

Apathy Revisited*

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Abstract

Contemporary world events, characterized by violence and extremism, force us to revisit the potential uses and abuses of political apathy in democracy. This article unravels the concept of apathy, placing it within its semantic field, qualifying it with respect to different political contexts, and making it relative to its possible conceptual opposites. In so doing, this article clarifies both the potential harms, and the probable values, of apathy – and of its alternatives – in contemporary democratic theory and practice. The article argues that the dividing line between a hundred percent participation, extremism, and violence is increasingly fragile in the divided societies that characterize contemporary democracies. In so doing, the article offers a defense of apathy, not as an inherently ‘good’ element of a democracy; but rather, as the least damaging to democracy in comparison with its real and potential opposites.

I. Introduction

What is apathy, and what place does it have in contemporary democratic theory and practice?¹ The word apathy is derived from the Greek root *pathos*, meaning feeling, suffering: to be ‘apathetic’ is to be (a = without, pathy = feeling) without feeling. The etymology of this term ‘apathy’ thus suggests in it a neutral element. Ironically, when the context of this term is democratic theory, authors are not always indifferent to apathy. Apathy as a concept in political theory and practice has been criticized, accounted for, and explained.² In fact, much work

* This essay is dedicated to the memory of Giovanni Sartori, 1924-2017.

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¹ As Held notes, apathy can be crucial, to the extent that it may be one of the actual ‘grounds for accepting or complying, consenting or agreeing, with something’ in modern democratic politics. D. Held, *Models of Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 195. The point of this article is to provide further examination along these lines motivated by Held, in an attempt to see how knowing the alternatives to apathy alters our judgment and analysis of legitimate democratic government.

² See most recently R. Jacoby, *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); I. MacKenzie and S. O’Neill eds, *Political Morality in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999); T. De Luca, *The Two Faces of Political Apathy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

has been done to measure apathy, to suggest its potential sources, and to identify the apathetic ‘elements’ of society.³ Discussions defending apathy in politics have met with even more criticisms.⁴ What becomes apparent in this literature, however, is that the critics and defenders of apathy are often talking past one another. This is due, in part, to their less than explicit discussion of key conceptual questions: To what particular group does apathy refer, what is the degree of apathy being discussed, and perhaps most crucially, what do we perceive as the potential and real alternative(s) to apathy?

This lack of specification in the literature leads us to wonder, how do the criticisms and defenses of apathy gain or lose significance as the referents, the degrees, and the alternatives to apathy change? Can apathy be healthy for democracy? If so, why and when? These questions are increasingly relevant in today’s world, as scholars and practitioners seek institutional arrangements that might effectively, and democratically, help polities best accommodate difference.⁵ The question, ‘when apathy?’ is therefore timely and interesting for both the theory and practice of democracy in the contemporary world.⁶ Yet unless the concept is unraveled, ie – qualified in different contexts and made relative to its possible conceptual opposites – the critics and the defenders of apathy will continue to talk past one another, and we may never clearly identify the potential harms or values of apathy, or its alternatives, in contemporary politics.⁷ This paper therefore ‘revisits’ apathy in an attempt to clear up the concept for discussion, and then to suggest the conditions under which apathy may actually be healthy for democracy, and those in which it may not.

³ I have in mind M. Rosenberg, ‘Some Determinants of Political Apathy’, in H. Eulau et al eds, *Political Behavior* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955), 160-169; G. Di Palma, *Apathy and Participation* (New York: Free Press, 1970); and more recently, R. Putnam, S. Pharr and R. Dalton, ‘Introduction: What’s Troubling the Trilateral Democracies?’, in S. Pharr and R. Putnam eds, *Disaffected Democracies. What’s Troubling the Trilateral Countries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴ For example, see B. Berelson, ‘Democratic Theory and Public Opinion’ 16 *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 313 (1952), discussed below.

⁵ A. Stepan, ‘Modern Multinational Democracies: Transcending a Gellnerian Oxymoron’, in J. Hall ed, *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 219-239. Also see E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1983); S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the Modern World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

⁶ Empirically, well before Brexit, the June 2004 elections to the European Parliament already showed what newspapers refer to as a voter apathy rate of fifty-five percent, and European politicians worry that neither the ‘democratic and civil ethos,’ nor the ‘praxis,’ of the European polity is in good health. Indeed, since the first European parliamentary elections in 1979, an increasing number of Europeans have either voted for ‘Eurosceptic’ political parties, or have simply abstained from voting altogether, raising interesting questions.

⁷ On conceptual cleaning, see R. Adcock and D. Collier, ‘Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research’ 95 *American Political Science Review*, 529-546 (2001); G. Sartori ed, *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1984).

