

# Who is to blame for the perceived crisis in democracy? Politicians, the media or the public?

Written by Patrick Lee

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## Who is to blame for the perceived crisis in democracy? Politicians, the media or the public?

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PATRICK LEE, JUL 28 2011

The first hurdle in tackling this question comes in analysing the phrase 'perceived crisis'. The word 'crisis' is one that is both overly used and misused in political and social sciences. Therefore Habermas' definition is helpful:

"The concept of crisis was familiar to us from its medical usage. In that context it refers to the phase of an illness in which it is decided whether or not the organism's self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery." [1]

Habermas makes explicit the concept of crisis as one in which the organism will either perish or continue to survive. Acknowledging this definition is vital before continuing this essay's discussion. It will be the paradigm by which the state of democracy is compared to throughout, and therefore has been identified immediately.

This essay will now be able to initially ascertain the reality of the perception of crisis in democracy; analysing contemporary theorists analogously in order to achieve this. This is significant as it is essential to firstly recognise whether the perception of crisis is valid, in order to place blame on a particular group for causing it. Secondly, an exogenous explanation of this crisis will be observed, focusing on the causes of voter apathy from a post-Hirschian perspective, and looking at theorists such as Inglehart, among others. The tertiary section of this essay will offer an endogenous approach, focusing on political parties and their politicians. Also implicit within this section of the essay will be an analysis of whether the perception of crisis is dependent on the viewing of it from either a right or left wing perspective. Finally, this essay will adumbrate the media's role in contributing to the crisis in democracy.

One final point to make before beginning this essay's discussion is the corollary of the fact that Habermas "focuses on Britain, France and Germany" [2] when defining major public spheres and emerging democracies. This essay will, like Habermas, focus upon the major examples of contemporary democracies, mainly Britain and the USA, in order to present the most representative picture possible of democracy in crisis.

There is an argument that "democracy is currently enjoying one of its most splendid periods." [3] Democracy can be defined as the rule of a citizen body with the right to free and fair elections, under the principles of 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. Using this definition it is clear that "there have been major extensions of elected government [...] within the so-called 'advanced countries.'" [4] Crouch's *initial* view, which will be returned to later, seems to be that there is nothing wrong with democracy, certainly not when analysed under the rubric of 'crisis' as defined above. "The people were still merely subjects but the term 'public' now came to be associated with matters pertaining to an increasingly depersonalized state authority." [5] This, Crouch seems to be arguing, is still the case today. Citizens are not ruled by an omnipresent Church, monarch or dictator. Rather, in keeping with Habermas' definition of a public sphere, "economic affairs [are] a matter of intense public interest" [6] due to capitalism, or 'mercantilism' as Habermas puts it. For Inglehart, "there is no crisis to speak of." [7]

However, there is a conflicting argument that democracy and capitalism are in deep crisis. "[D]emocracy, as we have come to understand it, has become unaffordable" [8] *The New Statesman* declared in September 2010. Other contemporary examples of a democracy in crisis include the mass protestation at Clegg's decision to break his election pledge regarding university fees: many citizens feel they were not given a fair vote on economic affairs.

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According to above definitions this is undemocratic. We also see academics such as Zizek, among others, claiming America is suffering from “too much democracy”[9], a perspective that received widespread attention during the recent US midterm elections. Finally, the global financial crash of 2007 triggered a growing view summarized best by *The Socialist Worker’s* slogan: “Capitalism isn’t working”[10].

There is a plethora of theories that place blame on citizens for the crisis in democracy. The crisis is predominantly defined by declining voter turnouts, and with the ephemeral nature of political interest from citizens. Hay and Norris both provide excellent statistics on decreasing turnouts. Hay points out “...the norm is for a lengthy process of decline over several decades”[11] but he also concedes this rule has exceptions. Hay adds that too much should not be read into maximum and minimum levels of voter turnout due to “one-off factors quite specific to the national context”[12]. However, his findings still imply a crisis in democracy, particularly when considering that many parties have a mandate to govern even when half of those registered to vote have not done so. An example being in the US in 1996 when Clinton beat Dole to the presidency with only 49% of the electorate turning out to vote. In this instance “something approaching public opinion”[13] is arguably not formed, as the majority of the public have not voiced their opinion. A democratic crisis is seemingly caused by citizens.

