing, there are large numbers of people in society who cannot get access, and they would be excluded from participation in any system of Internet democracy. A second difficulty relates to decision making on the Internet. While democratic debate can flourish on the Internet it is not clear how preferences will be aggregated into actual decisions by this means. Again the literature on social choice referred to earlier suggests that a system having many actors, each with differing policy agendas, will produce perverse problems of social choice (Mueller 1989: 63–65). Few stable decisions can be achieved in such a system, unless it is restricted in various arbitrary ways, and in effect becomes a type of plebiscitary democracy. Clearly, the Internet is going to play an increasingly important role in democracy in the future, but it is not without problems.

The leadership model has emerged in a number of different countries in recent years, and this is clearly a possible blueprint for the future. The essence of this model is that a charismatic leader establishes his or her own party with an organization mainly consisting of supporters rather than members or activists. These supporters generally play only a peripheral role in policy-making and are really there only to legitimize the leader and in some cases to provide finance rather than to participate in democratic decision making. The charismatic leader generally keeps a tight hold on power.

The track record of this type of party organization in winning elections

and in governing is not good. Ross Perot's Reform party in the United States ran a very successful presidential election campaign in 1992 but was unable to capitalize on this success in the 1996 election and is now rather faction ridden and ineffective. The most successful example of such a party is Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, which was modeled on a football supporters' club. It was in government in Italy in the mid-1990s and is now again in office. But its governmental performance on its first occasion in office was poor, and it suffered from factionalism and the defection of many of its parliamentary deputies.

The best example from Britain is Sir James Goldsmith's Referendum party, which was established with the explicit aim of obtaining a referendum on British membership of the European Monetary Union. Goldsmith took a strong anti-integration position on this issue, and he felt that voters would reject membership in a referendum. In the 1997 election the party contested 547 constituencies and claimed to have a fighting fund of twenty million pounds and two hundred thousand supporters (Butler and Kavanagh 1997: 149). On average its candidates secured 3.1 percent of the vote in these constituencies, and the party tended to do best in areas with large agricultural or elderly populations (306). The evidence suggests that it undermined the Conservatives to a certain extent, but as Butler and Kavanagh point out, "Our findings clearly suggest that, contrary to what has widely been claimed, only a handful of the Conservatives' losses of seats can be blamed on the intervention of the Referendum Party" (1997: 308). Goldsmith died shortly after the general election of 1997, and the party did not survive him.

Overall it appears that such parties usually fail electorally, and even when they succeed in winning a share of power, as Forza Italia did, their supporters find out that government is more difficult than they expected. This tends to produce faction fighting, a loss of objectives, and internal wrangling. The absence of a significant permanent organization, a cadre of activists, and a coherent set of values to sustain the party through hard times eventually counts against them.

The plebiscitary model appears to be the one that most readily applies to Britain at the present time. As the earlier discussion shows the modernization strategies adopted by the Labour and Conservative parties have shifted both of these parties in this direction. Plebiscitary politics is really designed to legitimize decisions already taken by the leadership and is not in any meaningful sense a deliberative process involving grass roots party members. In this kind of politics a small group of people around the lead-

ership decide which issues will be put to the vote, and they decide the framing and the wording of the questions. There is no mechanism for an alternative group to frame different questions or to decide to have plebiscites on different issues. The model does not try to approximate a system of representative democracy in which members are represented in a smaller forum that actually makes the decisions. In this model the role of high-intensity participants is to react to initiatives taken by the center, not to initiate proposals of their own.

The fourth model is a participatory model in which members fully participate through representative institutions in policy-making and leadership selection. Historically, the Conservative party has never had this type of structure, since it originated with a top-down structure organized from within Parliament. In contrast, Labour was originally founded outside Parliament and organized around a participatory model in which the annual conference was the sovereign body making the final decisions (Pelling 1965). In practice the relationship between the parliamentary party and the annual conference was always complex, with a system of power sharing operating for most of the party's history (Minkin 1978). However, there has always been a strong participatory tradition within the party organization that has emphasized the importance of democratic decision making by the members.

In our 1999 survey of Labour party members, we asked members to express their preferences for alternative organizational structures, linking this to the question of who should make policy. The responses to this question appear in table 8.1.

TABLE 8.1. Attitudes of Labour Party Members toward Alternative Organizational Structures in 1999 (in percentages)

"If you had to choose between one of the three methods for forming Labour party policy, which of the following would you favor?"