II. Debating Apathy

W.H. Morris-Jones offers one of the first defenses of apathy and argues its place in contemporary democratic theory, providing the starting point for this discussion.⁸ For Morris-Jones, apathy refers to a citizen's non-participation in voting (non-voting). The opposite of apathy, in his context, is voting, exercising the right to vote. He distinguishes the right to vote from the duty to vote, and subsequently questions the existence, justification or value of the latter for the functioning of political institutions. The context of the discussion is parliamentary democracy, which he asserts may be regarded in two ways: First, it may be viewed as a system of government resting primarily on participation and consent such that 'the more there is of these (measured quantitatively) the better.' In this case, emphasis on an obligation to vote is expected, 'for to withhold one's vote is to make the system as a whole the poorer'. However, when parliamentary democracy is viewed in another manner, as a way of 'dealing with business', it is 'distinguished by its love of trial and its willingness to admit error', and then

'Participation and consent may be useful and desirable, but only as aids to a complete and adequate debate... All that is imperative for the health of parliamentary democracy is that the right to vote should be exercised to the extent necessary to ensure that the play of ideas and clash of interests can take place'.⁹

In sum, when parliamentary democracy is thought not to rest upon maximized electorate participation (voting maximized quantitatively), but rather, on the optimal degree of electoral participation that expresses the diverse interests in society, 'heavy polls are largely irrelevant to the healthy conduct of political business'.¹⁰

One criticism is that Morris Jones' argument assumes that apathy will be proportionate in each sector of the society with different interests. In other words, those who do choose to participate, although a fraction of the whole, will represent the diverse interests of the whole. Yet, don't different sectors of society, citizens with different levels of education for example, tend to vote more than others?¹¹ Does Morris Jones expect class-proportionate apathy in spite of this? Probably not – but his point is simply to explain how parliamentary democracy can work at all given an apathetic part of society, and his observation is that as

⁸ W.H. Morris Jones, 'In Defense of Apathy: Some Doubts on the Duty to Vote' *Political Studies*, II, 25-37 (1954).

⁹ *ibid* 35.

¹⁰ *ibid* 35.

¹¹ B.Jr. Powell, 'American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective' 80 *American Political Science Review*, 17-43 (1986), is interesting here. Also see R. Timponi, 'Ties That Bind: Measurement, Demographics, and Social Connectedness' 20 *Political Behavior*, 53-77 (1998). The point is also related to J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, edited by S. Mansfield ed (Arlington Heights: AHM Publishing, 1980).

long as the minimal degree of voting expresses the diverse interests in society, apathy does not harm the system. He agrees that

‘a people gets the politicians it deserves; that corrupt and weak political leaders indicate a lack of developed standards among those who choose them; and that such a lack in turn comes from inadequate interest...’¹²

This said, Morris Jones doubts that this possible low-quality problem could be solved by an increase in quantity. We note, therefore, that his defense of apathy in the electorate is also based on his doubts as to the ability of ‘a quantitative instrument designed to make a qualitative choice’, to work as planned.¹³

Next, Morris Jones continues to defend apathy ‘on more positive grounds, on the ground that it is a political virtue’, an aid to and proof of liberal democracy. Quoting Hogan (1923), Morris Jones contends, ‘the apathy or caprice for which political democracy has been blamed is seen to be rather to its credit than otherwise’. And since apathy attests to the fact that

‘“people are free to interest themselves or disinterest themselves, as they please in politics...The apathetic part of the electorate”...is a sign of a liberal democracy...’¹⁴

That is to say, being a liberal democracy, it recognizes and accepts the fact that

‘“ there are and always will be some persons for whom political activity would be largely a waste of time and talent” and is prepared to leave them alone’.¹⁵

Let’s pause on this point. Here Morris Jones suggests the existence of a link between liberal democracy and apathy: he associates a democracy’s acceptance of apathy with the ‘understanding and tolerance of human variety’ – two conditions which are facilitating to, as well as characteristic of – liberal democracy in a pluralistic society. But Morris Jones seems to suggest, moreover, that the freedom to vote and the freedom not vote, to *not take part* in the democratic procedure, these freedoms together, are liberty. One indication of liberty for Morris Jones, then, would be not only ‘I can participate if I want to’, but also, conversely, where our context is participation-as-voting, ‘I don’t have to participate if I don’t want to’. In order to test the relationship, can we imagine

¹² W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 36.

¹³ See Sartori’s discussion of ‘selection’ in elections. G. Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited*, 140 (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House, 1987).

¹⁴ W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 36.

¹⁵ *ibid* 36-37.

a political system which does not allow apathy in the electorate, where the ‘I don’t have to participate (vote) if I don’t want to’ is not an acceptable statement, and predict that negative liberty in this system may also be restricted? Indeed, totalitarian regimes, where voting is mandatory and liberty is negated, seem to fit well. Yet, the ‘apathy representing liberty’ relationship cannot be stretched too far. Thresholds and degrees of indifference are important. Moreover, liberty is not an ‘effortless’ thing: It needs effort. Harold Laski reminds us ‘Liberty cannot help being a courage to resist the demands of power at some point that is deemed decisive’.¹⁶ The point is driven home by Sartori who stresses that

‘liberty as nonrestraint is not an end in itself, and political freedom requires positive action and active resistance.¹⁷ Where there is wholesale apathy, liberty is easily lost’.

Now before the discussion gets stretched too far, I should add that nowhere does Morris Jones advocate ‘wholesale apathy’. But, this helps to demonstrate the point: degrees, referents and qualifications are crucially important in these discussions and criticisms.

Another premise on which Morris Jones’ defense is based is, what he calls, apathy’s ‘beneficial effect on the tone of political life itself’. An ‘apathetic part of the electorate’ is ‘a more or less effective counter-force to the fanatics who constitute the real danger to liberal democracy’.¹⁸ Here, Morris Jones is specific: the referent of apathy is the electorate; its beneficial quality is recognized relative to its potential opposite – fanaticism; and, apathy is qualified as a more or less effective counter-force, not as the best or absolute answer to extremism (defined here as fanaticism).