One cultural modernisation theory, led by Inglehart, suggests that citizen’s contemporary attitudes to politics are changing. Public priorities are “broadening to include a range of new post-material values, such as environmental quality, lifestyle choices, and consumer rights.”[14] However, this theory seems inherently right wing. It implies that the public is happy to be apathetic and ultimately trust in government, which inevitably leads to reduction of state responsibilities. Whereas this theory does partially explain the crisis in democracy from the citizens’ angle, from a Marxist perspective, it relieves the state from its main goal of sustaining the labour market.

However Inglehart is quick to assert, “postmaterial values have a libertarian component that leads individuals to question authority. Postmaterialists often criticize the hierarchic and structured nature of contemporary representative democracy.”[15] The advantage of this argument is that it suggests that because of modernisation, citizens are increasingly ‘critical’. This means they will exercise their democratic rights in new, postmaterial ways. This theory explains new democratic phenomena such as blogging, petitions (e-petitions being the latest addition to democracy), and abstaining from voting in order to symbolise distrust in the democratic process. While this does explain the crisis in democracy, exposing citizens as the cause, it is difficult to label this ‘blame’ as it sees the decision to abstain from voting as a conscious, symbolic choice. Although, using this argument, it seems that one need look no further than citizens in order to find the cause for the crisis in democracy. For a further example, Dalton states that the hierarchic institution that suffers particular scrutiny is the police, which valorizes this theory when considering the huge number of protests aimed at police. Most notably following the death of Ian Tomlinson, and the murder of Jean Charles De Menezes in the UK, and the protests against the “SP 1070” law in the US.

However, as stated above, this argument seems to have a right wing agenda. Furthermore, there seem to be fundamental flaws in this perspective. For example, Norris argues that industrialisation and modernisation means greater education (education which Bobbio refers to as the great “broken promise”[16] of democracy) and “the rapid expansion in the size of the working class”[17]. Norris cites Powell, who “found a positive curvilinear relationship between economic development (logged per capita GNP) and voter turnout.”[18] The point here is: if we have a better-educated, larger working class, why would they choose not to vote in favour of developing post-material values?

The problem with these studies, as Hay extrapolates, is the tendency to view the argument from a behaviouralist perspective. On top of this, due to its use of quantitative data, this perspective “tends to focus narrowly on those variables which are readily quantified.”[19] Therefore Powell’s study is not totally representative. Most significantly it blames citizens for being disengaged, rather than focusing on political parties “failure to find and construct resonant political appeals.”[20] The conclusion to draw from comparing these studies is that democracy now enjoys the benefits of modernisation, but this has created a much more cynical, apathetic citizenry who protest in new, post-material ways. Therefore we have a crisis in democracy as a result of the electorate: citizens.

The epochal shift that Inglehart describes certainly resonates with the theories of Putnam and Bauman. Putnam

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claims “the fabric of American community life”[21] is unraveling. He cites the 1970s as one of the key factors in falling political engagement. The termination and subsequent replacement of a Keynesian economic policy with that of a neo-liberal laissez-faire market caused the 1970s-1990s to be a time of increasing economic anxiety. “[T]he combined pressures of time and money are the main explanation for our civic disengagement.”[22] Putnam suggests that in contemporary Western liquid societies, “we have less time for friends, neighbours, and civic affairs...”[23] On top of this, any more free time American’s enjoy in contemporary society is enjoyed by people who are unemployed, uneducated, and less likely to be politically engaged. Putnam describes this increasing parochialism of voters succinctly:

“[W]e’ve witnessed a redistribution of free time from people (mostly younger, more educated women) who would have invested it in community engagement, toward people (mostly older, less educated men) more likely to consume it privately.”[24]

Whereas Putnam stresses that it is most likely financial pressure, rather than time pressure that causes civic disengagement, the real attraction with this theory is that it is a systemic argument. Unlike studies described earlier in this essay, Putnam does not blame citizens completely, but rather implicit within his argument is a political and economic discussion that means citizens are reacting to government. To briefly summarise however, Putnam here has adumbrated two reasons for declining citizen engagement: the first being economic hardship, leading to less free time. The second being the fact that a redistribution of free time has led it to be enjoyed by people who are simply more politically disenchanted. Again, a crisis in democracy caused by citizens, but this time citizens reacting to a political doctrine.

