

Non-Voting – Disconnecting from Partisan Politics

Mary Grace Vella

marygrace.vella@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Through the issue of electoral abstention, this paper examines partisan disconnections arising from demobilization and dealignment trends in Malta: a country characterized by ‘near universal turnout’ and strong party loyalties. This socio-political understanding of turnout is examined within a triangular framework, addressing the macro-institutional and micro-individual dimensions of abstention.

Apart from the wider socio-political and cultural milieu, several demographic, institutional, and psychological variables are related to turnout. A typology based on the regularity and rationale of abstention proposes four main types of non-voters: ideological, antagonistic, indifferent, and circumstantial. The typology further differentiates between passive and active non-voters and insiders and outsiders to the political system. Despite their vast heterogeneity, non-voters tend to be younger, better-educated, more liberal, and more supportive of left-wing ideology. Non-voting is largely typified by voluntary, strategic, and rational forms of political expression, arising from cognitive mobilization and political protest against present modes of governance.

There are some signs that Maltese citizens are becoming more critical and distrustful of political parties and representative forms of democracy. This is also reflected in a more rational assessment of parties through increased floating and cross-party voting, as well as increases in non-electoral forms of political participation. These non-traditional patterns of behaviour present both evidence of partisan dealignment, as well underlying calls for political realignments.

Keywords: elections, turnout, dealignment, realignment

On election day, cloistered nuns have been known to abandon the seclusion of their convents ... Other voters, sometimes only a few days from the grave, can also be seen being ferried, frequently of their own volition, from their sick beds to some polling station.¹

This is a vivid, yet very realistic, depiction of the scenario characterizing turnout in Maltese elections. Indeed, Malta has the highest electoral turnout in all Western democracies and ranks fifth in terms of electoral participation worldwide.²

While turnout has since the 1960s been declining steadily across all established democracies,³ the turnout in Malta has remained relatively stable over the years with little major ebbs and flows.⁴ Since the 1947 election, which exhibited a turnout rate of 75.4%, turnout has experienced a steady upward linear growth so that, from 1971 onwards, it has always been higher than 90%. On this basis, Malta has been described by Hirczy⁵ as a country of ‘near-universal turnout’.

Apart from its tradition of high voter turnout, Malta is also renowned for its remarkably ‘strong and stable’ partisan loyalties,⁶ ‘fiercely competitive party system’,⁷ and ‘bi-polar nature of its politics’.⁸ This

- 1 G. Pirotta, ‘Maltese Political Parties and Political Modernisation’, in R.G. Sultana and G. Baldacchino, (eds.), *Maltese Society A Sociological Inquiry* (Malta, 1994), 96.
- 2 International Foundation for Electoral Systems, ‘Voter Turnout’, 2008: <http://www.electionguide.org/voter-turnout.php> (accessed 10 August 2017).
- 3 R. Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, 1990).
A. Blais, *To vote or not to vote? The merits and limits of rational-choice theory* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2000); M. Gray and M. Caul, ‘Declining Voter Turnout in Industrialized Democracies, 1950 to 1997: The Effects of Declining Group Mobilization’, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 33, no.9 (2000), 1091–122; B.G. Peters, *European Politics Reconsidered* (New York, 1991); S.J. Rosenstone and J.M. Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York, 1993); J. Vowles, ‘Dealignment and Demobilisation? Nonvoting in New Zealand 1938–1990’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 29 (1994), 96–114;
- 4 IDEA, ‘.Voter turnout in Western Europe since 1945: A global report’, 2004, http://www.idea.int/publications/voter_turnout_weurope/upload/Full_Reprot.pdf (accessed 15 August 2017).
- 5 W. Hirczy, ‘Explaining Near-Universal Turnout: The Case of Malta’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 27 (1995), 255–72.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 7 D. Fenech, ‘The 2003 Maltese EU referendum and general election’, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a714040390>
- 8 W. Hirczy and J.C. Lane, ‘Malta: STV in a two-Party System’, <http://www.maltadata.com> (accessed 1 August 2017).

political environment, combined with a proportional representation system where a ‘winner takes all political system prevails’,⁹ results in a situation where literally every vote counts.