Summing up, we have discussed Morris Jones’ defense of apathy as non-voting with respect to (a) his contention that a right to vote is not necessarily an obligation to vote; (b) his argument that the toleration of apathy in a liberal democracy underscores the liberalism of that democracy; and, (c) his identification of a ‘counter-force’ quality of apathy, which acts as a cushion to fanaticism. One final point of his defense may be added to this list: Morris Jones indicates the potential ‘limiting’ quality of apathy: apathy limiting the politicization of society. He warns that a

‘State which has ‘cured’ apathy is likely to be a State in which too many people have fallen into the error of believing in the efficiency of political solutions for the problems of ordinary lives’.¹⁹

Morris Jones drives his point (against politicization) home by emphasizing

¹⁶ H. Laski (1930), quoted in G. Sartori, n 13 above, 329.

¹⁷ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 305.

¹⁸ W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 35.

¹⁹ W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 37.

that 'man is a great deal more than a political animal; and the best parts of the best men are those with which parliament has nothing to do'.²⁰

Another often-cited 'defender' of apathy is Bernard Berelson who claimed, 'lack of interest by some people is not without its benefits, too'.²¹ Berelson's reasoning is that in order for a 'mass democracy' to function in a 'complex society', certain 'political shifts' are necessary, and these necessary political shifts are facilitated by maneuvering room and compromise. Compromise, in turn, and according to Berelson, is 'more often induced by indifference.' Let's ask an important question, one that he asks implicitly, and answers explicitly. In Berelson's contention that compromise is more often induced by indifference, the question then becomes, more often than what? In other words, what are his perceived potential alternatives to indifference that would not be as conducive to compromise? Or, similarly, against what other *kind* of participation does non-participation fare better? The answer is easily extracted from his discussion on 'Involvement and Indifference,' by noting that each citation of participation is qualified in the extreme. In other words, his perspective is really one advocating indifference 'by some' as opposed to 'all the people...deeply involved'. In fact, almost everywhere that participation is mentioned in the discussion of indifference, it is *qualified* by an adjective indicating the extreme sense of the term, in degree of intensity and extension: 'Extreme interest goes with extreme partisanship and might culminate in rigid fanaticism that could destroy democratic processes if generalized throughout the community'.²² What's more, Berelson does not suggest a necessarily causal relationship between extreme participation and the dangers of fanaticism; his 'might' and 'could', as well as the 'if generalized' suggest only possible dangers and potential consequences. Berelson's other references to participation are, likewise, all qualified. And of equal importance, his defense of apathy is not one of wholesale indifference, but rather that of a limited apathy, as opposed to a potential and qualified-in-the-extreme participation. Berelson does not exalt widespread apathy in a so-called 'elitist revolt from the masses'; Rather, he indicates the benefits of 'lack of interest by some people', 'moderate indifference', and 'action with little passion behind it' when the other possibility is a population 'too interested in politics' and 'motivated by strong sentiments'.

Now with this light on his discussion, can we find evidence in it to prove Berelson's so-called 'elitist fear' of participation? It was Bachrach who found, in Berelson, a 'revolt from the masses'.²³ It cannot be found here. Berelson's fear is one of extreme partisanship and extreme interest, of a rigid fanaticism that we

²⁰ Hogan (1930), in W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 37.

²¹ B. Berelson, P. Lazarsfeld and W.N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 314.

²² *ibid.*

²³ P. Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1980), 33-35.

probably are all ('elitist' and non-elitist alike) fearful of. Consequently, any discussion using Berelson's 'defense of apathy' as a proof of his 'elitist revolt from the masses', is simply unfounded. Berelson does confuse us somewhat by having different referents in the discussion. 'Extreme Partisanship' may imply a level of participation beyond voting. It also interestingly suggests a relationship between the party activists and the electorate: When extremist party mobilizers mobilize inactive members of the electorate – what are the possible outcomes? If all that happens is that the 'intense, extremized participant usefully challenges an excess of inertia of the inert citizen,' he may therefore be 'performing a positive role within the context of representative democracy'.²⁴ But there are at least two cases where this mobilization may be destructive to democracy: (a) when mobilization leads in a direction towards 'the permanent participation of all in everything' which is, in Dahrendorf's view, 'in fact a definition of total immobility,'²⁵ or (b) when increased mobilization of the electorate by extreme party activists leads to an extremist 'knowledge-negating' tyranny of the majority resembling something like the Weimar Republic.²⁶ If this is Berelson's fear of the masses, then the point is well taken: moderate apathy fares better for democracy than both immobility and tyranny.

Berelson's defense is much like that of Morris Jones' defense, in that both authors indicate the usefulness of apathy as opposed to its opposite – participation qualified in the extreme, where extreme refers to number of participants *or* intensity (sometimes both), of which the consequences may be immobility or fanaticism, respectively.

Yet, one critique of these authors is that neither Morris Jones nor Berelson explicitly mentions the threshold at which apathy stops being an effective counterforce to fanaticism, and starts to reflect a 'serious defect of democracy.' It at first appears from Morris Jones' defense that he assumes apathy to be equally distributed among social classes, and therefore, while parliamentary democracy 'demands expression of interests', 'All that is imperative for the health of parliamentary democracy' is that the right to vote be used 'only to the extent necessary to ensure that the play of ideas and clash of interests can take place'.²⁷ But we could ask: If there are some inactive groups, with interests unique to that group, how will *their* interests be articulated so that a representative 'play'

²⁴ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 119.

²⁵ R. Dahrendorf, 'Citizenship and Beyond: The Social Dynamics of the Idea' *Social Research*, 691-692 (1974) (also quoted in G. Sartori, n 13 above, 246).

