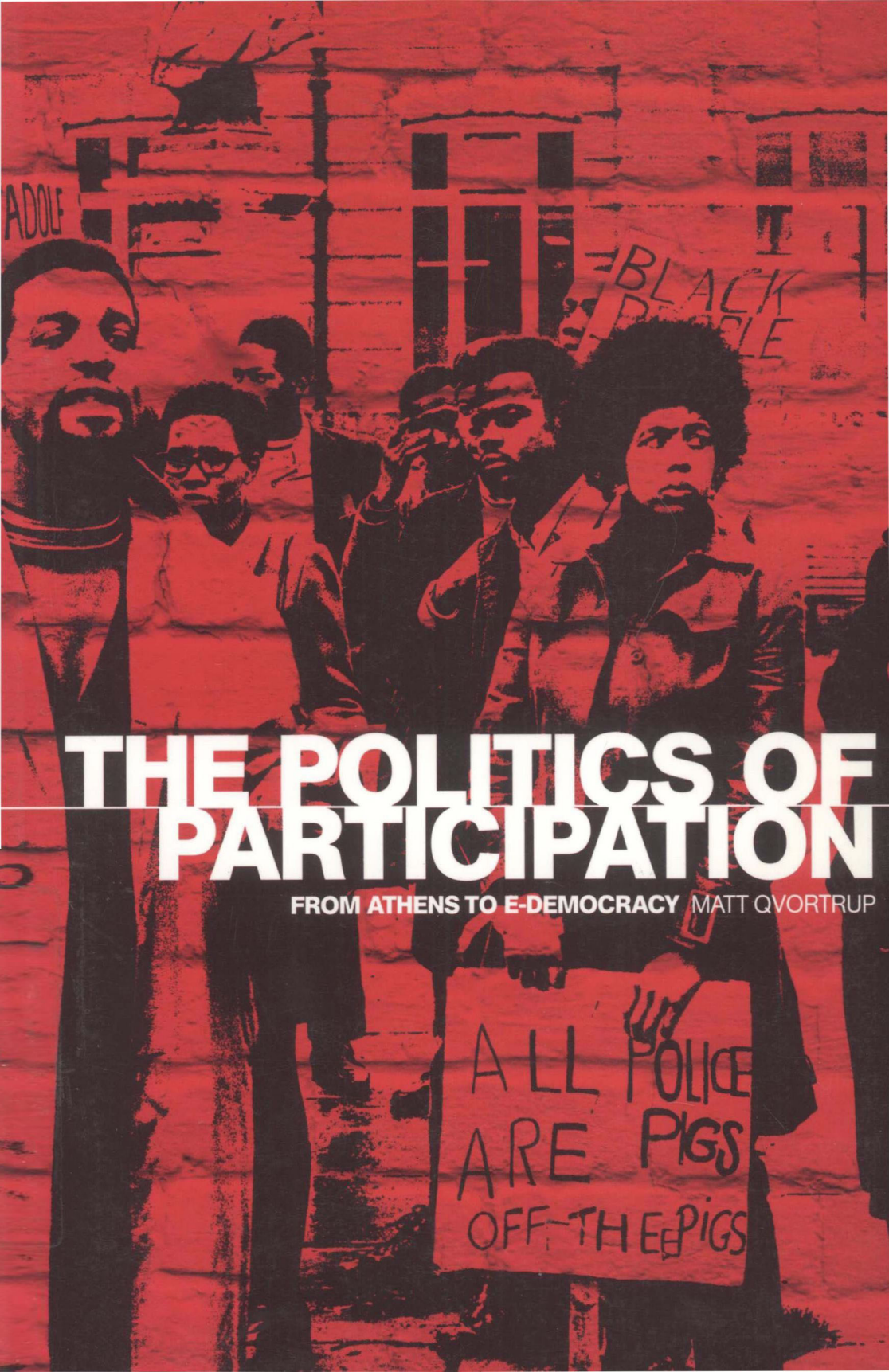

THE POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION

FROM ATHENS TO E-DEMOCRACY MATT QVORTRUP

The politics of participation

MANCHESTER
1824
Manchester University Press

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Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,
NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 7658 9 *hardback*
ISBN 978 0 7190 7659 6 *paperback*

First published 2007

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Charter ITC BT 10.5/12.5pt
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Manchester
Printed in Great Britain
by Biddles, King's Lynn

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From Athens to e-democracy

Matt Qvortrup

Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York
distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

But I, my life surveying,
With nothing to show, to devise, from its idle years
Nor houses, nor lands – nor tokens of gems or gold for my friends,
Only these Souvenirs of Democracy –
In them – in all my songs – behind me leaving.

