

Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley

Citizenship in Britain

Values, Participation and Democracy



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There are increasing concerns about changes in society and the economy which are undermining the effectiveness of democracy and weakening traditional conceptions of citizenship. What does it mean to be a British citizen in the early part of the twenty-first century? This book presents the first major empirical study of citizenship in Britain, comprising surveys of political participation and voluntary activities, and of the beliefs and values which underpin them. As well as presenting new data, the authors provide a sophisticated discussion of the concept of citizenship, and the consequences of a lack of civic engagement in a modern democracy. They examine why some people are 'good' citizens when others are 'bad' and they explore the consequences of citizenship for policy-makers and democracy. Comprehensive and accessible, this book makes a major contribution to our understanding of civic attitudes in Britain today and will appeal to students, researchers and policy-makers.

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(Yann Martel, author of *Life of Pi*, Booker Prize winner, *Guardian*,
23 October 2002)

‘A public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community . . . a public is a kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing.’

(W. H. Auden quoting Kierkegaard)

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Numerous drafts of the questionnaires were devised and revised in the foyer of the Palace Hotel in Tachikawa during the time that Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley were visiting Chuo University in Tokyo, at the invitation of Steven Reed. The hotel staff were rather bewildered by the fact that for day after day two of their guests sat for hours on end in

the lobby surrounded by questionnaires and piles of paper and made repeated requests for coffee and tea. Their tolerance and service were much appreciated.

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Sheffield and Colchester
August 2003

Preface

‘We should not, must not, *dare not*, be complacent about the health and future of British democracy. Unless we become a nation of engaged citizens, our democracy is not secure.’

(Lord Chancellor, in an address to the Citizenship Foundation, 27 January 1998. His emphasis. Quoted in *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*. Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, September 1998, London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, p. 8)

Comments such as those of the Lord Chancellor, quoted above, in which he warns about British democracy and appeals for engaged citizens have not been a common feature of British political discourse until relatively recently. For much of the twentieth century British democracy was assumed to be healthy. Furthermore, the term ‘citizen’ appeared to be inappropriate in the British context. The British were more likely to be dutiful and respectful subjects rather than engaged citizens.

There are numerous reasons, both political and social, why British democracy and citizenship have become important features of contemporary political debate. These include membership of the European Union, the introduction of human rights legislation, the devolution of powers within the state, the increasingly heterogeneous nature of the population, the greater movement of populations across state boundaries, concerns about the prevalence of anti-social behaviour, and the threats to both personal safety and personal liberties arising from international terrorism.

For much of the twentieth century both elite and mass opinion was confident that the political system worked well and individual rights were effectively protected by its institutions and procedures. Respect for these traditional political institutions and procedures was reflected in the absence of any fundamental reforms immediately after the Second World War. Whereas the culmination of the war heralded an abrupt shift in domestic policies as post-war governments accepted greater responsibility for managing the economy and providing universal levels of social welfare, by contrast major reforms to political institutions and procedures did not occur. Apart from a modification to the delaying powers of the

House of Lords, state institutions remained unchanged. The highly centralised political system was maintained and the powers and procedures of Parliament, the Civil Service, and local government remained essentially the same as before. The lack of change reflected an overwhelming belief that the political system was efficient and required no major upheaval. A confidence, verging on complacency, was the prevailing sentiment.

Such confidence in the political system seemed justified. The publication of a comparative, five-nation study of civic attitudes (Almond and Verba, 1963) revealed that the British were trusting of each other and of their political system, were satisfied with their political system and took pride in their political institutions. The authors concluded that Britain could be described as 'a deferential civic culture' in which

The participant role is highly developed. Exposure to politics, interest, involvement, and a sense of competence are relatively high. There are norms supporting political activity, as well as emotional involvement in elections and system affect. And the attachment to the system is a balanced one: there is general system pride as well as satisfaction with specific governmental performance. (1963: 455)

Such positive conclusions regarding the British political system could not be reached today. Levels of political involvement and public interest have declined, as have levels of public trust in politicians. The lack of public confidence in the current political system is shared by many within the political elite. Here we quote just two recent examples of elite concern. The first is taken from the retirement speech of the Speaker of the House of Commons, Betty Boothroyd (2000), in which she stated

I know from my postbag how much disillusionment about the political process there is among the general public. The level of cynicism about Parliament, and the accompanying alienation of many of the young from the democratic process, is troubling. It is an issue on which every member of the House should wish to reflect. It is our responsibility, each and every one of us, to do what we can to develop and build public trust and confidence.

The other example comes from the authoritative House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration (2001) which stated

Not since the extension of the suffrage in 1918 has there been such a low level of participation in the electoral process. The reasons for it may be debated, but not its seriousness for our democracy. We find it extraordinary that this collapse in electoral participation, put alongside other evidence on civic disengagement, has not been treated as a civic crisis demanding an appropriate response.