Since ‘voting is not compulsory’, according to Franklin¹⁰ ‘unless we want to assume that Maltese citizens are uniquely civic-minded’ there must be other underlying features contributing to such high turnouts. The socio-political climate and the institutional features of the electoral system indeed highlight various factors which may be useful for explaining the ‘near universal’ turnout in Maltese elections.¹¹

In an outstanding study on electoral turnout in Malta, Hirczy identified a combination of influencing factors:

(1) intense and pervasive partisanship; (2) concentration of political power in a single elective institution; (3) highly competitive elections resulting in one-party governments despite PR; (4) maximization of the impact of a single ballot ... and (5) unusually intense campaigning by individual candidates and by parties.¹²

Louth and Hill¹³ also ascribed the high turnout to Malta’s ‘small, urbanized, and geographically-concentrated population’. The sociological environment resulting from smallness may present increased incentives to participate in the political process.¹⁴ ‘Intensified interpersonal contacts’ augment one’s sense of duty and present aggregate-level pressure to vote.¹⁵ Moreover, since ‘issues cannot really be “distant” ... “alienation” ... is not much of an issue’.¹⁶

Since voting is voluntary, it has been argued that the high turnout is a reflection of ‘genuine high motivation of the electorate’.¹⁷ This

9 G. Baldacchino, ‘Jurisdictional Self-reliance for Small Island Territories: Considering the Partition of Cyprus’, *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 365 (2002), 197.

10 <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a714040390> \h

11 Hirczy.

12 Ibid., 255.

13 J. Louth and L. Hill, ‘Compulsory voting in Australia: Turnout with and without it’, *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no.1 (2005), 28.

14 R.A. Dahl, and E.R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford, CA, 1973).

15 W.P. Veenendaal, ‘Politics and Democracy in Microstates. A Comparative Analysis of the Effects of Size on Contestation and Inclusiveness’, Ph.D Thesis, Leiden University (2013), 7.

16 M.A Falzon, ‘Malta has highest free voter turnout in the world’, *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 15 February 2009.

17 H. Schiavone, ‘Maltese MPs earn €18,000, have a day job and claim no expenses’, *The Irish*

motivation may, however, be influenced by other factors apart from clear-cut notions of civic duty. It has been argued that, given the widespread grass-roots organization of the political parties, ‘few would dare being seen as not voting’.¹⁸ Another issue concerns the high stakes in Maltese elections, which ‘include not only the control of government ... but also the prerequisites of office and patronage benefits’.¹⁹ Indeed, Falzon²⁰ suggests that the high turnout reflects self-interested motivations and thus paradoxically exhibits the Maltese electorate’s inability and reluctance to display ‘critical thought about politics – our laziness to produce apathy’.

These ‘unusually large number of features’ reinforce one another²¹ by forming a *mélange* of low transaction and input costs, yet considerably high stakes in output rewards. Higher levels of turnout in turn increase the perception that voting is ‘socially desirable’²² and instil a stronger urge to vote.²³ Moreover, the continued renewal of the norm of civic duty may contribute to passing this enthusiasm on to new generations, possibly explaining the sustained high turnout across the years.

So, in the context of this ‘near-universal’ turnout, when in the 2008 parliamentary election, 93.3% of the eligible electorate turned out to vote, turnout was perceived to be unexpectedly low. The proportion of abstainers had never been so high since the election of 1971 when 92.9% turned out to vote. Turnout continued to decrease in the subsequent 2013 and 2017 parliamentary elections which respectively exhibited a turnout rate of 92.8% and 92.1%. This decline in the last three rounds of parliamentary elections was additionally accompanied by a relatively high rate of invalid voting.

Thus, juxtaposed against this normative prescription of high levels of electoral turnout, competitive party systems, and strong partisan

Times, 27 March 2010,

18 G. Baldacchino, ‘Pangs of nascent nationalism from the nationless state? Euro coins and undocumented migrants in Malta since 2004’, *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 15 no.1 (2009), 153–4.

19 Hirczy, 260.

20 Falzon.

21 Hirczy.

22 J.A. Karp. and. D. Brackington, ‘Social desirability and response validity: A comparative analysis of over reporting voter turnout in five countries’, *Journal of Politics*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2005), 836.

23 A. Blais, *To vote or not to vote? The merits and limits of rational-choice theory* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2000).

loyalties lies the empirical reality of an experienced turnout decline which may possibly reflect the initiation of partisan dealignment trends in Maltese society. Moreover, in line with the experienced trend in other advanced industrialized democracies, there may be reason to believe that such decline may continue to materialize, possibly with an incremental effect.

Scope and methodology

A broad objective of the study was to gather more knowledge on turnout trends and the phenomenon of electoral abstention in Malta whilst putting this knowledge within a general socio-political perspective. The study adopts a triangular framework by addressing the macro-institutional and micro-individual dimensions of abstention through discourse and aggregate data analysis of turnout trends and socio-demographics of non-voters and by means of qualitative intensive interviewing and quantitative survey research with a sample of non-voters.

The research was organized around a number of issues pertaining to the frequency, distinctiveness, causes, and implications of non-voting. The following main questions were posed: Who are the Maltese non-voters? Are they socio-demographically and socio-politically distinctive? Why are they non-voting? Can non-voting be considered as a tacit approval of the status quo, a sign of apathy and indifference? Or is it a sign of alienation: a conscious act of disconnection from the present political system and its forms of governance?

The study also sought to address the policy and the structural and electoral implications of non-voting by identifying the primary cleavages and other contextual conditions which may be contributing towards decreased turnout. It sought to establish whether, on the basis of non-voting trends, there is evidence of partisan dealignment, representing a weakening of partisan bonds and whether abstention could be linked to wider patterns of political realignments.

The disconnectors

The findings gained through the different methodologies have largely complemented one another, so that, in combination, the data provides a consolidated view of the non-voting phenomenon.

The research supports the view that, apart from the wider socio-political and cultural milieu and specific contextual electoral conditions, several demographic, institutional, and psychological variables are related to turnout.

Turnout is largely influenced by the type of election. The Maltese electorate is more likely to abstain and to utilize non-voting as a form of protest in local and European rather than in parliamentary-level elections. The analysis also suggests an element of stability in non-voting patterns of behaviour, both longitudinally and transversely, as well as in the type of non-voting for both voluntary and involuntary forms of abstention.

The analysis suggests that Malta's 'party of non-voters' is not a homogenous category but is characterized by a wide spectrum of divergent situations and traits. While each non-voting case is a unique combination of social, psychological, and political forces, rendering simple comparisons and categorisation difficult, as evident from the proposed typology (Figure 1), some broad commonalities between non-voters' dispositions emerge.

This schematic classification is based on two fundamental overarching divisions, dealing with the frequency (regular versus irregular) and rationale (voluntary versus involuntary) of abstention. By crossing both variables one identifies four discrete sub-groups of non-voting populations, representing ideological, antagonist, indifferent, and circumstantial non-voters. These categorizations can be broadly conceptualised as based on issues of principle, alienation, disengagement, and convenience.

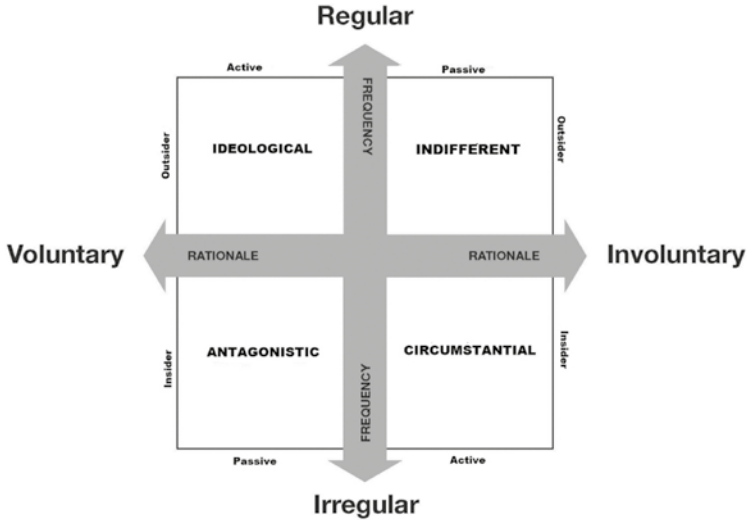


Fig 1. Non-Voting Typology

This classification suggests that several underlying attitudinal and behavioural dispositions of non-voters are inter-related. Through such dispositions as dimensions of political interest and knowledge, extent of partisan affiliation, evaluation capacity, and degree of political participation, including activism in non-electoral forms of participation, the typology further differentiates between active and passive abstainers and those located within or outside the political system (insiders and outsiders).

