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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN

Paul Whiteley

Political Participation in Britain

The Decline and Revival of Civic Culture

Paul Whiteley

常州大学图书馆
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To Ava and Sophia

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Preface

The aim of this book is to examine the relationship between civil society, democracy and government in contemporary Britain. It looks at the extent to which the state relies on political participation and the key institutions of civil society, such as political parties, interest groups and voluntary organizations, in order to govern effectively. It also explores the evolving relationship between political participation and the attitudes and values of citizens, which underpins civil society and the British state. It traces political attitudes and behaviour in Britain from the 1950s through to contemporary times, highlighting the most significant changes that have occurred. It also assesses the implications of these changes for contemporary British government and democracy.

The analysis in the book ranges across an investigation of what people think and what they do when acting as citizens, and how these link to the overall problem of governing effectively in the twenty-first century. It is a complex story involving an examination of attitudes to government and policy making, beliefs about the institutions of civil society such as political parties, and also the extent that people participate both in politics and in wider voluntary activities in society. It looks closely at voting and other forms of political participation, seeking to explain why people should participate in politics in the first place. It then looks at the relationship between civic engagement and the civic culture and governance.

There are two overarching themes developed in the book. The first is the theme of understanding and mapping out the dimensions of civil society in contemporary Britain. This involves asking questions such as:

- How has democracy been defined and practised in Britain?
- To what extent have political values and attitudes changed among the public over time?
- To what extent has political participation changed and if it has, why has this happened?
- How exceptional is Britain in comparison with other established democracies?

These are important questions and they are addressed with the help of a great deal of evidence from diverse sources.

The second broad theme asks what difference does civil society and civic engagement make to government and policy making? Addressing this involves looking at such questions as:

- Does voluntary activity help to improve policy delivery?
- Does citizen participation in politics produce better government?
- Is British democracy improving or deteriorating?

It is fair to say that this second theme has been relatively neglected in comparison with the first. While it has always been assumed that a vibrant civic culture is good for democracy and government, it has not often been clearly demonstrated. Of course, a healthy democracy is a good thing in its own right and does not have to be justified in wider terms. But as this book will show, it can be justified in a wider setting, because it is clear that an effective democracy delivers effective government; civil society and good government are intimately related.

The civic culture, even though it is often taken for granted, is of central importance in influencing politics and government – in some ways the civic culture determines the constitution and anchors British democracy. Governments of particular political persuasions get into power because they are elected by the general public, yet they can only carry out their programme of government with the continued support of the public. Policy proposals are always made with an eye on public opinion, and governing always involves making choices against a background of what the public want, or are willing to put up with. Policy u-turns, for example, seldom arise from a careful reasoned analysis of the alternatives, and are much more likely to be triggered by a public outcry in reaction to whatever is being proposed. Similarly, with a few exceptions, successful policies work because they are supported by the majority of the population who reluctantly accept them at worst and actively help to implement them at best. The role of the law, acting to sanction people in enforcing policies, is greatly exaggerated, although it does have a place. Successful policies are supported and facilitated by the public as a whole, which is one of the reasons why they are successful.

So the core thesis of this book is that a healthy civil society makes for good governance and effective policy making. But there are warning clouds on the horizon, since civil society in Britain is not as healthy as it was a generation ago. Civic engagement is in decline, public attitudes and values are less supportive of governance than they once were and as a consequence the effectiveness of government is waning. Britain is in danger of becoming a 'flawed democracy' (a concept discussed in

detail in Chapter 9). This theme runs through the book, but in the final chapter I explore some options designed to change this state of affairs for the better and to revive civic engagement in Britain.

The general election of 2010 was a turning point in post-war British politics since it produced the first full coalition government since the Second World War. This came about because no party obtained a majority of seats in the House of Commons and so an accommodation between political parties had to be reached. This is obvious enough, but it raises an interesting question: why did no party get an overall majority, when up to that point Britain had experienced nothing but single-party governments since the Second World War? The answer to this question can be found in trends in the civic culture and in political participation which have slowly been evolving behind the scenes for years. These trends, which are discussed extensively in this book, came to a head in the 2010 general election to produce a dramatic change in the nature of British government. This is a clear example of how the civic culture directly affects politics and government and will continue to do so in the future.

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1

British Democracy in the Twenty-First Century

> The political culture in Great Britain also approximates the civic culture. 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 government performance. (Almond and Verba, 1963: 315)

> Popular engagement with the formal processes and institutions of democracy has been in long-term decline since the 1960s. Party memberships have been falling continuously since that time to the point where they stand at less that one-quarter of their 1964 levels. The number of people who say they identify with one of the main parties has followed a similar severe trajectory. Turnout for other elections – local and European parliamentary – have remained stubbornly low for decades. (Power to the People, 2006: 27)

These two descriptions of the state of civil society in Britain are separated by nearly fifty years. The first comes from the classic study of participation by Almond and Verba undertaken in 1959. The second is from the report of the Power Commission, an investigation of the state of democracy in Britain published in 2006. There is a dramatic difference between these two accounts of British democracy. The aim of this book is to explain why these changes have occurred and what they mean for British politics and society.

This is a book about citizenship and civil society, that is, relationships between ordinary people and between the citizens of Britain and their governments. Civil society is the foundation upon which democracy and effective government are built, so the scope of the analysis and its implications are wide. We will look at the norms and values that underpin democracy, at political participation broadly defined, at voluntary activity and civic engagement and, after mapping out the contours of

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