(Walt Whitman, *Souvenirs of Democracy*)

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Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the help of Peter McLaverty, Pippa Norris, Richard Jenkins, Nigel Smith, Dahlia Scheindlin, Gary Sussman, Rick Ridder, Quintin Oliver, Tony Wright, Robert Smith, Laurence Morel, Oonagh Gay, Elizabeth Tait, Michael Saward, Clive Bean, Neil Kenlock, David Sanders, Iain MacLeod, Allan McConnell, Darren Halpin, Anne Van Ewyk, Mark Rolfe, Bjørn Erik Rasch, Ethan Putterman, Patricia Springborg, Lyn Carson, Ted Becker, Alistair Anderson, Ed Page, Joop van Holsteyn, Patrick Dumont and Deborah Brennan. I am grateful also to the Robert Gordon University for sponsoring the sabbatical during which much of this book was written, and to the universities of Sydney and New South Wales for their hospitality during my sojourn in Australia. The Economic and Social Research Council is acknowledged for granting me a fellowship in 2006 to pursue the ideas covered in chapter 4. Lastly I owe special thanks to Anne Bamford for being so generous, kind and wise. This book is dedicated to my sons Sebastian and Frederik with love!

Lisbon, 12 March 2006

A note on the data

Material in chapters 3–6 is based on analyses of *Eurobarometer*, European Values Surveys and secondary analyses of the *British Election Survey*. The analysis in chapter 10 is based on participant observation in the Netherlands and France in the spring and summer of 2005 and on opinion polls conducted in the native languages of the two countries. In France it is based on IPSOS, carried out 29 May 2005; in the Netherlands the data is based on three TweeVandaag Opinion Panle (Opinion Polls) carried out on 5 April 2005 (N = 15283), 9 May 2005 (N = 13459), and 28 May 2005 (N = 17195). For Luxembourg the data are based on opinion polls carried out for the main national newspaper *Lëtzebuerger* by ILReS Market Research throughout the first six months of 2005.

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Introduction

In human societies collective decisions can be reached as a result of three different mechanisms (or combinations thereof): by talking, by voting or by fighting.

The politics of participation involves all three forms. We endorse talking and voting because they are activities based on peaceful and reasoned arguments, and we condemn violence because we know that might is not right. The ideal is peaceable decision-making, but as sociologists and political scientists we must acknowledge that occasionally – if options are limited – people resort to violence – even in democratic societies. It is not only among states that 'war is the continuation of politics by other means', as Clausewitz famously observed in *On War*.

This book is devoted to an analysis of talking, voting and fighting among citizens, in an attempt to understand why and when ordinary people engage in these activities or combinations of them.

It might be a good idea to consider initially a simple statistic about the United Kingdom: the National Trust has 2.5 million members and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has 1.04 million members. Far from suggesting that birds and stately homes are unimportant, it might be a reason for concern that either organisation has many more members than the three main political parties put together. Labour has 361,000 paid-up members, the Conservatives 350,000 and the Liberal Democrats 90,000 (Walker 2001). Do these figures suggest that we have become disengaged, that we care less and less about politics? Is British democracy in a state of crisis? Research by American writers Almond and Verba in the early 1960s showed that Britain had a model civic culture characterised by a high level of citizen participation and strong civic norms that fostered political stability and effective policy-making (Almond and Verba 1963). The general consensus in the press in recent years has been the opposite.

No political phenomenon can be analysed without a firm understanding of method, and this is especially true for citizen politics.

Political activity defies traditional boundaries. Sometimes political activists use arguments, at other times they vote – and occasionally they resort to violence; in other words: talking, voting and fighting. To understand political action we are required to have an open mind and to be open to different methods.

