

BULLETIN

Citizenship, responsibility and community: the views of 'better off' citizens

Warwick IER is one of Europe's leading centres for labour market and related studies, with its research including a broad range of issues concerning to employment, socio-economic change and social policy analysis. This Warwick IER *Bulletin* summarises findings from research* into citizenship, responsibility and community, themes which in recent years have been the focus of considerable political and academic debate. This debate has included some concern with the position of better off citizens, but studies have primarily focused on poorer citizens. The research summarised in this *Bulletin* addressed two questions: ■ has there been a retreat from civic engagement by better off citizens; ■ and what are the perceptions of better off citizens regarding their citizenship responsibilities?

Key findings

- **There is little evidence to support contentions of a withdrawal from civic engagement by better off citizens**, although some people do choose not to be involved in their community.
- **The formal community involvement of better off citizens can be seen as different to the informal activity characteristic of low-income areas.**
- **Active citizenship does not automatically mean an inclusive society.** Examples were found of community building based on 'protecting' citizens from anti-social behaviour by residents in neighbouring streets/areas, and some preference for communities of 'like minded' people. This reality stands in potential tension with ideas of diverse but inclusive communities promoted in policy development.
- **There is little support for the idea that high earners should contribute to society through time and commitment (e.g. voluntary work) rather than just paying tax:** but any support for higher rates of tax was very qualified.
- **An 'economic independence model' of citizenship dominated views regarding responsibility, which has implications for social inclusion.** Other studies have argued that an emphasis on economic independence and individual self-reliance, over more universal and inclusive models of citizenship, has potential consequences for social division and exclusion.
- **Commonly used terms such as 'better off' and 'wealth rich but income poor' carry little precise meaning and are neglected in social policy analyses,** in contrast to the very extensive consideration given to defining and measuring poverty.
- **The research has implications for:** policy development on building inclusive communities; the need to include better off citizens in social policy analyses; and the complex and contested nature of ideas about citizenship.

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Background: citizenship, responsibility and community

In recent years ‘citizenship’, with a particular emphasis on responsibility, has been the subject of considerable political and academic attention. For example, citizenship is now part of the national curriculum. ‘Community’ has also been a major area of New Labour policy development, an example being the 2004 Home Office consultation on community cohesion through a theme of ‘strength in diversity’.

Why are the views of better off citizens of interest?

The views of better off citizens regarding citizenship, responsibility and community are of interest for several reasons. Increasing inequality since the 1970s means there are greater numbers of better off citizens and more wealth for some citizens. Indeed, under New Labour the UK has experienced an unusual combination of falling relative poverty but slightly rising income inequality, because while many lower income families have seen their incomes rise faster than the average, the incomes of the ‘richest’ citizens have also risen faster than the average since 1997.¹ But studies of citizenship and community, as well as social policy analyses more generally, continue to focus on poorer citizens.

At the political level in the UK there has been some specific consideration of responsibility in relation to better off citizens particularly regarding notions of ‘active citizenship’, first expressed by Conservative governments in the 1980s. Active citizenship included the idea that citizenship responsibility was about time and commitment (e.g. voluntary work), not just paying taxes. This argument partly justified tax cuts for high earners (it is interesting to note that tax now accounts for 37.9% of household income for those in the bottom fifth of the income distribution and 35% for those in the top fifth).² With New Labour, Tony Blair’s first speech as Prime Minister included a section on ‘The Ethic of Responsibility’ which he argued applied “as much at the top of society as at the bottom” and New Labour thinker Peter Mandelson has argued that there needs to be debate about the position of Britain’s new ‘super-wealthy’.

With regard to community and civic engagement it has, however, been argued that there has been decreasing participation in the public sphere by better off citizens.³ There is also some evidence that residents of gated communities may seek to withdraw from systems of local services and local taxation.⁴ But the opposite argument can also be made. For example, the 2001 Home Office citizenship survey found civic

participation rising by socio-economic group and household income - households with an annual income of £75,000 or more reported the highest levels of formal volunteering.

