

Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain: Values, Participation and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press; September 2004).

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Below is an extract from the forthcoming book on civic values and behaviour in contemporary Britain. The evidence regarding people's civic values and behaviour is taken from the Citizen Audit, which was conducted in 2000 and 2001. Firstly, details of the Citizen Audit are provided (extracted from Chapter 2), followed by the main conclusions (extracted from Chapter 9).

### ***The Citizen Audit***

The Citizen Audit was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its *Democracy and Participation* research programme. It was a series of surveys designed to examine citizenship in Britain today. In addition to measuring people's civic attitudes and behaviour, the Citizen Audit was constructed in such a way as to investigate some of the key political concepts which are relevant to citizenship including political knowledge, interest, efficacy, tolerance, and participation. The design rationale of the Citizen Audit was, first, that it should be a representative sample of the British population; second, that it should be large enough sample so that geographical analysis could be carried out; and, third, that it should be able to measure the dynamics of citizenship over time. These objectives mean that the Audit had three different components: firstly, a baseline cross-section survey conducted by means of face-to-face interviews; secondly, a large cross-section survey linked to the baseline survey but conducted by mail; and thirdly, a panel survey in which respondents from the baseline survey were re-interviewed a year later.

## ***Main conclusions***

### What Does Citizenship Mean?

The findings in this book make it possible to begin to answer the question posed in chapter 1: The starting point of an answer to this question is to divide citizenship into two related aspects involving attitudes and beliefs on the one hand and behaviour on the other. We explored the former in chapter 2 and the latter in chapters 3 and 4 before going on to discuss the determinants of such attitudes and behaviour in chapters 5 and 6.

We explored many facets of attitudes to citizenship in chapter 2 examining identities, inter-personal trust, institutional trust, tolerance, and perceptions of government among other things. The common thread running through the discussion was the attempt to understand the relationship between the individual and the state. This relationship concerns questions like: do individuals identify with the state and feel that they belong to it? Do they trust its institutions and their fellow citizens? Do they believe that the government is responsive to their concerns or do they think it largely ignores them? These are all important for understanding what it means to be a citizen in contemporary Britain.

The analysis in chapter 2 suggested that on the whole Britons identified with their country rather more than they did with their locality or region. But surprisingly, less than a quarter of our sample identified themselves as British, indicating that in a sense national identity is fragmenting. Citizens increasingly identify themselves with the country they are living in - England, Wales or Scotland - rather than with the British Isles as a whole.

If identity is one of the foundations of citizenship then so is trust - a sound civic culture involves individuals being willing to trust each other as well as the institutions of the state. The evidence suggests that people do tend to trust each other, and many trust the unelected institutions of the political system, such as the police and the courts. However,

there is much less trust of elected institutions such as Parliament or the political parties. Curiously, while the elective principle legitimates democratic government, directly elected institutions are not trusted very much compared with their appointed rival institutions. One way of explaining this apparent paradox is that a healthy democracy requires people to be basically loyal to the system and to some extent be proud of it. At the same time they should have a healthy scepticism towards their elected representatives if government is to be held accountable. Britons certainly appear to share that scepticism.

Another important feature of democracy is tolerance, and with a few exceptions, citizens are tolerant towards other people and organisations. However, there are clear limits to this tolerance; they may be happy to allow dissenters to speak in public, but they are not happy to extend this to neo-nazis or to have a new age traveller camp housed next door. Tolerance operates in a context, and its limits are reached when it imposes real costs on the people involved.

A third feature of a healthy democracy is citizen attitudes to government. The key issue here is whether or not individuals feel that the government is responsive to their concerns. The evidence suggests that most people believe that government is not very responsive to them as individuals, and moreover it will not generally make decisions in accordance with their personal wishes. On the other hand there is a widespread belief that government is relatively responsive to majority opinion. Again, if the institutions of democracy are to work well, government should be viewed in this light. While people may think that the government pays little attention to them as individuals, democracy will be safeguarded if they think it pays attention to a majority of citizens.

In this respect some of the most important findings in the Citizen Audit relate to attitudes to voting. Generally people disagree with the proposition that voting makes no

difference, even though they do not see all types of voting as being effective. Majorities believe that voting in local elections, general elections and elections for the Scottish Assembly all have an influence on the decision-makers at these different levels of government. However, the same cannot be said about elections to the European Parliament and to the Welsh Assembly, where voting is seen as having little influence on decision-makers. Ironically, more people believe that voting influences decision-makers in local authorities than believe it influences the House of Commons. This is surprising given the erosion of local authority powers over the past twenty-five years. The Welsh Assembly in particular does worse than the European Parliament in public perceptions of responsiveness to voters. This may, of course, change in the future as this relatively new institution becomes embedded in public consciousness, but apart from the Scottish Assembly the regional and European institutions have a long way to go before they are seen as responsive to public concerns.

As we made clear in Chapter 1, citizenship is a very broad concept and to make it tractable for empirical analysis it is important to concentrate on the key issues. We have suggested that a key issue from the point of view of civil society is the need to balance the demand for rights with a willingness to accept the obligations which accompany those rights. This is key requirement for a successful political culture.