²⁶ The exception, and thus the problem (theoretically) is the abstentionist; he is not participating, yet if his non-participation is some sort of 'statement', if indeed it 'means something', then he may still feel intensely on the subject and not be indifferent. What we do here to simplify is to consider participation as behavior, as taking part, and apathy as not-taking-part. Therefore, intensions or feelings, though important, don't count in our cases. Still, it's worth noting that the abstentionist may appear apathetic in the electoral sense, but if he doesn't like the outcome and has intense feelings, he may become quite active.

²⁷ W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 35.

and ‘clash’ could take place? Now, out of fairness to Morris Jones’ discussion, he does not claim that democracy *should* work like this, or that this way is good, but rather, he indicates what is necessary so that it can work at all. In effect, he states that

‘it will no doubt be said that a people gets the politicians it deserves; that corrupt and weak political leaders’ are ultimately due to “inadequate interest” from the electorate’.²⁸

Berelson, on the other hand, explicitly addresses this problem in an earlier work, which may have been overlooked by his anti-elitist critics.²⁹ In this essay Berelson does support the view of those theorists who suggest, ‘a sizable group of less interested citizens is desirable as a ‘cushion’ to absorb the intense action of highly motivated partisans.’ He notes further:

‘If everyone in the community were highly and continuously interested, the possibilities of compromise and of gradual solution of political problems might well be lessened to the point of danger’.³⁰

And most important for our thread of the discussion is Berelson’s suggestion that what democracy perhaps ‘really requires is a body of moderately and discontinuously interested citizens within and across social classes’.³¹ This qualification is important for two reasons; (1) it re-emphasizes Berelson’s defense as being one of moderate indifference, or ‘discontinuous indifference’, as opposed to unrestricted indifference, and (2) it indicates that where Berelson supports apathy, it is a support for *proportional apathy*, that is, ‘within and across social classes’.

Again we can raise the same question: is ‘proportional apathy’ probable, or are some classes more apathetic? It is Dahl who suggests that apathy is found within certain classes more than others.³² He contends, ‘in the real world, political indifference (apathy) is in fact inversely proportional to education and several other indices of knowledge’.³³ Dahl’s interest in the ‘disinterested’ really is part of his inquiry as to the relationship between participation, consensus, and polyarchy. Dahl indicates that ‘current evidence suggests that in the United States the lower one’s socioeconomic class, the more authoritarian one’s predispositions and the less active politically one is likely to be’.³⁴ Assuming this relationship to be true, Dahl then infers that if the ‘authoritarian minded’,

²⁸ *ibid* 36.

²⁹ B. Berelson, n 4 above.

³⁰ *ibid* 317.

³¹ *ibid* 109.

³² R. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

³³ *ibid* 39 fn 5.

³⁴ *ibid* 89.

politically inactive segments of society become active and enter the political arena, consensus on basic norms must be declining and in turn, to the extent that this consensus declines, polyarchy would be expected to decline. Dahl's theoretical argument is not an outright defense of apathy. More accurately, it is a response and counter-proposal to the notion that an increase in political activity is always associated with an increase in polyarchy. But for our purposes here, the important element in Dahl's discussion is his assertion that the citizens from lower socioeconomic classes tend to be – in direct relation to their socio-economic level – (i) less politically active, and (ii) of a more authoritarian predisposition. Now, from this relationship, can we infer that the less politically active (the apathetic) are (a) from lower socio-economic classes, and (b) of a more authoritarian predisposition? If so, this may raise several implications for our discussion. Yet, before going too far, we must note that the referent model of democracy for Dahl's discussion is the American model, and 'as for the finding that the rich participate in politics more than the poor, it is above all an American finding'.³⁵ Let this suffice to raise questions as to the probability of proportionate apathy, and the potential harms from 'selective' apathy.

Summing up and sorting through the previous discussion, we can now distinguish and discuss some of the potential harms and values of apathy in a liberal democracy. First, an apathetic part of the society may serve as a counterforce to the extremely interested, the fanatics, 'who constitute the real danger to liberal democracy,' as suggested by Morris Jones.³⁶ Berelson's discussion calling for a 'healthy balance' between the strong and weak-passioned citizens also underscores the potential value of a politically indifferent *part* of society as a *counter balance*, or 'cushion', to the 'highly interested ... motivated by strong sentiments.' Moreover, tolerance and cooperation, two facilitating conditions for the smooth functioning of liberal democracy in a pluralist society, are perhaps more induced by indifference than by its possible opposite, extreme participation.

Another proposed, potential benefit of apathy is its 'virtue' as an indication of the liberty in liberal democracy.³⁷ The argument, touched upon earlier, contends that the accepted existence of an apathetic section of the electorate demonstrates that people are free to participate or not to participate in politics. As Morris Jones noted, 'the apathetic part of the electorate...is a sign of a liberal democracy that is prepared to recognize that 'there are and always will be some persons for whom political activity would be largely a waste of time and talent' and is prepared to leave them alone.' Although we may agree that any attempts to coerce the apathetic into participating are unacceptable for a liberal democracy, and therefore the apathetic should be left alone, this is not the same as to find

³⁵ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 105.

³⁶ W.H. Morris Jones, n 8 above, 37.

³⁷ Here it is interesting to note the role of apathy, versus toleration, in Athenian democracy, as discussed by Thucydides in *The Peloponnesian War*.