Questions about whether there has been a retreat from civic engagement by better off citizens, and what are the perceptions of better off citizens regarding their citizenship responsibilities, were explored through 60 in-depth interviews with the occupiers of higher value properties. The research findings are summarised here.

Community and responsibility

The research found a wide variety of examples of active citizenship with interviewees engaged in diverse types of voluntary work, residents groups, charities and community networks; everything from helping in a charity shop, organising Neighbourhood Watch to parent-teacher associations, the Freemasons and a lot more besides.

The motivation for undertaking such voluntary work included notions of active citizenship as these two quotations illustrate: “I feel I should be involved, even if it’s just in a small way, and do something positive for the local community” (public sector manager, male, 50s) and “life has been extremely good to me...I think I owe it to society...there’s too many sit back and wait, wait, expect others to do it” (retired businessman, 70s).

At the same time, there were also interviewees who were not involved in their community as these examples show: “I’m probably one of those people who keeps his head down and doesn’t participate in anything” (software engineer, male, 30s) or “people don’t talk to each other here, they really don’t and I think that’s something you lose when you live in big detached houses, you just don’t see people” (company director, female, 40s).

So some people do choose not to be involved in their local community but, in overall terms, there was little evidence to support the argument that there has been a withdrawal from civic engagement (although the sample did not perhaps include the ‘super wealthy’).

Inclusive communities?

The research raised a question as to whether the active citizenship of interviewees promoted the kind of ‘strong but diverse’ communities promoted in policy development. For example, one of the interviewees who engaged most strongly with the theme of community was a gay man who did use ideas of a community

looking after its own, but this was the gay community doing so in response to broader discrimination. There were also examples of community activity as a response to the anti-social behaviour of residents in neighbouring streets/areas. Some interviewees spoke in terms of the community protecting itself against others. A further theme was interviewees valuing communities of ‘like minded’ people. The reality of interviewees’ experience appears potentially to stand in contrast to the policy aspiration of community based on broader diversity and inclusion.

A final point to make is that while there were examples of people having a sense of ‘neighbourliness’ and ‘helping out’, the greater emphasis on formal voluntary work and membership of organisations suggests that the community involvement of the people in this study is qualitatively different to the informal community activity that other studies have found is more characteristic of low-income areas.⁵

Citizenship and responsibility

To move to the second research question, what were the perceptions of these better off citizens regarding their citizenship responsibilities?

The starting point was a question about whether there is currently too much emphasis on rights and there needs to be greater emphasis on responsibility. In response, no one in the research argued for an approach in which rights should be given primacy. A small number of interviewees responded by saying that rights and responsibilities are joint components of citizenship. The dominant response, however, was agreement that there is too much emphasis on rights and there should be greater emphasis on responsibility, with the following quotation typical of many responses: “I think people expect too much as a right and don’t take on their fair share of responsibility themselves and it’s a lot of ‘it’s my right...I expect it’ and I think too much of that is done and people should take on board more responsibilities themselves” (retired shop-owner, female, 60s).

In terms of how interviewees perceived their own responsibilities, responses were very diverse ranging from caring for one’s family to picking up litter, and paying taxes to voting. On this point these better off citizens expressed views similar to other groups of citizens. For example, these views are like those expressed in a 2003 study of young citizens (which included some described as ‘outsiders’).⁶ Another point of similarity was that interviewees found it easier to talk about responsibilities than rights.

Responsibility and better off citizens

How did interviewees respond to the idea that wealthy citizens, because they no longer pay such high taxation, should have a responsibility to contribute to society in other ways such as through voluntary work? The closest to agreement with this idea came from interviewees who considered there is a general need to contribute to society, and some who argued for a greater sense of corporate responsibility. But such views were qualified by interviewees believing either that such an approach is not feasible or there is a need for all citizens to contribute so this should be a universal responsibility. However, most interviewees were strongly opposed to the principle of the idea, arguing that wealthy citizens pay more tax than other people, are already likely to be engaged in charitable work and imposing an obligation would be an infringement of personal liberty.