By the 1990s reform of political institutions had become a feature of inter-party argument. In the years preceding the 1997 general election the Labour Party sought to capitalise on public concern by portraying

the Conservatives as an *ancien régime* attached to old institutions, and proposed that a new modernised regime would introduce major institutional changes. After the Labour Party's electoral success in 1997, these reforms were duly introduced. For example, the devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales, and the election of these devolved institutions by a more proportional electoral system; the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into a Human Rights Act; and the introduction of a Freedom of Information Act.

Very fundamental changes to the working of the British state have recently been introduced. Critics claim, however, that these reforms are too limited and will not resolve some of Britain's fundamental, structural problems (Beetham et al., 2002). After examining contemporary public attitudes, Bromley, Curtice and Seyd (2001: 200) argue that 'Britain faces a crisis of confidence and participation that is far deeper than any programme of constitutional reform is capable of reversing.'

Declining public confidence in, and respect for, conventional political institutions and procedures has provided a stimulus to alternative forms of politics. Recent well-publicised exercises in protest, particularly against road and airport runway developments, fuel taxes, a ban on fox hunting, and the US-led war in Iraq suggest a greater public willingness to engage in direct action or street demonstrations. Riots in 2001 in Bradford and Oldham provided additional evidence of public disenchantment, particularly among young ethnic minorities, with traditional methods of political participation.

There is solid evidence of voter apathy and distrust of politicians, but we have little knowledge or understanding of people's contemporary attitudes towards citizenship. Which is one reason why the Economic and Social Research Council established its Democracy and Participation programme and why, as part of that programme, it commissioned a Citizen Audit. The findings of the Citizen Audit are the subject of this book.

1 What is Citizenship?

Introduction

This book is about citizenship in contemporary Britain. It addresses the question: ‘what does it mean to be a British citizen in the early part of the twenty-first century?’ Answering this question leads to a number of subsidiary questions like ‘what does it mean to say that someone is a good citizen?’; ‘what determines the values and behaviours which constitute citizenship?’; and ‘what does citizenship mean for the wider society and the effectiveness of the political system?’

Important changes are taking place in Britain in the relationship between the citizen and the state. The meaning of citizenship, the relationship between citizens and government and problems of representation and accountability in the modern state have all become the focus of research in recent years (Andrews, 1995; Brubaker, 1992; Etzioni, 1995; Spinner, 1994; van Gunsteren, 1998). In Britain there are general questions to be asked about the effectiveness of democracy and the role of the citizen in government in the twenty-first century (Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992; Beetham, 1994). Similarly, there are changing conceptions about the role of citizenship in promoting effective policy-making and the effects of a strong civic tradition on the performance of the political system as a whole (Putnam, 1993; Van Deth et al., 1999; Weir and Beetham, 1999).

Against this background there are increasing concerns about changes in society which are undermining the effectiveness of democracy and weakening traditional conceptions of citizenship. These changes include a decline in feelings of community and solidarity in the public (Bellah et al., 1985); growing public cynicism about politics and a widespread disaffection with political institutions (Knight and Stokes, 1996; Nye, Zelikow and King, 1997); a decline in the institutions which underpin civil society and democracy such as political parties (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002); and a long-term decline in electoral turnout in the great majority of democratic states (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). In the light of these concerns

citizenship as a topic for research has undergone something of a renaissance in recent years. Writing a generation ago Van Gunsteren argued that 'the concept of citizenship has gone out of fashion among political thinkers' (1978: 9). This is certainly no longer true since there has been an upsurge in research into citizenship which is now examined from a variety of alternative disciplinary perspectives (Heater, 1990; Clarke 1996; Van Gunsteren, 1998).

In addition to academic debates, citizenship has become a central concern to politicians and policy-makers, faced with difficult social and economic problems arising from changes in society and in politics. Government ministers have been preoccupied with a civic renewal agenda as a means of raising participation, reducing crime and promoting voluntary activity (Blunkett, 2001, 2003). Citizenship studies have been introduced into the schools curriculum for the first time as a compulsory subject. The curriculum focuses on topics such as developing political knowledge, promoting the skills of enquiry and communication and stimulating participation (Department for Education and Employment, 1999; Crick, 2002).

There are a number of reasons why the topic of citizenship has come back into vogue. The first is that for the normative theorists citizenship raises basic questions about the relationship between the individual and the state, issues debated since classical times which are central to the concerns of political philosophers such as Locke and Hobbes. As the relationship between the individual and the state changes and is influenced by issues like new nationalisms, globalisation, mass immigration, multiculturalism and environmental stress, the nature of citizenship is explored by normative theorists who are trying to understand the ethical problems raised by these changes.