In chapter 1 an account is developed of what is required for the study of political phenomena. Using a largely qualitative method, drawing on writers like C. Wright Mills, Richard Fenno, Clifford Geertz and above all Hannah Arendt, it is argued that political participation cannot be understood from an objective perspective only, and that one needs to study the phenomenon *from the inside*. Quantitative approaches certainly have a place in the study of politics, but a *full* understanding of the phenomenon is possible only if we combine different approaches, seeking – like detectives – to patch together the story. Consequently, an understanding of citizen politics requires that we adopt the perspective of the citizens in question and take seriously their grievances and concerns. To do so we must transcend – but not abandon – the idea that politics can be adequately studied objectively; we must combine the various perspectives of what has been called the 'sociological imagination' (Mills 2002). Chapter 1 presents a *tour de force* of the argument and the rationale behind this way of analysing politics.

Having outlined an overall approach to studying citizen politics, I turn in chapter 2 to historical debates about citizen politics. Throughout the history of civilised society, citizen politics has been the exception rather than the norm. Most societies through the ages have been based not on citizen engagement but on more or less despotic rule. Why, then, should citizens be involved in politics and, indeed, take a direct part in the process of governing? An answer to this question requires an understanding of the development of the philosophical debates about citizen participation through the ages. Beginning with the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, the chapter presents a general account of the defence of citizen politics provided by Machiavelli and Marsilius of Padua, Rousseau and Mill, but also an introduction to the elitist critics of democracy, e.g. José Ortega y Gasset and the federalists. Following this general overview, more contemporary theorists are introduced.

In Part II I consider the issues empirically. Comprised of a number of smaller sections (or sub-chapters), chapter 3 centres around the central issues concerning citizen politics. Adopting an empirical approach, I present a typology of different forms of citizen politics, from activities initiated by the people themselves to actions prompted by the elites; similarly, citizen politics can be divided into *conservative*

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or *progressive* effects. Based on this typology, different forms of politics are analysed.

In the remaining chapters of Part II, the four categories are analysed in turn and explanations developed as to the causes and determinants behind different kinds of political action, whether elite-driven or citizen-initiated.

Chapter 4 considers the 'illegal' – but not necessarily illegitimate – aspects of citizen politics, including terrorism, while chapter 5 focuses on novel means of political engagement that have emerged in recent years (including teledemocracy and the internet, and deliberative democracy, the political parties' use of designer politics and political marketing). I argue that the increased use of political consultants can in some cases strengthen democratic legitimacy by ensuring that citizens' preferences are acknowledged in policies.

Having considered various aspects of direct engagement I turn in chapter 6 to consider theories of electoral choice in an attempt to explain why people vote and what determines their preferences; the chapter considers also the influence of the mass media.

Chapter 7 is an excursus on the UK Parliament. It is often argued that politics should be left to (elected) experts and that Parliament is the proper forum for democratic deliberation. The question is, however, whether that is an accurate description of the reality of Parliament. To answer this question we consider the procedures and powers of the UK Parliament.

Part III looks at practical citizen politics in the form of three case studies of referendums and citizen politics. While support for increased participation is a constant theme in the political rhetoric of the elites, decisions to submit more issues to the voters do not always live up to their idealistic billing.

The decision to hold referendums is a case in point, and chapter 8 considers why governments have submitted issues to referendums (both in the UK and elsewhere). Chapter 9's concern, citizenship engagement, is pursued through a case study of the 2005 referendums on the European Constitution in Spain, France, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, while chapter 10 considers the effects of postal voting (one of the favoured options for increasing participation). Together these three case studies present an overview of the state of democracy in Western democracies as well as touching on some of the possible means of (re-)engaging citizens with the political process.

The book concludes with a discussion of democracy's prospects, in the course of which I sum up the argument, make recommendations for future studies and offer suggestions for new forms of participation.

Contrary to the often negative assessment of the state of citizen engagement, I contend that if citizen politics is to thrive a broadening of the political system itself is required to allow for different forms of democratic participation.

Part I

Theoretical aspects of citizen politics

Democracy is what social scientists call a social construct. It is not a phenomenon which can be studied experimentally or in the way that phenomena are studied by the natural sciences. What then is democracy?