	All Members	Very Active Members	Inactive Members
Policy formed by the party leadership and endorsed by a postal vote of members	37	15	42
Policy formed by annual conference	25	35	22
Policy formed at regional and national policy forums	39	50	36

Note: $N = 1,325$.

The first option in the list is the plebiscitary model; the second option used to be the status quo until recent changes to the party constitution switched the model to a system of policy forums. Labour established these policy forums at the same time as it reformed the annual conference, with the aim of improving member participation in the policy-making process, and this system represents the third option. Interestingly, only about one-quarter of the members wanted to return to the position where the annual conference formally makes policy, and more than one-third opted for the plebiscitary model, in which members vote on proposals emerging from the leadership. The favorite option, however, was for policy to be made in the new national and regional policy forums, the participatory model.

There were interesting differences between active and inactive members with respect to their attitudes to these alternative models of decision making. About 50 percent of the very or fairly active members preferred the participatory model, compared with only 36 percent of the inactive members. The most preferred option among the latter group was the plebiscitary model, with 42 percent of them opting for this alternative.

These findings highlight the dilemma of the leadership in shaping the future of the party organization. If the leadership moves in the direction of the plebiscitary model it will not unduly worry the supporters, but it will antagonize the activists. The plebiscitary model appears ideal for a leadership party, but it creates real problems for a party seeking to establish a participatory style of decision making that motivates the high-intensity participants.

Given that the policy forums are the preferred model overall, and that Labour has pioneered this organizational form, why do we argue that the party has moved in the direction of the plebiscitary model? The answer to this question can be seen in the responses of those party members who had experience in the policy forum meetings. The 1999 survey showed that about 11 percent of party members had attended one of the policy forums, which translates into 35,000–40,000 people. When this group was asked about their experiences, their attitudes to the forums were very favorable. By large margins they found them interesting, friendly, efficient, and easy to understand.

The evidence for the plebiscitary model is that only 32 percent of participants with experience in a policy forum thought that the forums were influential (36 percent did not think so). More generally, some 53 percent of members agreed with the statement “The party leadership doesn’t pay a lot of attention to ordinary party members,” up from 35 percent who

thought this in 1997. Labour's modernization strategy meant transforming itself into an electable, participatory party. The leadership could see the advantages of creating incentives to join the party and to be active. The current problem is that in the mind of many members it is becoming a plebiscitary party. As we can see in table 8.1 only 15 percent of the activists support such a development. The conclusion is that, if the party wholeheartedly embraces the plebiscitary model, this will demotivate the activists and further reduce high-intensity participation.

Some people might argue in private that this is an acceptable price to pay for a quiescent and manageable party. But there are two very likely consequences of a strategy that moves in this direction, as the earlier discussion indicates. One is that it will have a severe impact on finances, since the active members give more money than the inactive members. Second, it will weaken local election campaigns, which cannot be organized from party headquarters and which with an evermore volatile electorate are becoming more important as time goes by.

Peter Hain, a Labour politician with a long record of commitment to grass roots politics, argues:

One-member-one-vote can't replace the feeling of being directly involved in the party in a collective way. It's all right to be involved in an individualistic way, which is what one-member-one-vote is all about, but being involved in a collective way is what being a member of the party should be all about. It shouldn't feel like being a member of the AA or RAC. (1999: 19) ⁴

Thus the plebiscitary model will weaken members' powers unless they, rather than just the leadership, possess the right to initiate such ballots and have an influence on the question wording and the timing of votes.

Many years ago Duverger (1954) suggested that mass parties developed by a process of "contagion" (1954: 25) from the left such that the mass membership model overtook the cadre party model because it was more effective in a mass democracy. In Britain, there may be a new contagion from the left occurring in which the plebiscitary model becomes the norm and is characterized by a veneer of democracy overlaid by centralization and control. The problem with this scenario is that it is not clear whether a party bereft of high-intensity participants can provide a viable alternative model to the existing party organizations. If the party structure becomes hollowed out, then the functions of campaigning, recruiting,

socializing, and fund-raising are not likely to be effectively carried out. If this happens, existing parties will become vulnerable to attack from more democratic forms of organization, in effect new parties that have retained the vigor and dynamism created by high-intensity participation.