Social mobility, suburbanization, Post-Fordist employment, and other forms of modernity have “weakened the ties between individuals and social communities.”[25] Putnam argues, “that social capital is decreasing as a result of these societal trends.”[26] By looking at the economic and political causes of these societal trends, Putnam, as we will see with Crouch later in this essay, distinguishes himself from other theorists discussed so far. This is because whereas he is initially analysing decreasing levels of civic engagement on behalf of citizens, and thereby inevitably inscribing some blame upon citizens, he looks at what has happened politically to cause such civic unrest. This is what leads Putnam to emphatically declare: “I have no doubt that global economic transformations are having an important impact on community life across America.”[27] Before analysing global economics and its effects, it is important to give more examples of this societal change. As the discussion is focused currently on citizens rather than politicians, examples from contemporary politics are irrelevant. Putnam touches upon the best example: Television. “The effect of electronic entertainment – above all, television – in privatizing our leisure time has been substantial.”[28] He estimates TV has accounted for 25% of the decline in civic engagement. Although Putnam displays no empirical data, one need only check the BARB television ratings for the UK to see programmes such as *X Factor* and *Eastenders* receive far greater ratings than political events. Therefore another reason for citizens being blameworthy for causing the crisis in democracy is extrapolated.

It now becomes important to begin analysing how global economics have impacted upon citizens, and in particular upon declining voter turnouts. One important factor may be Hirsch’s 1977 work *Social Limits to Growth*. “Fred Hirsch had opened a seam of vulnerability in the intellectual defence of the free-market economy.”[29] There are many points to make here. Perhaps the reason more critical citizens are choosing to abstain from voting, thus causing a crisis in democracy, is a reactionary one. Abstaining is a visceral reaction to a political and economic system that has a “reliance on the free market as the main means of pursuing human ends.”[30] This reliance, which is ultimately futile from Hirsch’s perspective, leads to distributional struggles to own the best possible commodities and to earn more money than people we compare ourselves to. It also leads to waste of ‘secondary goods’.

“To a large extent Hirsch is pointing to the ineluctable hopelessness of much human striving, to the folly of pretending that material effort can produce human happiness.”[31]

To summarise this argument as succinctly as possible: Better educated and critical voters are choosing to abstain from voting in a system which since the 1970s has relied on a free-market economy which, as Hirsch points out, both has limits in providing for mankind, and produces unhappiness. Therefore whereas we can blame citizens for the

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crisis in democracy, the greater picture shows us that citizens' actions are being influenced by the state and the global economy.

This unhappiness is something Putnam also approaches. Putnam claims that generational change may account for "half of the overall decline"[32] of civic engagement, thus causing a crisis in democracy. Like Hirsch, and Crouch as will be described shortly, Putnam aligns this generational change with the acceleration of global economics. "The replacement of local banks, shops, and other locally based firms by far-flung multinational empires often means a decline in civic commitment..."[33] This theory certainly goes some way in explaining increasingly low levels of voters. It explains the 'fabric of community life' is unraveled by global politics, meaning fewer people being committed to a political party for life. As class becomes more transient and work more liquid, political views are no longer fixed and ascribed from birth, but also become more transient and liquid, leading to a crisis in democracy. "[T]he shifting distribution of values could therefore contribute to the decreasing trust of politicians and government."[34] This view is shared by Huntington, who writes that changing public values emphasise "only negative effects"[35] for democracy.

Citizens' actions are corollaries of decisions and actions by the state, meaning politicians are truly responsible for the crisis. This goes parallel with the basic Downsian model, which argues, "the more distant the parties are from respondents, the more likely respondents are to say they mistrust government."[36] This brings to mind Crouch's quote: "Corruption is a powerful indicator of poor health in a democracy"[37] In the UK examples include the MP's expenses scandal, which caused Clegg to declare in 2009: "Confidence in politicians is – understandably – at an all time low."[38] There was also the controversy surrounding Lord Ashcroft's tax evasion while funding the Conservative's during their election campaign. "Of course, electoral party politics is disfigured by the inequalities of funding procured by the role of business interests."[39] Lord Ashcroft's controversial funds are a classic example of liberalism clashing with democracy, and the victims are the voters, which leads to a further crisis with democracy.

In the US there are older examples such as the Watergate scandal, and more recently with Jeb Bush's 'victory' in Florida's election in 2000. We can therefore see that whereas the crisis in democracy is being measured in citizens declining participation, the blame lies with the politicians.

The Downsian model presumes that the level of dissatisfaction with political parties is constantly increasing, fuelling disengagement, and therefore "nearly all governments are generally doing worse than they use to."[40] Dalton is correct to assert this is not the case, as governments are increasingly scrutinised to a much higher degree (the MPs scandal again is a good example, as well as the much greater interest in politicians private lives). Politicians have become "something more like shopkeepers than rulers, anxiously seeking to discover what their 'customers' want to stay in business."[41] Therefore we are not seeing a crisis in falling government performance, but rather as mentioned previously, a higher level of scrutiny by a better-educated citizenry and media. Perhaps then, and this will be returned to, the media are to blame for the crisis.