The local non-voting population ranges from radical environmentalists to hunters, from Roman Catholics to atheists, and from left-wing anarchists to ultra-nationalist right-wingers. Despite the fact that non-voters come from different age-groups, status, and socio-economic and political backgrounds, they are predisposed to be younger, better-educated, and cognitively mobilized, as well as more liberal and oriented towards the left of the political spectrum. Non-voters are also more likely to uphold progressive rather than conservative or moderate views and values, and are more likely to adhere to extremist rather than centralist ideologies. Non-voters also have a higher predisposition to come from mixed, floating, or politically antagonist family backgrounds.

The results suggest that non-voting is largely a voluntary, strategic, and rational form of political expression and constitutes a form of alienation and political protest against present modes of governance. While the experiences of non-voters reveal myriad factors underlying the abstention decision, including low feelings of political efficacy, issues of inconvenience, lack of factual knowledge, and lack of interest in politics in general, the most significant factors were those associated with distrust, animosity, and cynicism towards political parties, particularly the two major ones, and general disillusionment with the party system. Indeed, many non-voters across all categories, including the 'circumstantial' category, consider themselves as apartisan and conceive abstention as a form of protest and conscientious objection.

With the exception of the 'indifferent' category, the non-voters under study tend to exhibit relatively high levels of interest in political and public affairs and uphold considered views on various social, humanitarian, and environmental issues with a good number also being actively committed towards these issues. As a result, most non-voters demonstrate relatively high levels of internal efficacy exemplified by personal insight and understanding of the political process, but relatively low rates of external efficacy, through the perception that voting is not likely to significantly impact on electoral outcomes and governance structures. High levels of internal efficacy may thus be responsible for lower perceptions of external efficacy, partially explaining non-voting amongst the cognitively mobilized.

Disconnections or reconnections?

In his 1993 postscript to the 1961 anthropological study on Maltese society, *Saints and Fireworks*, Boissevain²⁴ observes that 'In spite of the sweeping changes that have taken place ... Malta and Gozo ... are, perhaps surprisingly, basically still very much the same'.

Despite recognition that on certain issues Malta has sustained its traditional aspects, it would, however, be surprising if the economic and social changes that Malta has experienced over the last years have left the political realm untouched. Though Malta has retained its high

24 J. Boissevain, *Saints and Fireworks: Religion and Politics in Rural Malta* (Malta, 1993).

levels of electoral participation and partisan loyalties, the social and economic contexts in which the contemporary electorate thinks and acts is very different from that of previous generations. While the closely knit family system, the size of the country, and the influential role of the Church have made change happen at a much slower rate,²⁵ resulting in a situation where Malta often lags behind European development both in time and momentum,²⁶ ‘national identity is being reshaped in a new international secular context’.²⁷

Similarly, the modernization of Maltese society over the past decades may be starting to transform the political alliance of the electorate. The Maltese seem to have become more tolerant towards different political opinions and no longer ‘extremely emotional’²⁸ in demonstrating their political views, as attested by decreased overt incidents of political violence.

Although elections, particularly parliamentary ones, are still characterized by considerably high turnouts, an increasing segment of the population seems to be expressing low levels of trust and valence in the political and party systems. Thus, Malta’s political culture characterized by the ‘parochial nature of party politics’,²⁹ ‘sectarian violence and mismanagement of public sector resources may have led to, or been a result of, widespread disenchantment with the legitimacy of the local state’.³⁰ Moreover, despite their hegemonic influence, the parties’ ideological and strategic convergence towards the ‘reformist centre-ground’³¹ may lead to disaffection among those who do not endorse this broad, moderate stance. This homogenization of issues may as a result lead to the alienation of certain parts of the electorate, particularly those who may feel strongly about a particular issue and perceive the two parties as having the same converging agenda.

25 S. O’Reilly Mizzi, ‘Gossip. A means of social control’, in R.G. Sultana and G. Baldacchino (eds.), *Maltese Society. A Sociological inquiry* (Malta, 1994), 369–82.

26 G. Baldacchino, ‘The dynamics of political restructuring in Western Europe and Malta’, *Hyphen*, vol. 7 (1989), 99–116.

27 A. Abela, ‘Shaping a National Identity. Malta in the European Union’, *International Journal of Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2005), 24.