If these situations are the implications of these findings for the future of the British party system, what are the implications for wider theoretical questions about the nature of political participation? We examine this issue in the final section.

Theories of Political Participation



The findings from this analysis of high-intensity participation in the British political system have implications for wider theories of participation and indeed for different paradigms in political science research. We referred earlier to an interesting if sometimes rancorous debate between rational choice theorists of participation (e.g., Tsebelis 1990; Aldrich 1993, Jackman 1993) and opponents of such theories (e.g., Hindess 1988; Lowi 1992; Eckstein 1992). What do these findings have to say about this debate?

The first point is that variables associated with a narrowly defined rational choice theory play an important but essentially limited role in explaining high-intensity participation. Their relevance is in relation to selective incentives, namely outcome, process, and possibly ideological incentives for participation. The political ambitions of individuals and their desire to work with other like-minded people are clearly important factors in explaining political participation of the high-cost type. But they are only a limited part of the story.

The second point is that in certain key respects the findings contradict the rational choice account of participation. They do so in relation to group incentives, since it appears that calculations of the costs and benefits of political action take place at the collective rather than at the individual level, something that makes no sense at all in a purely rational actor account. This finding is reinforced by the strong relationship demonstrated between expected benefits and participation. To reiterate a point made in chapter 2, that a particular activity is regarded as effective in achieving the goals of the party should not motivate a rational actor to participate, since it is only individualistic goals that matter in rational choice theory. Actors are not being rational if they ground their calcula-

tions of costs and benefits at the level of the group, since they have no control over group actions, and in any case they have an incentive to free ride on others. Only their own individual contribution to the benefits of collective action matters in this account. This point is further reinforced by the finding in the models in chapter 4 that, unlike group efficacy, personal efficacy is not a robust predictor of high-intensity participation, since it is not statistically significant in a number of specifications. In many ways these findings are quite subversive to rational choice explanations of political participation.

The third point is that political participation of this kind cannot be explained without reference to social psychological processes, which cannot be interpreted merely in cost-benefit terms. Affective variables that focus on the strength of actors' emotional attachment to their parties and the social norms that surround party activism are key factors in explaining high-intensity political participation. It is of course the case that social psychological variables were found to be important in the earliest research on voting behavior, which stressed the importance of psychological variables and the social contexts in which actors lived in explaining electoral participation (Berelson et al. 1954).

In this sense the finding that affective or emotional variables play an important role in explaining high-intensity participation is not surprising. As we pointed out earlier, such variables can provide a solution to the paradox of participation and the free-rider problem, which has been at the center of debates about the rationality of participation for many years. Frank is the best exponent of this point of view when he describes his commitment model in the following terms:

I will use the term commitment model as a shorthand for the notion that seemingly irrational behavior is sometimes explained by emotional predispositions that help to solve commitment problems. . . . On purely theoretical grounds, the commitment model suggests that the moving force behind moral behavior lies not in rational analysis but in the emotions. (1988: 11–12)

His basic argument is that behavior based on emotional feelings is hardwired into human consciousness as a consequence of evolutionary processes that give such behavior a long-run survival advantage over more immediately self-interested courses of action. In this account apparently irrational acts, such as risking one's life to help a stranger or cooper-

ating in the one-shot prisoner's dilemma game, have long-term survival value since they develop trust of others and help build an individual reputation for honesty. Such a reputation brings with it profitable opportunities that are not open to individuals with a reputation for being untrustworthy or selfish. Notice, however, that this account is not a rational actor account of the evolution of such norms, but rather it is a Darwinian account in which some types of behavior have survival value while other types do not.

In the present context emotional attachments associated with the party and the symbols and beliefs that it represents help to motivate participation and thereby overcome the free-rider problem. The emotional payoffs that individuals obtain from working for a cause they believe in are the driving force that overcomes the temptation to free ride on the work of others. This is manifest in both the strength of the individual's attachments to his or her party and also the social norms that surround participation in politics.

If these findings undermine simplistic rational choice accounts of participation, they also suggest that the civic voluntarism model gives a wholly inadequate account of high-intensity participation in politics. Few of the variables in that model are robust, statistically significant predictors of high-intensity participation, and those that are often have perverse signs from the point of view of theory. The findings suggest that the theoretical criticisms of this model set out in chapter 2 are supported by the empirical evidence.