Such issues are of great concern to empirical political theorists as well and provides a second reason why citizenship is a topic of such contemporary interest. Since the earliest comparative work on the civic culture by Almond and Verba (1963), political scientists have been trying to understand the nature of the values, attitudes and forms of participation which underpin civil society. The concept of civil society takes centre stage in the analysis of citizenship and refers to the formal and informal relationships between people which can be broadly defined as political but which operate outside the institutions of the state. When party members campaign in local elections, when individuals join an interest group, when concerned citizens go on a protest march, or when volunteers help out in their local hospital, all of these constitute support for civil society. Without this, democracy could not function effectively.

There is a paradox at work here; on the one hand, democracy is triumphant throughout the world with new waves of democratisation

occurring in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia (Huntington, 1991; Vanhanen, 1997). But on the other hand, fewer citizens are willing to turn out and vote in many of these democracies, when electoral participation is essential for the operation of democratic politics (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Norris 2002). We see this decline in voting rather clearly in Britain where the turnout in the 2001 general election of 59 per cent was the lowest in modern British history. Clearly, there is something happening to contemporary citizenship which is bringing this about.

A third source of interest in the concept of citizenship comes from students of policy-making, particularly social welfare policy-making. With welfare systems under stress in all advanced industrial societies, arising from demographic changes such as an ageing population together with growing demands for state support for various groups, there is a potential 'fiscal crisis of the state' (O'Connor 1973). On the one hand, there are growing demands for spending on health, transport, education and pensions. On the other hand, there is a declining ability to deliver these benefits in the face of tax resistance by electorates. At the heart of welfare policy is a social contract binding citizens to each other both contemporaneously and across the generations. This contract involves a willingness of some individuals and groups to make sacrifices in order to support others. If citizenship is weak then this social contract will be weak, and governments will not be able to deliver on their promises.

A fourth source of interest in citizenship comes from the growth in immigration and in the growth of multiculturalism which that produces. As society becomes more heterogeneous then citizenship potentially becomes more problematic. When nearly all the citizens of a given country share the same ethnic, historical and cultural backgrounds, that makes the task of building the social contract relatively straightforward, though this does not of course eliminate political conflicts. In contrast, when citizens of a country have very heterogeneous identities deriving from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, particularly if these identities involve fundamental disagreements about values, then the task of building a social contract is much harder.

A fifth factor in the debates about citizenship is the weakening of state power brought about by globalisation, and for Britain the growing consolidation of policy-making in the European Union. If the state is circumscribed in its policy actions by supra-national authorities, even when those relationships bring concrete benefits to its citizens, this creates a democratic deficit and problems of accountability. Citizens unable to hold their governments to account in the long run may withdraw their allegiance from those governments. The problem can be eased if the new supra-national authorities can be made accountable, but as is well known this is highly problematic. Moreover, it is made even more problematic

by the role of multinational corporations in the contemporary world. In recent years these corporations have often succeeded in obtaining benefits from government in the form of tax concessions and subsidies while at the same time avoiding tax contributions (Steinmo, 1993). The real problem here is the weakening of state authority which means that the social contract cannot be enforced effectively.

Another aspect of the same issue is the growth of sub-national political movements seeking autonomy and in some cases independence from national governments. In Britain the Labour government has already embarked on devolution for Scotland and Wales and is currently grappling with the problems of managing devolution to the regions. But this is just one aspect of an issue of growing importance across Europe, whether it is Flemish autonomy in Belgium, Catalan autonomy in Spain, Basque autonomy in France and Spain, or northern regional autonomy in Italy. The growth in demands for such regional autonomy may enhance democratic accountability in some respects, but it makes the task of building a national social contract harder. It can also produce a politics dominated by issues of identity, where there is fundamental disagreement about the locus of state authority, as is true in the case of Canada for example. In this situation it becomes ever more difficult to enforce the social contract.

Taken together these factors amount to a formidable array of reasons why citizenship should be taken seriously as a topic for contemporary research. In this book we aim to examine these questions empirically, with the aid of a series of surveys of the population of Great Britain carried out in 2000 and in 2001. We approach the issue of citizenship from an empirical perspective, since we believe that many of the contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of citizenship have lost touch with the political reality of societies and governments trying to grapple with these problems.

To illustrate this point, we cite Rawls' highly acclaimed book, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). As is well known Rawls argues that if people chose a set of principles for determining the kind of society they wish to live in from behind a 'veil of ignorance', that is ignorance about their own position in the social hierarchy, they would choose two founding principles. Firstly, they would favour liberty for all, and secondly redistribution which would advantage the least well-off at the expense of the most affluent. These ideas have received an enormous amount of attention in the literature and they are very interesting, but their relevance for addressing actual issues of inter-generational redistribution, multiculturalism, tax resistance and declining participation is debatable. The 'veil of ignorance' neither exists nor could it exist, thus the utility of these ideas for policy-makers faced with the task of grappling with these problems is highly questionable. We

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