'virtues' of liberal democracy among those citizens who show no interest in the democracy's 'workings.' As discussed earlier, liberty is as difficult in theory as it is in practice. So on this proposed 'pro' of apathy, we may wish to pass or call it a draw; 'Accepted apathy' in the electorate as a sign of freedom from coerced participation – yes. But that's about it, since freedom is really much more complicated and, at certain crucial junctures, may demand active participation for its achievement and subsistence. We recall, 'where there is wholesale apathy, liberty is easily lost'.³⁸ What is more potentially harmful to liberal democracy than the loss of liberty? The general point is that discussions of apathy that fail to specify referents, degrees, or relativity to other concepts can get mixed up, leaving loopholes for readers, and often messing up the readers as well.

Next, does apathy, being conducive to toleration, tend to prevent fragmentation? Berelson makes reference to the value of 'not caring much' in preventing party splintering. He asserts, 'the splinter parties of the left, for example, splinter because their advocates are *too* interested in politics' (emphasis his). While I would suggest that party fragmentation is due to more than this, Berelson's point is well taken. It is true that toleration may be better facilitated by indifference than by rigid fanaticism; and toleration of differing viewpoints does seem to be indispensable not only in the mass electorate, (if, for example, the 'other' candidate wins and some cannot tolerate this outcome, what may happen?) but also in political parties and parliamentary groups, where pluralism and difference of opinion, when paired with rigid fanaticism, tend toward immobilism and group paralysis. So, the importance of toleration is accepted. But does toleration in this case come from apathy? When our reference groups are taking-part-in-person groups such as parties and parliaments, should toleration be discussed vis a vis fanaticism versus apathy? Certainly in the mass electorate, the answer is clearer: non-participants, by their virtue of not demonstrating any opinion, let alone a strong one, are then by definition tolerant. It makes sense to talk of an apathetic, non-participating member of this group. But in Berelson's example of the fragmented party whose fragmentation he attributes to its 'too interested advocates', I would suggest that sources of party fragmentation may also be found, and maybe more so, among the party activists and mobilizers. Isn't it often the divergent opinions among activists regarding mobilization tactics and party platform specifics (ie, the concerns of party activists and leadership) that may lead to a party's fragmentation? Is the splintering of the Chilean Communist Party attributed to its 'too interested advocates,' or to divergent opinions between hard-liners and soft-liners among the party's elite? In the party activist arena, would toleration be induced by apathy on the activist's part? The 'apathetic activist' is a weird thing to hope for. At this level of participation, it is more likely respect and compromise that help prevent fragmentation. The point is to notice how the 'value' of apathy changes

³⁸ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 305.

as the reference group makes apathy a sometimes more, and sometimes less, salient concept.

I would like to pause on this point about apathy and its potential opposites in different arenas of participation. Interesting questions may be posed regarding the discussion of apathy among different referents. Taking the example above of parties, we can look at: (a) party advocates (horizontal relations within the electorate), (b) party activists (horizontal relations within the party), and (c) party advocates and activists (vertical relations between both groups). Discussing only the first two will still demonstrate the point. First, when we are referring to party advocates in the electorate, as in Berelson's discussion, the analysis of the potential value of indifference is based on an 'apathy vs. 'rigid fanaticism' ' continuum. Both of the polar opposites, apathy and rigid fanaticism, are plausible concepts for this reference group (a). The continuum here makes sense. And here Berelson's defense of moderate indifference as an alternative to rigid fanaticism can be defended. But if we follow my suggestion that in exploring party fragmentation we should also look at party activists, our reference group becomes (b) and the discussion concerns the tone of intra-party dynamics. Is the apathy v rigid fanaticism continuum still salient? Does it still make sense to argue about the pros and cons of apathy with respect to this reference group? No, for such an argument would make the mistake of inaccurately confusing indifference as non-participation, with non-extremism.³⁹ The distinction is crucial since we can argue that once a citizen becomes a party activist, he is by definition participating, being active, and therefore, non-apathetic. So, one possibility here is still rigid fanaticism. What about apathy? Indifference is not a good opposite for fanaticism in this reference group and is, moreover, an inaccurate term.

The argument may be generalized by noting that once we change our reference group from the electorate to any other collectivity where mere membership in the group indicates a degree of real participation, the discussion as to the pros and cons of apathy changes. In fact, once we pass to some other 'spheres' of participation apart from the mass electorate, it is no longer apathy that is relevant to a discussion of the conditions facilitating the functioning of democracy. What becomes apparent by sorting through the discussion is the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the concept of apathy, emphasized by the fact that apathy may even become an inaccurate term as the subject of the discussion changes. Thus, the salience of apathy as a concept in the discussions depends much upon what reference group or participation arena we choose to discuss. Inspired by the difficulties of sorting through the discussion, the following is a proposed manner of cleaning up the concept.

³⁹ The distinction between non-extremism and non-partisanship is made by W.G. Runciman and discussed in G. Sartori, n 13 above, 129, fn 71.