Crouch points out that seeming satisfaction with a liberal democracy has led Western societies into a state of post-democracy. Under this model citizens are "passive, quiescent, even apathetic"[42] and public debate is a "tightly controlled spectacle."[43] The fundamental aspects of a post-democracy have been the symptoms of democracy in crisis largely out-lined so far in this essay. It was mentioned earlier that Crouch *seemingly* places blame on citizens for their 'apathetic' nature, and 'seeming satisfaction' with liberal democracy. However, like Putnam, Hirsch and to some extent Dalton, Crouch sees the economic policy changes of the 1970s as key. Due to the oil crisis, Keynesian economics were abandoned due to their perceived inability to deal with inflation, and Thatcher and Reagan introduced a neo-liberal open market. "[D]uring the Reagan years the USA changed fundamentally. Its welfare provision had become residual, its unions marginalized, and its divisions between rich and poor had started to resemble those of a Third World country."[44] Thatcher summarised this time of state reduction by stating: "There is no such thing as society. Just individuals, and their families."[45]

What is significant, and why this point is being laboured, is the fact that Crouch also points out that the US and UK were:

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“[E]xamples which elites throughout the world, including those in countries emerging from communism, could embrace with open arms. [...] US concepts of democracy increasingly equated it with limited government within an unrestrained capitalist economy and reduced the democratic component to the holding of elections.”[46]

This is a concept that, with the rise of New Labour and other forms of centre ground politics, has become dominant throughout the world and caused a crisis in democracy. Crouch therefore places blame with politicians, mainly Reagan and Thatcher, for putting an end to egalitarian politics, and creating a poor example of democracy for the rest of the world to follow. This has led to a crisis in democracy caused by politicians.

Whereas Keynesian economics have been re-introduced with the US and UK governments decision (one which set the example for many other European democracies), to nationalise the banks, this is not enough. This is because right wing cuts and draconian taxes (an excellent example being the 20% VAT tax) are preventing citizens from spending. As Keynes famously said, the government should pay people to dig and fill in holes in times of economic crisis. This is not the case today.

To conclude this section of the essay emphatically, it seems that politicians and the increasing importance of global corporations in a free market economy are to blame for the crisis in democracy. Whereas this crisis can be measured in terms of voter turnout, the only real blame to place on voters that is not a direct result of politicians actions is the rise in television viewing, which, as stated, Putnam attributes 25% of blame too. Put simply, nation state politics are being undermined by global economics.

Norris states that the,

“coverage of public affairs by the news media contributes to civic disengagement, including ignorance of public affairs, disenchantment with government, and political apathy.”[47]

Already mentioned in this essay is the association between “watching television entertainment, social trust and engagement in voluntary associations and community affairs.”[48] However there seems, as Putnam asserts, more responsibility on the part of the citizen who chooses to purchase and watch the television. In this sense, the citizen retains blame.

However, it was mentioned earlier that the Downsian model is wrong to imply that governments performances are steadily falling, but instead public scrutiny is getting better and better. It now becomes important to test what Norris calls the public’s “ignorance of public affairs”, by analysing the performance of the press.

Jamieson[49] studied advertising in the US from the 1960s-1980s and found that 50% of images focused on images of candidates, with only 15% on policy. This brings to mind the obsession in contemporary politics with party and politician image over policy. One of the first issues Ed Miliband tackled in his first speech as Labour Leader[50] was his resemblance to Wallace from *Wallace and Gromit*. There is the obsession in the press with William Hague’s private life, a topic that receives as much attention as his affiliation with homophobes and Holocaust deniers, some of his only affiliates throughout European politics. Do the press remember John Prescott as the politician who successfully negotiated the Kyoto treaty, or as an over-weight man suffering from bulimia who once punched someone? “The principle democratic role of the media, according to traditional liberal theory, is to act as a check on the state.”[51] The press, in this sense, does not fulfill its duty as the watchdog role, and therefore can be seen as to blame for the crisis in democracy.

However, when considered this seems to be a problem with the demand side of news, rather than supply. Due to citizen apathy and political disengagement caused by reasons highlighted earlier, citizens are more interested with “tabloid trash”[52] as Norris puts it. The media, functioning in a global capitalist economy, must provide what will sell, and as seen earlier on from looking at Putnam’s theory, there is a demand from citizens for cheap, exciting, scandal stories. Therefore, again, blame must really lie with politicians and citizens.