It would be inaccurate to say that the civic voluntarism model is wrong, but it is clearly inadequate as an explanation for high-intensity participation. Arguably, the longevity of this model can be attributed to a research strategy that privileges its testing as the preferred theoretical model at the expense of possible rivals. Instead of comparing the model with alternatives, evidence is sought in favor of it, which is then used to support the model as the best theoretical explanation of participation.

The problems of the civic voluntarism model are exemplified by the role of educational attainment in predicting activism, which is a key variable in the U.S. versions of the model. Once cognitive and affective factors explained by other theories are taken into account education is not a robust predictor of participation. Thus it is not surprising that rising educational levels in most advanced industrial societies have not produced higher rates of participation or that many highly educated individuals do not participate in politics.

It seems plausible that the outcome of the 1992 general election played an important role in influencing the findings from the panel analysis, particularly the evidence that participation declined more for Labour than for the Conservatives. There are a number of ways in which winning or losing an election can stimulate or inhibit the incentives to participate. Activists in the winning party would tend to revise their evaluations of collective benefits, since the success of their party ensures that such benefits will continue to be provided at both the national and local levels.⁵ Equally, group efficacy should also be boosted for the winning party and inhibited for the losing party. Outcome incentives should also become more important for the winning side, since being part of a winning team increases the probability that the individual can build a successful political career.

Activists in the losing party should have the reverse profile; for them the collective benefits should become less significant, because their party remains in opposition and unable to deliver collective goods. This is likely to be reinforced for the Labour party members by the fact that the party lost four successive elections in a row prior to the 1997 general election. Obviously, this will also be true of individual and group efficacy. Another effect of losing an election is to reduce the activist's chances of pursuing a successful political career, so outcome incentives to participate should be reduced in the case of the Labour party members. All these factors would reduce Labour activism more than Conservative activism.

These points have two important implications for electoral politics in general. First, they imply that prior elections can have an important influence on the ability of a party to campaign at the local level in a subsequent election. This suggests that there appears to be a dynamic process at work in electoral politics; if electoral failure can produce a decline in grass roots campaigning, which in turn reduces the effectiveness of subsequent electoral mobilization by a party, there is the potential for accelerating the electoral failure. Just as Noelle-Neumann (1984) argues that there is a spiral of silence at work in electoral politics in which issues perceived as unpopular are crowded out by issues that appear to be popular, a similar process may be at work in electoral behavior (Whiteley and Seyd 1998). There may be a spiral of mobilization at work in which electoral success stimulates campaign activity, which in turn helps to produce further electoral success. The corollary of this is of course that there may also be a spiral of demobilization arising from electoral failure.

It is important not to overstate this process, since Labour did after all

go on to achieve the largest election victory in its history in 1997 and since there was little evidence of such a spiral in its case after 1992, although the process may well have influenced the result of the 1983 general election, which Labour lost by a landslide. On the other hand indirect evidence suggests that there may have been such a spiral in the case of the Conservatives in 1997. As Rallings and Thrasher point out in their analysis of trends in local elections in Britain, "No party before had seen its local electoral base destroyed in quite the way as the Conservatives during the 1990s" (1997: 125). Many of these defeated Conservative locally elected representatives became inactive as a result and failed to provide leadership or to campaign in the 1997 general election. As a consequence Labour significantly out-campaigned the Conservatives in that election (Denver, Hands, and Henig 1998).

The second implication for electoral politics is that regular elections serve to sustain and develop high-intensity participation. In other words there is a feedback process operating from the low-intensity participation of the many in elections to the high-intensity participation of the few in campaigning and running for office. The institutional framework of democratic politics sustains this type of participation, which in turn is crucial to the future of democratic politics.

In conclusion, high-intensity participation can be explained by a relatively small number of variables, some of which involve calculations of costs and benefits of the type familiar to rational choice theorists and others of which involve social norms and affective attachments of the kind that pervades social psychological accounts of political phenomena. The general incentive theory dominates the field of the rival theories tested in this book, although it does not eliminate them from consideration. With some caveats the general incentive theory appears to work as an explanation for high-intensity activism, for exiting behavior, and in a suitably modified form for electoral behavior as well. It is of course unlikely to be the last word in political science explorations of the key phenomenon of political participation. But measures of the type encompassed by this theory are likely to figure in any other accounts of high-intensity participation in political systems other than Britain.