instance, that non-participants are clustered in lower social strata, then we might well want to conclude that lack of engagement reflects political cynicism, rather than satisfaction. The positive functions of apathy, as seen from the academic’s study, may be less apparent in the ghetto.

The most striking result from participation studies is the limited extent of any direct participation other than voting. In an influential analysis, Milbrath and Goel (1977, p. 11) divided the American population into three groups, a classification which has since been applied to other liberal democracies. These categories, based on involvement with conventional politics, were:

- a small proportion of gladiators (around 5–7 per cent of the population) who are active in politics – for instance, campaigners;

- a large group of spectators (around 60 per cent) who observe the contest but rarely participate beyond voting;

- a substantial number of apathetics (around 35 per cent) who are not engaged in formal politics.

Milbrath and Goel’s labels were based on an analogy with Roman contests at which a few gladiators performed for the mass of spectators but with some apathetics not even watching the show (Figure 8.1).

As we have suggested, it is important not to write off the large population of spectators: those who observe politics without becoming involved other than through casting an occasional ballot. Especially among the young, political engagement may take the form of visiting websites, discussing an election with friends, or watching a film about a current issue. Political spectating may be becoming a leading and highly influential form of participation. In an age of spectatorship, suggests Green (2010a), the disciplinary gaze of the people – their eyes, rather than their voice – has become the source of their power.

Furthermore, monitoring is not, as far as we can tell, in decline. Norway is typical of a wider trend: despite a fall in turnout, ‘the broader political activity of citizens has increased. The rise in political involvement is quite widespread, covering political interest and political discussion’ (Listhaug and Gronfliaten, 2007). In other liberal democracies, too, many citizens recognize the value of surveillance. In Britain, for instance, half the respondents to a 2008 survey claimed that it was essential, or very important, to remain informed about current affairs, higher than the proportion making the same observation about contacting politicians, or joining a party (Ipsos-Mori, 2008).

However we interpret political spectating, the most striking fact about political participation in liberal democracies is the small proportion of gladiators. Table 8.1 shows some typical findings from a British study: apart from signing a petition, participation declines rapidly once we move beyond voting at national elections. Throughout the democratic world, anything other than voting is the preserve of a minority of activists. The gladiators are, indeed, outnumbered by the apathetics: people who neither vote nor even monitor politics through the media.

Figure 8.1 Patterns of participation in liberal democracies

Most people are political spectators, keeping an eye on political developments but only participating directly through voting. The apathetics, who disregard formal politics altogether, outnumber the gladiators who fight the political battle.