Furthermore, Schudson claims that even ‘tabloid trash’ serves an important function in democracy. He argues:

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“The focus of the news media on events, rather than trends and structures; the fixation of the press on conflict whenever and wherever it erupts; the cynicism of journalists with respect to politics and politicians [...] These are precisely the features that most regularly enable the press to maintain a capacity for subverting established power.”[53]

Schudson presents a convincing argument. Citizens in democracies, as discussed, are disengaged. Furthermore, Bobbio claims that the most established democracies “are impotent before the phenomenon of increasing voter apathy”[54] due to limited citizen education. In this imperfect situation, perhaps a disingenuous media that does recognise and report on politicians is an example of the media fulfilling its watchdog role as best it can.

One limit upon the media in the UK and US is an electoral system that favours only a few parties. It is “not the job of the press to offer the public a wide range of issues but to cover, analyse, and discuss the issues the two viable candidates were presenting.”[55] The media therefore have limits imposed upon them and, again, it is difficult to call them ‘blameworthy’ in this instance. Despite this however, they are certainly shown to be limited in their ability to deliver a healthy democracy, and therefore contribute in some way to the crisis.

The electoral system leads to an often-tedious two-party race:

“...while the party rivalry become ever more bland and vapid, one cannot call this kind of politics non- or anti-democratic, because so much of it results from politicians’ anxieties about their relations with citizens. At the same time it is difficult to dignify it as democracy itself, because so many citizens have been reduced to the role of manipulated, passive, rare participants.”[56]

In this instance a lack of legislation for a more democratic electoral reform is the cause. Therefore blame lies with politicians, as they are the policy makers; the media are simply doing the best with what is on offer.

There are, however, examples in which the media are directly culpable for contributing to the crisis in democracy. For example, journalists belong to a small microcosm. “There is a real danger in democracy here: [...] journalists, because they are so closely linked, have their own, narrow, idea of what the media should cover...and ignore the interests of the people.”[57] The FTSE boardrooms are virtually run by white, middle class men, and this is reflected in the way the media is run. This has led to an undemocratic representation in the media, meaning the media are culpable for the crisis in democracy.

The media has some, but not all, culpability regarding private ownership. Most notably *Fox News* has a monopoly over the media, particularly in the US; and other Murdoch owned papers in the UK, such as *The Sun*, *News of the World* and *The Times*. Putatively one of Blair’s greatest achievements, and Brown’s greatest failures, was winning over Murdoch. “If Murdoch were left to pursue his business interests in peace he would give Labour a fair wind.”[58] This tug of war between politicians and global media can only serve to weaken democracy and strengthen global corporations. However, blame must lie with the policy and legislation makers for not doing more to reward local news outlets, and limit the powers of media moguls like Murdoch. Of course, there is Cable’s recent escapade of challenging Murdoch, but, again, it seems he is limited by government. Therefore, once again, we see a scenario where an institution (in this case the media, not citizens), is culpable for the crisis in democracy, but if we trace this culpability, politicians are responsible in causing the crisis in democracy.

This leads conveniently to this essay’s conclusion. Blame can be placed on each group for not adequately fulfilling its democratic role. However, each relies on each other in such a way that makes a healthy democracy impossible if one does not function adequately. Put differently: citizens, politicians and the media are to blame for the crisis in democracy. However, this essay agrees with Crouch, and to some degree Putnam, that politicians are the policy makers, and if culpability is traced back far enough, the majority of responsibility is theirs. Most topics discussed from the aspect of citizens and the media have been crises caused by governmental legislation.

Many theorists agree that this crisis is cyclical but, as Crouch points out, each time we go round we lose something increasingly important from democracy. Democracy is now in a state of ‘centre-periphery’, “in which ‘weak’ public

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spheres formulate and relay opinions from 'weak' publics to the parliamentary centre.”[59] This is an imperfect state to be in, and is a similar description to Crouch's post-democracy. Within this state each fundamental tenant of democracy – citizens, politicians and media – is challenged by overwhelming obstacles. These obstacles have all been outlined in this essay. They are all hindering each institutions respective role in achieving its job to deliver a healthy social democracy, which, as *The New Statesman* [60] points out, is exactly what we need in difficult financial times.

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# Who is to blame for the perceived crisis in democracy? Politicians, the media or the public?

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