III. Conceptualizing Apathy: Another Try

This conceptual clarification of apathy involves two components. First, we are discussing apathy in terms of what it is not. Apathy is zero percent participation, a polar opposite of ‘intense participation,’ where ‘intense participation may be (i) 100% participation, extremism, or (iii) violence. Apathy is a of intensity of participation which is equal to 0.’ Second, participation may be simultaneously thought of as having different spheres or arenas. For the purposes of this paper, I will distinguish four different arenas of participation, each differentiated from the other by: (a) How many can participate, and, (b) What the participants participate in. It is important for the discussion that all concepts be clearly defined; participation here means ‘taking part in person, and a self-activated, willed taking part’. Furthermore, its ‘authenticity and effectiveness ... is inversely related to the number of participants’.⁴⁰

The first sphere of participation is the mass electorate. Here, the citizen is free to participate by 1. voting, or 2. some form of mass demonstration. Granted,

‘when we speak of electoral participation and, in general, of mass participation, the concept is overstretched and points, more than anything else, to ‘symbolic participation’, to the feeling of being included’.⁴¹

For this reason, this is our ‘lowest’ sphere of participation, characterized by the participation ratio (as a fraction representing ‘share’ in participation) being its smallest.

Then I distinguish an arena that includes party activists and mobilizers. In this sphere, participation is (expected to be) ‘greater’ (in degree of intensity) because a) ‘taking part in person’, the ratio expressed by a fraction, is larger, since the group of activists and mobilizers tends to be smaller than the entire electorate, and b) the activity of the party activists and mobilizers is actually active ‘activity’; it is more participation than mere ‘voting’ or demonstration because it implies 1. more decision making power in the activity at hand, and 2. more continuous (time frame) participating. Moreover, as discussed above, membership in this arena of participation assumes participation. In other words, he who is a party activist belongs to this arena because we have identified him as an activist by observing his active participation; here a degree of intensity of participation is assumed. Unlike the electoral arena where membership signifies only the option to participate if so desired, it is the exercised option to participate – and to participate in more than voting – that distinguishes the activist from the interested voter. The importance of this distinction for the discussion we have been pursuing is that once our reference group changes from the electorate to this second arena of party activists, by definition apathy (as non-participation)

⁴⁰ *ibid* 113-114.

⁴¹ *ibid* 233.

is no longer a salient issue. True, there may be a party activist who becomes inactive, apathetic; but such behavior, being contrary to the defining characteristics of his arena, would probably bring about his retreat or removal from this sphere.

I must stress here that these spheres can be placed on a continuum, indicating that there are degrees of participation in between the ones designated by our four spheres. A citizen's participation in community groups, voluntary associations, and other such collectivities provides participation activities which do allow for more 'real' participation in terms of a smaller number of total participants. But the vertical placement of the spheres serves to suggest a more 'real' participation in the 'higher' arenas, in terms of competence, due to the selective election or appointment processes by which members become members. This applies to the last two spheres. For the present discussion, only four spheres are distinguished to keep it simple. The continuity between arenas, the existence of groups in-between these spheres, however, is important and the role of these groups (or sub-spheres) should not be disregarded.

A third participation arena I have chosen to distinguish here includes the elected body – such as parliament.⁴² Again, membership assumes a degree of intensity of participation that is greater than zero percent. Moreover, to the question, Participating in what? We can reply – participation as taking part in person in decision making. Just as the case of the arena 'below' it, a discussion of apathy (as non-participation) here becomes pointless. Elected representatives have chosen to participate, it is their business to participate, and they are where they are because they have promised to participate on behalf of somebody else, some 'body' being segments of the electorate. So, apathy as non-participation loses significance here. Now, a counter argument may suggest that the case of the apathetic or indifferent parliament member is conceivable. I would concede that this may be possible a) only on a discontinuous basis, ie –indifference on certain distinct issues, and b) that even in this case, 'indifference' as non-participation is not an accurate term to use in this arena and should not be confused with non-extremism (a discussion discussed earlier).

Finally, we come to the last arena being distinguished here: the committee sphere, the decision making and decision-forming arena. The argument is the same as for the previous two spheres. Since committee membership assumes participation, a discussion of the potential pros and cons of apathy becomes meaningless. And this contention is most accurate here, in the committee arena, where a committee – a) by way of its small size, allows for a larger participation ratio (each member thus has more weight) and; b) by way of what the committee members participate in – decision making – represents 'the optimal unit for real

⁴² Again, participation in this arena is increasingly relevant as we move toward supranational government structures such as the EU. See L. Sidentop, *Democracy in Europe* (London: Penguin, 2000).

participation...'.⁴³

So, where does our discussion of apathy lead to now having marked these participation arenas? What I have suggested throughout the review of the literature, and what becomes more apparent through the distinction of participation spheres, is that a discussion of the positive or negative role played by apathy in a liberal democracy changes as we change referents (arenas). After the first sphere, what becomes meaningful to the discussion is no longer the 'apathy vs. its potential opposites' question, but rather, a) what is the relationship between these potential opposites? And, b) is there a tendency towards one of the opposites, more than another, in the different spheres? I propose we turn to each of these points.

Earlier I suggested a set of continua that seems useful for discussing the concept of apathy in politics. Apathy was defined as non-participation, a conceptual polar opposite of 'intense participation', where intense participation may be thought of as a hundred percent participation, extremism, or violence. Depending on a citizen's degree of intensity of participation at time *t*, he would be placed on a point between apathy and one of the opposites on one of the three continua. Now, in addition, at time *t*, a citizen may be placed in one of the four participation arenas (or somewhere in a sphere on the continuum between the four designated arenas), according to 1. what he takes part in (voting, demonstrating, mobilizing, government decision making) and 2. the context of his participation (a dispersed voting collectivity, non-institutionalized community assembly or party, a concrete/institutionalized assembly, or a committee).