28 E. Micallef, ‘Power to the People’, *Times of Malta*, 8 February 2008.

29 J. Friggieri, ‘The Philosopher’s drone’, *MaltaToday*, 7 September 2003.

30 G. Baldacchino, ‘The contribution of social capital to economic growth: lessons from island jurisdictions’, *The Round Table: Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 378 (2005), 36.

31 M. Cini, *Party politics and the European question: The case of Malta* (Wisconsin, 2001), 17.

Expanding educational levels and increased access to political information may be leading to a process of cognitive mobilization that enhances the political skills and resources of the electorate. A greater sector of the electorate may be approaching politics with a greater ability to judge political affairs independently of habitual loyalties passed down from their family and class background. This rationalization process, shifting the basis of electoral choice from ascribed emotional attachments to ideological and policy assessment, indicates that the ‘voter-party relationship is beginning to change’,³² resulting in weakening partisan allegiances, greater electoral volatility, and restructuring of traditional party loyalties. Apart from voluntary forms of abstention, these processes seem to be reflected through decreased class-voting, an increase in protest-party voting, and the expansion of floating and cross-party voting.

Whereas historically, Maltese society was characterized by a deep class cleavage, where the working class generally supported the Labour Party and the middle and upper-classes supported the more conservative Nationalist Party, in these last years this cleavage seems to have become a less marked feature of the socio-electoral landscape. As a result, whilst still of relevance, the traditional class structure has decreased in political and electoral salience. Apart from changes in the class structure through the growth of the middle-class strata, this phenomenon may possibly be fuelled by the increased policy convergence of the two major parties. An increasing number of voters, especially those of younger generations, may not be internalizing their families and class political background. Indeed, it is recognised that ‘a larger sector of the electorate have cast away their chains with their voting traditions or the voting traditions of their families and are making their own assessment and their own decisions on the way they will cast their vote’.³³

This decline in class-based voting is accompanied by increased notions of the voter as consumer. Electors are seen to be progressively inclined to make their electoral choices on the evaluation of the policy packages offered by contesting parties.³⁴ Cross-party voting may also be on the increase, with the result that the political system may be steadily

32 Baldacchino, ‘The dynamics of political restructuring’ 102.

33 J. Dalli, ‘An Intelligent Vote’, *Maltatoday*, 17 February 2008,

34 M. Wattenberg, ‘Turnout Decline in the U.S. and other Advanced Industrial Democracies’, *Center for the Study of Democracy*, Irvine, 1998.

‘dealing with a polyphonic electorate, voters able to speak with more than one voice, using their vote to manage a multiple identity that cannot be satisfied with an either/or logic’.³⁵ In view of the almost equally divided allegiance of the traditional Maltese electorate towards the two major parties, these non-partisan voting patterns are highly influential in shifting the balance of power of electoral outcomes, as also evident from the outcome of the 2013 general election. It is often these non-mainstream voters and those ‘undecided who finally decide’.³⁶ Indeed, such developments indicate that ‘In today’s Malta, even the most die-hard of political party supporters ... may choose to vote with their feet, if they feel that “their” party is no longer delivering the goods.’³⁷

Weakening party loyalties arising from cognitive mobilization processes may be shifting the nature of Maltese politics from long-term habitual loyalties to electoral choices based on rational assessment of parties and candidates. Provided that such decisions are endorsed on constructive criteria, rather than on purely egoistical or patronage driven interests, such trends present a positive challenge to present partisan structures since

It shows that elections are not an easy ride. The thought that voters do have brains exerts more pressure on our politicians who know it for a fact that they will be judged on their innovative proposals and their futuristic vision for the country.³⁸

The decreasing trust in partisan and institutional forms of politics, in combination with a plausible rising trend in both non-traditional electoral participation (as evident in the shift made through floating voting in the 2013 election and the election of third-party candidates in the 2017 election) and non-electoral forms of participation, as evident from the growth of civil society activism, point to strong underlying currents of dealignment as well as evidence of realignment. Whereas it is surely not the case that party attachments are altogether wavering, the devolution

35 R. Fsadni, ‘The polyphonic ballot’, *Times of Malta*, 13 March 2008.

36 E. Saliba, <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080208/opinion/power-of-the-people.195441>; <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20070228/letters/survey-results-interpretation-1.25157>

37 <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20080615/interview/exit-stage-right.212639>; <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20070330/opinion/non-partisan-politics.21950>.