Responsibility and taxation

To come full circle then, if interviewees did not support the contention that wealthy citizens should have specific/additional responsibilities did they in fact express support for citizenship responsibility being based on the payment of taxation? Across the sample, with very limited exceptions, there was an acceptance of taxation as a citizenship obligation, and agreement that those on higher incomes should pay more tax than those on lower incomes.

Support for higher rates of taxation was, however, more difficult to discern. British Social Attitudes surveys show a majority of people would support higher taxation. The research here reflected differences between support and opposition for higher taxation. However, what was notable was that interviewees who expressed support for higher taxation did so on a largely qualified basis expressing views that: high levels of taxation are damaging to the economy; there is great waste within the public sector, tied to abuse of welfare services; and making at least a partial contribution to the cost of services through charging may be preferable to taxation.

Responsibility and economic independence

So what conception of citizenship did interviewees express? Care needs to be taken not to over-simplify the very diverse range of views that were expressed and what were often highly complex responses. Indeed, other studies have demonstrated that people’s understanding of citizenship draws on a variety of traditions and people can employ contradictory discourses.

What dominated responses in this study was the identification of responsibility at the level of the individual through self-reliance and economic independence. Some interviewees did make strong defences of the welfare state, and particularly the NHS and state education, but views on broader issues of social security were, with some limited exceptions, principally framed in terms of providing a safety net. Interviewees disagreed over exactly where lines are to be drawn between the responsibilities of the individual, the family and the state, with some arguing for a more extensive welfare state and others for a minimalist safety net. But the dominant view was one that saw responsibility as being about the economic independence of the individual.

This finding contrasts with other studies which have highlighted greater support for collective provision and more universal and inclusive models of citizenship. But in this study it was an individualistic approach to responsibility that was dominant. Other studies (for example see note 6) have argued that the model of economic independence is potentially divisive and can be seen as standing in tension with the post war social democratic view of social citizenship as bestowing equal status on all citizens.

Conclusion

The research provided rich data on a range of other issues relating to rights and responsibilities, notions of first and second class citizens, ideas about contributing to society, issues about those who are perceived as failing in their citizenship responsibilities, and the very value and meaning of the terms 'citizenship' and 'citizen'.

This *Bulletin* has focused on themes of citizenship, responsibility and community. Key findings include the lack of evidence to support contentions of a withdrawal from civic engagement; questions about whether active citizenship automatically creates inclusive communities; and the emphasis on a citizenship model of economic independence over collective provision. The research therefore has implications for:

- policy development on building inclusive communities;
- the need to include better off citizens in social policy analyses;
- and the complex and contested nature of ideas about citizenship.

About the research project

This project researched two inter-connected issues: local taxation and citizenship (a separate *Bulletin* on local

taxation is available at the Warwick IER website). A focus of the local tax element was the idea that people can be 'wealth rich but income poor' and the research included in-depth interviews with the occupiers of 60 properties in the four higher council tax valuation bands (a category which includes only 20% of all properties). Interviews were conducted in a number of diverse geographical settings in the West Midlands including an inner-city area, suburban estates, a property 'hot spot' and a rural area.

An immediate issue was how to describe this sample of interviewees. Some of the interviewees did have low incomes, despite living in higher value properties, but over 50 had above average incomes and most also had above average assets. The terms 'better off' and 'comfortable' were the two most commonly used by interviewees to describe their position. The sample, excluding those few on low incomes, is therefore described as consisting of 'better off' citizens. But an issue that is raised by the research is that in contrast to the very extensive consideration that has been given to defining and measuring poverty, commonly used terms such as 'wealth rich but income poor', 'better off' and 'comfortable' (as well as others such as 'rich' and 'super wealthy') carry little precise meaning.

Notes

1. Brewer, M., Goodman, A., Myck, M., Shaw, J. and Shephard, A. (2004), *Poverty and Inequality in Britain: 2004*, Commentary 69, London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.
2. