A progressive political agenda has of necessity to come to terms with reconfiguring the relationship between citizens and the state. The creation of a people’s contract rooted in a vision of the good society that cares for the wellbeing of all its citizens is an indispensable component of a progressive agenda. Progressives nationally and globally are beginning to articulate a common vision and common political purpose directed at the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist world.

Active political participation and civic engagement are central to the realisation of the progressive vision and the progressive agenda. Progressives are increasingly coming to recognise that participation in growing gap between them and their political processes and institutions, is through substantive political participation that goes beyond voting and engaging with political parties.

This is highly contested terrain, not simply because there is growing disenchantment with formal electoral politics but also because the very reasons individuals and groups engage politically vary considerably. In democratic countries of the North or the South, it is important to study levels of participation and engagement because they constitute a vital barometer of how well democracies are performing in relation to the needs and aspirations of the masses of our people. Levels of political and civic participation and engagement are also an effective gauge of social and political inclusion, and engaged citizenry are a useful measure of the degree to which democracy is democratised.

There is a growing interest in the relationship between formal political participation and levels of civic engagement and there is growing evidence of a mutually reinforcing relationship between formal political participation and participation in community organisations. Those who operate in the sphere of formal political participation need to recognise that a focus on formal political participation can obscure the multiplicity of ways in which citizens engage politically – within communities, in social and protest movements, in trade unions, and in a variety of civic organisations at the grass roots level. Progressives therefore have to embrace a broader definition of
Political participation (to encompass non-formal, substantive participation), in the political arena. Progressives need to understand the extent to which formal and non-formal participation by organisations representing the interests of the masses, especially of disaffected and disenchanted individuals and communities, can overcome their distance and alienation from the formal institutions of government and can leverage a higher profile for their issues and concerns. Progressive political parties have to think carefully about how to close gaps and distances between them and the people. They have to think carefully about how to deal constructively with political apathy, political disenchantment, and political distemper. They have to identify strategies to turn these negative perceptions around and build bridges of solidarity across an often fragmented polity.

In South Africa, the struggle against apartheid was a revolutionary and a progressive struggle. And the African National Congress had to continually ensure that its political tent was sufficiently large so as to include all the forces that were anti-apartheid. The African National Congress from its inception has always been an organisation steeped in democratic norms and traditions. Positions in the organisation were and continue to be contested, elections are held, and there are winners and losers. This was also true while the organisation was banned and forced underground. While the organisation was banned inside South Africa, it still had to find new and innovative ways of engaging the masses through a wide array of civic associations which could and did operate on the legal terrain. These organisations were able to engage the masses in the struggle against apartheid and for democracy. At the international level the African National Congress also understood the importance of a strong vibrant global movement of solidarity with the oppressed people of South Africa.

Is this experience translatable? How do we build South/North bridges of solidarity? How do progressives tap into the tremendous well spring that exists in communities? How do progressives translate social capital into political capital? In the West there is the phenomenon referred to as the democratic deficit – ever lower rates of political participation coupled with a growing disenchantment with formal political participation. What is the role of trust and vision in winning over the polity? What is the yardstick against which people measure their political parties? And what is the yardstick people use to measure their own willingness to engage with or disengage from the formal political process?

A recent United Nations report (The World Youth Report 2005) also voices concern over this phenomenon of disengagement from traditional modes of political participation particularly among the world’s youth. The report, however, warns against concluding that because of low voter turnout and
low membership of political parties, young people are not interested in the political future of their societies. The report notes that youth are substantively engaged in informal political activity. The forms of youth political engagement include anti-globalization protests, involvement in student organisations, and involvement in issue-based networks and organisations including women’s organisations and organisations representing the interests of people with disabilities.

The factors that either inhibit or enhance political participation by youth and members of racialised and marginalised communities have to do with the complex interplay between social identity and the persistence and reproduction of racial oppression and discrimination. Social identity has a direct bearing on both the form and the extent of political participation. This is the substantive dimension of political participation. Undoubtedly in mature democracies as well as in South Africa, the youth are redefining the forms of their political engagement as well as the terms and conditions under which they engage politically. The reasons for this phenomenon in South Africa differ from those in Western Europe or North America. However, the phenomenon still bears watching and bears analysis and interrogation.

In South Africa, since the political upheavals of the late 1980s and early 1990s, youth membership in public organisations appears to have declined. Research is also pointing to growing youth disengagement from the new institutions of democracy – as evidenced in lower voter registration and voter turnout numbers. This is consistent with findings about youth voter turnout in Western Europe in the 1990s. The questions that progressives need to address are: Why the turn away from the institutions of democratic governance and administration? Why the growing distemper with formal politics?

Ironically, in many countries, neoliberal political parties have moved rather swiftly into the political vacuum created by the distemper with politics. In some countries they have been able to articulate a vision that gets them elected. And more often than not, it is a vision that runs counter to the common good. Yet it is sufficiently seductive to capture the votes.

In South Africa both the struggle against apartheid and the struggle for democracy have provided the impetus for sustaining a viable progressive politics. The traditions of democracy, of embracing the needs, wishes and aspirations of the oppressed majority of the people of South Africa are all the hallmarks of progressive politics. In 1953, at the request of Chief Albert Lutuli, President-General of the ANC, Professor Matthews prepared a memorandum on the proposed Congress in which he said:

“We must build new South/North bridges of solidarity?”

“In South Africa both the struggle against apartheid and the struggle for democracy have provided the impetus for sustaining a viable progressive politics. The traditions of democracy, of embracing the needs, wishes and aspirations of the oppressed majority of the people of South Africa are all the hallmarks of progressive politics. In 1953, at the request of Chief Albert Lutuli, President-General of the ANC, Professor Matthews prepared a memorandum on the proposed Congress in which he said:

“The main task of the Congress will be to draw up a ‘Freedom Charter’ for all people and groups in South Africa. From such a Congress ought to come a Declaration, which will inspire all the peoples of South Africa with fresh hope for the future, which will turn the minds of the people away from the sterile and
negative struggles of the past and the present to a positive programme of freedom in our lifetime. Such a Charter properly conceived as a mirror of the future South African society can galvanise the people of South Africa into action and make them go over into the offensive against the reactionary forces at work in this country, instead of being perpetually on the defensive, fighting rearguard actions all the time.”

Fifty years ago what is widely regarded as the first ‘People’s Parliament’ in South Africa – the Congress of the People – was convened in Kliptown.

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That Congress adopted the Freedom Charter, a charter that articulated a progressive vision and a progressive political agenda that has stood the test of time. In any context, let alone apartheid South Africa, the Freedom Charter is an incredibly progressive document for it declares “South Africa belongs to all who live in it”.

The progressive nature of the Freedom Charter derives as much from its content as from the recognition that it is truly a reflection of both the participation by the people united in their diversity as well as a reflection of the will of the people of South Africa united in their diversity. A progressive politics requires a progressive vision articulated in the language of the people. The Freedom Charter articulated a vision of social justice, equality, freedoms, democracy, the development role of the state, the importance of transformation, and redistribution. In particular the central tenets of the Freedom Charter speak to the importance of belonging, unity in diversity, legitimacy and democracy, equality and human rights.

After the ban on the ANC was lifted and with the Freedom Charter in hand, the ANC successfully contested the first democratic elections in the history of South Africa. In the second and third elections, the ANC won by ever larger margins of victory. Clearly the organisation has tapped into the will of the people and has responded to the needs and demands of the people. In South Africa the vision of creating a non-racist non-sexist South Africa that belongs to all who live in it is a progressive vision that resonates with the people.

A progressive agenda can win the day. In the case of South Africa, political liberation has not immediately brought with it liberation from poverty and underdevelopment for the masses of South Africans. A progressive agenda therefore has to engage the state, organizations in civil society and the citizenry in the fight against the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment. And this requires not slavishly following the global fad of downsizing the machinery and apparatus of the state and thereby creating a lean and mean state. Rather it requires a political will and determination to strengthen the developmental state that actively pursues a social justice agenda.
So, it is not sufficient to say that voters deserve the governments they elect. There is a need to systematically assess why the neo-liberal agenda (with its focus on morality, so called family values, rugged individualism, and an unfettered market place) has been attractive to voters in many countries. Concomitant with this there is a need to analyse why in many of those same countries, the progressive agenda with its focus on health care, education, and the common good has on numerous occasions been less attractive.

Are there lessons to be learnt about community based political organising? How can progressives turn the disenfranchisement of the communities from formal political structures to their advantage? To begin with, progressives need to clearly identify the pull factors that draw people into engagement and push factors that act as barriers to their participation, or that turn them off formal political engagement.

Very often it is the strength of civic organisations and their connectedness to community that provide citizens with the opportunity for civic engagement. The incentives and disincentives to participation are not monetary, rather they include considerations of solidarity, personal satisfaction and making a difference to the community as a whole. Political participation in society therefore needs to be understood as part of the process of social and political inclusion.

If as the research shows there is a strong connection between political participation and civic engagement, precisely is the message for progressives? The lessons from the recent elections in the United States point to the significance of mobilisation at the level of community. The so-called moral majority were able to utilise single issue pressure groups and fundamentalist faith based groups to get their message across. In the end it was the ‘moral agenda’ that won the day. Now more than ever progressives need to step back and assess more closely how and why people engage politically. This in turn requires consideration of the relationship between formal citizenship and formal, or what some call passive political participation (voting). It requires unpacking the relationship between democratic citizenship and substantive political participation (active engagement with political parties, engaging with the policy process as part of the policy community; ensuring that all have a voice in political decision making; advocating for electoral equity etc).

Progressive political parties need to identify the systemic barriers to political participation by members of marginalised and historically disenfranchised communities. They have to assess whether the institutions of political life equitably reflect the

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diversity of society. And they have to learn more about patterns of diverse community participation in building social capital through volunteerism, social movements and advocacy – be it in trade unions, churches, mosques, temples, or national rifle associations.

Progressives need to look very closely at the relationship between formal political participation and participation in civic organisations. Research points to the positive correlation between formal political participation and the number of civic organisations. This network of interrelated civic organisations represents a form of social capital as groups that were highly organised and interrelated also reported a high degree of trust in the local government and a high level of political interest. Other research has found a strong correlation between the number of civic organisations and the level of political participation and political trust. Social capital, information flows and political knowledge which derive from social and organisational networks all play important roles in enhancing political participation and political mobilisation.

Democracy and the very institutions of democracy, including political parties, institutions of governance and the illusion of political participation via a ballot cast every four or five years need to be democratised. Progressives need to start promoting notions of ‘democratic citizenship’, the ‘democratisation of democracy’, and inclusive political practices; therefore, they need to promote strong organisations in civil society. Progressives also need to be far more assertive about their conception of the developmental state as a corrective to the excesses of the marketplace and as the legitimate repository of the will and aspirations of the majority.

In South Africa we know only too well the relationship between political participation and civic engagement. We know from our history the importance and significance of building bridges of political solidarity at the grass roots level and internationally. We also know the galvanising effect of articulating a vision of a non-racist, non-sexist society. These could well be among our most important contributions to the growth of the global progressive movement.

We know from our history the importance of political solidarity at the grass roots level and internationally.

Dr. Essop Pahad is Minister in the Presidency, Government of South Africa.