In chapter 1 I consider some of the problems involved in the study of so loosely defined a concept and phenomenon as 'democracy' in terms of the methods of political science. After a critical introduction to the subject – and a critique of the idea that popular government can be analysed in a *scientific* manner – I turn to an alternative, more humanist, approach to the study of politics.

As a social construct itself, politics has a history, and in one sense the debate about democracy is a dialogue with more than 2000 years of ongoing discussions of the subject. Chapter 2 presents an account of the history of citizen democracy, from ancient Greece to the present day, with an emphasis on political and philosophical ideas.

1

Understanding citizen politics: a methodological overview

Before beginning this analysis of the problems of political participation, it is necessary to briefly consider how we might study a phenomenon as complex and multifaceted as politics.

There is no simple answer to that question. David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, inspired by Isaac Newton, suggested that '[p]olitics may be reduced to a science' (Hume 1985), yet he failed to spell out what, if any, laws of politics obtained in his discipline. Political scientists of subsequent centuries, it seems, have not had much luck in their similar endeavours. Laws such as Robert Michels's 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels 1911) and Duverger's 'Law' (according to which first-past-the-post electoral systems lead to two-party systems) are either trivially true (in the case of Michels) or have been falsified by actual events – thus, that Canada has more than two main parties falsifies Duverger's 'Law', if it was intended to be a *law* in the first place. Indeed, it might be argued that the search for such 'laws' is altogether misplaced – and is even obsolete in the sciences themselves. As Hannah Arendt (1983, 61) has put it, the concept of laws in the social sciences and history was

> always a metaphor borrowed from nature; and the fact is that this metaphor no longer convinces us because it has turned out that natural science can by no means be sure of an unchallengeable rule of law in nature.

Those who (still) entertain the thought that politics can – in due course – become a *science* are seemingly forced to agree with Karl Popper's observation that politics is 'yet to find its Newton or Galileo' (1957, 1).

Keeping within scientific discourse, the science of politics (if it can be thus called), is characterised by being in a constant state of flux, with its competing paradigms, epistemologies and theoretical approaches. Political science, to use the terminology of philosopher of science Thomas S. Kuhn, is in a revolutionary period (see Polsby 1998, 199). According

to Kuhn scientific disciplines can be divided into two phases: a *revolutionary* phase, where competing schools battle over the proper study of the discipline; and a *normal* phase, where there is universal agreement on an established paradigm and most work in the scholarly community is guided towards puzzle-solving, i.e. fitting in the last pieces of the jigsaw to establish a complete picture (1962, 36). During periods of *normal* science, the process of scholarly discovery is cumulative. And, while political science may not have made discoveries on a par with those of Kepler, Newton or Boyle, some argue that political science *has* made progress and that it has now established a 'paradigm'.

Presenting a case for rational-choice theory – often defined as the use of micro-economic models in the study of politics –Shepsle and Bonchek have argued that political science may not yet be 'rocket science', but the use of sophisticated mathematical models means that politics can be studied using some of the same models that are applied by astrophysicists and chemists. As they put it:

> The transformation of the study of politics from storytelling and anecdote swapping, first to thick description and history writing, then to systematic measurement, and more recently to explanation and analysis, constitutes a significant movement along the scientific trajectory (1997, 7).

Arguing in a similar vein, Almond (1996, 50–51) has opined:

> If we were to model the history of political science in the form of a curve of scientific progress in the study of politics over the ages, it would probably begin in Greek political science, make some modest progress in the Roman centuries, not make much progress in the Middle Ages, rise a bit in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, make some substantial gains in the 19th century, and then take off in solid growth in the 20th century . . . It [political science] is 'progressive' in the sense that it imputes the notion of improvement to the history of political studies, in the quantity of knowledge, and in quality in terms of both insight and rigor. With respect to insight, most colleagues would agree that Michael Waltzer (1983) has a better grasp of the concept of justice than does Plato, and with respect to rigor (and insight as well) Robert Dahl (1989) gives us a better theory of democracy than did Aristotle.

But can this view be justified? The view that Waltzer and Dahl knew more about justice and democracy than, respectively, Plato and Aristotle seems questionable, and is perhaps best repudiated by the prediction that more people in 200 years time will read Plato and Aristotle than Dahl and Waltzer.

The problem with Almond's statement is that it assumes that in political science theoretical debates can be concluded with finality. This has

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