38 E. Micallef, ‘Power to the People’, *Times of Malta*, 8 February 2008.

and demobilization process of Maltese politics may be following the same trends as those in other European countries with a time-lag effect.

The prognosis of Maltese society presents a plausible increase in a more educated and liberal electorate, more receptive to diverse political views and life-styles. It also presents increased access to apartisan information, factors which collectively lead to increased cognitive mobilization and other forms of rationalization processes. Maltese society is also presenting increased opportunities for citizens to participate in non-electoral forms of participation. Apart from generating circumstantial abstention, increased opportunities for mobility may also enhance cognitive mobilization processes, resulting in a more broad-minded electorate which is simultaneously more amenable to different political orientations and more critical of an insular style of politics. People living abroad may also be less interested and attached to local politics and thus possibly less emotionally and pragmatically involved on a political level. Processes of modernization may correspondingly lead to an increase in indifferent forms of abstention. As life-style patterns and the pace of life become more hectic and demanding, people may have less time to dedicate to political matters. Furthermore, increased individualism may be resulting in a loss of sense of community with less incentive to participate in society's running on a political sphere.

The analysis suggests that the dynamics underlying these attitudinal and behavioural trends reflect generational differences. If so, processes of generational replacement will eventually produce an electorate which is more rational and cognitively mobilized as well as more distrustful and possibly more indifferent towards institutional, especially partisan forms of politics. Such dealignment-realignment process is thus considered as a long-term secular process taking place through changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the electorate over time. As there is a 'heavy habitual component to voting',³⁹ similarly non-voting presents an element of stability and habitual support. Indeed, those coming from floating, mixed, or antagonist backgrounds demonstrate a high propensity towards non-voting behaviour whilst those non-voting in one election are more likely to abstain in subsequent elections. In mitigating against the hegemony of partisan voting, such backgrounds are more likely to regard abstention as another electoral choice. The increased

39 Hirczy, 142.

vogue in rational non-partisan voting patterns opens new avenues for abstention since such innovating trends should make it is easier for non-voting to be seen as one of several viable electoral options. Similarly, engagement in processes of direct democracy may in turn relate indirect attitudinal and behavioural effects that mitigate against the dogma of electoral participation.

In a context where ‘near universal’ turnout fuelled by patronage bi-partisan driven loyalties is the order of the day, non-voting represents both a rejection of partisan politics as well as a potential transformation for realignment in terms of new political structures and processes. In its neutral, passive, persistent form, non-voting presents an interlocutor ‘reformist’ symbolic gesture of deligitimization, a silent refusal of the rules and terms that shape political meanings and identities. Yet in its more active, assertive, empowering, yet transitory form, it carries a loaded revolutionary call for realignment.

Maltese society appears to be heading towards a more dynamic shifting of balance between dealignment and realignment forces, leading to a more vibrant and multi-layered political culture. Through its multi-faceted capacity, non-voting presents both evidence of partisan dealignment, as well as of secular realignment trends. Through generational replacement, non-voting and other underlying trends of devolution and disconnections from traditional voting patterns of behaviour could lead to a progressive transformative shift towards a realignment of the political sphere, through calls for more responsive and accountable democratic structures and processes. As a result, given their repercussions on the political sphere, these trends in de/re-alignment may bode well for the quality of Maltese democracy, since they may represent a more active citizenry which critically appraises rather than passively accepts the inadequacy and incongruity of Maltese politics. Thus, as the

conformist of simple ‘ritual’ support ... can also collaborate to maintain structures without any capacity for self-criticism ... the non-integration in the present system of government of some critical abstentionists could imply a certain hope for a future more influenced by the ecologist movement, by broadening areas of political organisations ... and even by the glimmer of a world scale government.⁴⁰

40 R. Virós Ma, ‘A Qualitative Approach to Electoral Abstention’, *Working Paper*, no. 98 (Barcelona, 1994), 5.

Mary Grace Vella, by profession a probation and social inclusion officer, lectures Systems of Knowledge at the Junior College and is a visiting lecturer at the Faculty for Social Well-being. She has a long history of activism in civil society organizations dealing with humanitarian, environmental, and animal rights issues, and is a member of the Observatory for Living with Dignity within the President's Foundation for the Well-being of Society.