When it comes to accepting obligations it is clear that people's sense of civic duty is relatively high. This encompasses obedience to the state, a willingness to undertake voluntary activity, such as participating in a neighbourhood watch or a local renovation project, and a willingness to engage in civic service, such as going on a jury or giving blood. But for most people their sense of duty does not extend to more high intensity forms of participation such as becoming a school governor or standing for the local council; on such

matters, their commitment is much more limited. If democracy is to work properly it is important that some people are willing to run for public office, but this only need be a minority. What is much more important is that the vast majority of people feel obliged to operate by the rules of the game, to pay their taxes, and to obey the law. Generally, this is true in Britain.

If most people accept their obligations it is also true that most people are aware of their rights. There is widespread support for private rights such as paternity leave, women's right to choose an abortion and the right to die. However, there is scepticism about extending gay rights to make them equivalent to those enjoyed by married couples. In relation to state-provided benefits, such as housing, income maintenance for the poor and higher education there is strong support for state action to maintain such rights. However, there is less public support for the notion that the government should find work for every person requiring it. Perhaps this reflects the fact that governments have increasingly acknowledged that they have only a limited influence on employment in the modern globalised economy.

When considering rights it is important to recognize that many people want the right to be left alone by government, so that the demand for rights is not always about asking government to intervene. This is apparent in the survey, since many people think that individuals should not expect the state to provide for their retirement, and many think that health care should not be universally provided for the affluent. Overall, this selective approach to rights, combined with the evidence of a strong sense of civic duty, makes the task of governing easier. The demand for benefits on the one hand tends to be balanced by the supply of support and resources on the other.

If public attitudes to rights and obligations are broadly supportive of democratic government, what of public willingness to participate? The first point to make is that it is

important to define participation broadly since a narrow focus, say, on electoral participation, will miss much of the participation which is actually going on. It is apparent that macro participation - that is participation aimed at influencing actors or organisations which are direct representatives of the state - can be structured into three broad categories. These are individualistic forms of participation, such as voting and donating money to an organisation, contact participation, such as writing to the media or speaking to a Member of Parliament, and collective participation, such as attending a political meeting or taking part in a demonstration. Not surprisingly, in terms of the costs and benefits of participation, more people are involved in individualistic forms than in collective forms. The evidence in Chapter 3 suggests that many of the individualistic forms have increased and many of the collective forms of participation have declined in importance since the early 1980s. Despite this, the evidence also suggests that participation potential - the willingness of people to get involved - is high and in the case of participating in demonstrations, it has increased over time. Moreover, viewed in terms of the number of political actions undertaken over the previous 12 months, more than eight out of ten citizens have participated in some form.

Another important dimension of participation is membership and activism in organised and informal groups. In fact membership of organised groups is a minority activity, since 55 percent of Britons are not members of any group. In addition, many of the people who are members of groups pay their dues and do very little else. While many of these groups have very little direct link with the political process, since they involve organisations like sports clubs and gymnasias, they are nonetheless training grounds for participation for many people. If individuals are actually involved in one of these groups, then many of them regularly attend meetings, speak, organise, and try to mobilise their fellow members to undertake tasks for the organisation. It is clear that such groups are places where

people can learn the skills associated with more high intensity forms of participation.

Beyond the organised groups is a whole world of informal groups which underpin civil society, and in some cases provided important services. About 1 person in 5 belongs to an informal group such as a pub quiz team or a book reading group, and about a third of people provide some sort of support for neighbours or friends beyond their immediate family. This type of activity is important because it helps build networks of civic engagement and also provide services which are of real value. There would be drastic political consequences for government if such informal provision of support for people in the community was no longer provided.

Another aspect of participation which has been largely invisible to researchers in the past is what we have termed micro-political participation. This refers to actions designed to influence indirect agents of the state in the day-to-day world. For parents this means trying to influence their children's education in school, for patients it means trying to influence their medical treatment, or for the employed it means trying to influence their working conditions. Given that the state is becoming less and less a direct service provider and more of an overseer and regulator, this is an aspect of politics which is growing in importance. It is readily apparent that a lot of this type of participation is taking place. In the previous year almost 1 in 2 of our respondents in employment had tried to improve their working conditions, 1 in 4 parents had tried to change the way their children's education was provided, and 1 in 10 patients had tried to change the way their health treatment was delivered. Not surprisingly, people tend to take action only when they are dissatisfied with these services or work conditions, and their actions are less likely to be channelled through the orthodox route of contacting a politician and more likely to involve contacting the professionals direct. It is also apparent that micro political activities are more likely to be

conducted through personal contact and individualised forms of action, with the sole exception of employee participation via trade unions. Success rates for this type of action seem to be quite high, and on the whole people felt that they had been treated fairly in trying to influence politics at this level.

Overall, the Citizen Audit survey reveals that citizens have not contracted out of politics, but rather are engaged in a multiplicity of political activities beyond the traditional ones. The most common forms of political activity tend to be individualistic, like giving money, signing a petition, or purchasing particular types of goods. These can be done without the need to cooperate with other people in an organisation. While many observers are rightly concerned about the decline of electoral participation, it is important to remember that political engagement does not lie upon one single continuum. Rather, there are distinct individualistic, contact and collectively-organised forms of political engagement. When these are viewed as a whole and micro-political participation is also taken into account, there is a lot of participation going on in Britain.