What the discussion has suggested thus far is that when we speak of the citizen in sphere 'A' or in an intermediary sphere up to, but not including, sphere 'B', we can theoretically speak about his degree of intensity of participation being somewhere between zero percent (apathy) and: a hundred percent participation, extremism, or violence. However, once we discuss the citizen as a part of sphere 'B' and beyond, the concept of apathy does not apply; the citizen is – by his location in sphere 'B' or beyond, – a participant. And since moving from sphere 'B' and beyond involves 1. an increased share of participation (smaller ratio) as spheres tend to become smaller, 2. greater institutionalization – the participationist is probably participating more, and 3. in more decision making. His intensity of participation on the zero percent to a hundred percent continuum approaches the one hundred percent extreme. But, this does not necessarily correlate with extremism or violence. And, inversely, the citizen at the mass level may decide to demonstrate by himself twenty-four hours a day. This would be a hundred percent participation, but would this be extremism, or both? This raises an important question.

How is the a hundred percent participant related to the extremist or the violent man? Is associated with a high intensity. Why would he participate a

⁴³ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 233.

hundred percent, doing nothing else but participating? He must feel intensely about something, the intensity then encouraging his one hundred percent devotion to participation, which in turn reflects the intensity of his action. We may even say,

‘(...) Participation in the full sense assumes ‘intensity.’ The full participant is such because his reward is the activity itself. Whatever the prior motivations, the party activist, the incessant demonstrator, the engaged member of a grouping, feels intensely about politics’.⁴⁴

In the continuum here a hundred percent participation is presented as the polar opposite of zero percent participation or apathy. The higher the degree of intensity, the nearer the citizen is located to the one hundred percent participation extreme.

Second, with regard to the zero percent Participation v Extremism continuum, the same argument applies: The nearer the citizen is to extremist behavior, the greater the degree of intensity of this individual. We must keep clear the relationship: Wherever there is extremity, there is probably intensity. But the contrary is not always true since a person may be intense without being extreme. Extremity is a position on a continuum of possible positions, while intensity tells how strongly a person feels about his or her placement. So the one hundred percent participant and the extremist are related *at least* through high intensity. But, what is specific to the extremist? ‘The extremist is such because he has no doubts; he already knows, and is sure of what he knows’.⁴⁵ In this sense, the extremist is not a knowledge seeker, rather, a knowledge destroyer in that ‘extremists are usually taking a more selective view of a situation and must devote energy...to screening out opposing considerations’.⁴⁶

Next, we can apply this criterion of intensity ‘telling how strongly a person feels’, to our third opposite, violence. To start off clearly, it’s helpful to have some idea of the characteristics of the violent citizen. It was Cotta who suggested, ‘The violent man is generally conceived of as impulsive, inconstant, and passionate’.⁴⁷ And with regard to these three, ‘it is passionality that impresses upon violence and the violent agent its typical distinctive tone and mode of being’. Since passion is itself associated with high intensity of feeling, then that passion-as-intensity which characterizes violence, also links violence to the other extremes, which share intensity as a characteristic. But, what is particular to violence and distinguishes it from other types of intense behavior? Where is the fine line, across which the violent man stands, and the one hundred percent

⁴⁴ *ibid* 118.

⁴⁵ *ibid*.

⁴⁶ R. Lane and D. Sears, *Public Opinion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964).

⁴⁷ S. Cotta, *Why Violence?: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1985).

participant or extremist does not pass? One answer may be the use of physical force; but is there more to it? We recall Cotta's insight into how the violent man is conceived: 'impulsive, inconstant, and passionate.' Is it the inconsistency and impulsive nature of the violent man that distinguish him from the one hundred percent participant and the extremist? It really is not degrees of intensity distinguishing these three, for they are all characterized by their high degree of intensity. Again the question – What distinguishes the violent man from his equally intense counterparts? This leads back to developing a clear idea of 'violence' and the 'violent man.'

Cotta suggests that it is passionality, characterized by 'immediacy, discontinuity, and unexpectedness' that 'impresses upon violence and the violent agent its typical, distinctive *tone* and mode of being'.⁴⁸ But we may find a citizen who is immediate, discontinuous and unexpected in his participating behavior: this does not necessarily make him violent. But, if the citizen is discontinuous, immediate and unexpected – and is *also* really passionate (read highly intense), then we have something more than a nearly one hundred percent participant. To simplify these characteristics of violence, we may ask, what is their common thread? 'What, in fact, is the element common to immediacy, discontinuity, nondurability, and unforeseeability if not indeed the absence of measure?'.⁴⁹

Our answer, then, according to Cotta, is the absence of measure. Violence finds its source in a passion (intensity) which is 'outside the control of reason ... unruly ... not subject to any restraint.' We have, then, violence originating in an intensity (passion), an intensity without constraint, reason, or measure. Is it here we draw the line between violence, extremity and a hundred percent participation? All three of these share a high degree of intensity. But the intensity of the violent man becomes an autonomous, unrestrained intensity. The one hundred percent participant is intense, but can be intense inside constraints, within measure, within rules. The extremist comes closer to the violent man, and we may suggest that the extremist is a potentially violent man. We recall that 'the extremist is such because he has no doubts...he already knows, and is sure of what he knows', conditions which allow us to associate 'extremist behavior' with 'cognitive blindness'.⁵⁰ With the extremist, there is no sense in talking out the issues. Since he already knows, he seeks no further opposing knowledge, he negates other knowledge. Violence, similarly, 'denies at the root the dialogical nature of existence...' Violence is 'cessation of the reciprocal recognition,' it 'refuses the dimension of otherness, and thus dissolves coexistence...'.⁵¹

But then, can't the extremist be extreme within rules, within measure?

⁴⁸ *ibid* 63 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁹ *ibid* 64.

⁵⁰ G. Sartori, n 13 above, 118-119.

⁵¹ S. Cotta, n 47 above, 66.

Even though he opposes the ‘other’, does he not recognize it? The answer is more difficult, but it is still probably – yes. The extremist has not necessarily broken with measure. Extremity may lead to rupture, but it is not defined by it. In fact, isn’t the Extremist extreme because of his strong inner measure, by which he selects and screens out opposing considerations? By this inner measure, doesn’t the extremist’s behavior become predictable? The extremist would say either ‘black’ or ‘white’, but he is always siding with one extreme and completely opposing the other – implying a routine, a rule. In contrast, the violent man is unpredictable and impulsive.⁵²

The line is very fine, yet important, between extremism and violence. And what the difficulty of distinguishing clearly between our three extremes has suggested is that while one does not necessarily imply the other, they are closely related. The danger implied here, and important to our discussion, is that the one hundred percent participant appears to be closely related to the extremist and the violent man.

Having worked up to this point, to one of ‘extremes’, it is time to wind down and to tie up all the ends as we go. We just suggested a potentially close relationship between one hundred percent participation, extremism, and violence. We are left to discuss the salience of these extremes and the potential relationship, against their opposite – apathy – in each of the participation spheres.

In the committee sphere, characterized earlier as ‘optimally’ meeting the ‘real participation’ criteria, we make no sense if we speak of the ‘apathetic’ committee member. Moreover, the extreme or violent committee member would lose his job: Unanimous agreements – facilitated by adherence to formal and informal rules, compromise, respect and discipline – are characteristic of the committee. The committee member, then, would probably sit somewhere on the zero percent to one hundred percent participation continuum. Given the high degree of participation (high ratio, decision making participation, and participation ‘competence’), of the committee member, he would most likely be somewhere *nearer* to the one hundred percent extreme. But both extremes are excluded: zero percent, because it makes no sense, and one hundred percent participation, because as we have suggested earlier, the line differentiating the one hundred percent participant, the extremist, and the violent man is very fine; The high intensity of the one hundred percent participant relates him to the extremist and the violent man, neither of whom would last long on a committee.

In the sphere of ‘the elected’, a parliamentary body, the argument is somewhat similar: again, the zero percent endpoint is excluded. In parliament, the apathetic member is really not a possibility. And even if he is apathetic for a while, the law of anticipated reactions from the electorate probably challenges his inertia. The

⁵² Cotta distinguishes three different ‘rules’ in the discussion of violence. Due to space constraints, they have not been extensively treated here.

other two continua, with the opposites of extremism and violence, cannot be completely ruled out. The Weimar Republic, the French Fourth Republic, and the Chilean Parliament under Allende suggest the possible and dangerous relationship, in this sphere, between participation, extremism and violence.

This is a good lead in for discussing the next sphere: party activists and mobilizers. The intensely participating party activist or mobilizer may be beneficial to a democracy: he may be stimulating the inactive citizen, spreading information, and other positive deeds. But a transformation to an extreme or violent activist or mobilizer poses a potentially uncontrollable threat. Through his role as mobilizer, he connects to the spheres below, the masses, and transfers his own intensity to these masses in the mobilization process. The violent, extreme, or even the one hundred percent-participating party activist then has the potentially dangerous power to multiply his own intensity. So, in this sphere, we hope the activist exercises self-control of this power. Unlike the committee or the parliament where the selection and election processes tend to control the intensity of the members, the activists and mobilizers must themselves keep from becoming what Hoffer warns against, 'True Believers'.⁵³

We come full circle in the discussion, and return to the 'masses', the electorate, and the analysis of apathy in this specific sphere. In light of the discussion, how does apathy fare? First, referents make the difference. Within this sphere, we have two cases: 1. if apathy means not participating as non-voting, we are concerned that all the interests of society may not be articulated, particularly those of disadvantaged social groups.⁵⁴ Here apathy is troublesome, but neither breaks nor makes democracy; it reflects the neutrality of the term, 'apathetic.' However, 2. when we consider cases in which the potential opposite of apathy is some variable degree of participation beyond casting a ballot, then the apathy may have a 'more than neutral' role in liberal democracy. Degrees and probable alternatives are important, for neither wholesale apathy, nor highly participator, extremist, or violent masses, are congenial to liberal democracy.

IV. Conclusion

Suggestions that we attempt to improve the practice of democracy by moving towards one hundred percent participation (in greater intensity or extension) away from apathy should consider other possible 'endpoints' of political apathy besides voting, and the intricate relationships between them.

⁵³ R. Lane and D. Sears, n 46 above, 94-95. It is interesting to note, in this vein of True Believers, Lipset's discussion of coerced participation and the extremely high voter 'turn-out' in authoritarian systems. S.M. Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

⁵⁴ A. Lijphart, 'Unequal Participation: Democracy's Unresolved Dilemma' 91 *American Political Science Review*, 1-14 (1997).

The dividing line between one hundred percent participation, extremism, and violence, while critical in theoretical terms, is increasingly fragile in the divided societies that characterize contemporary democracies. It is in view of these more harmful, and possible, directions that authors have come to defend apathy in the past, and may have serious grounds to do so today: not as an inherently 'good' element of a democracy; but rather, by default, as the least damaging to democracy in comparison with its real and potential opposites.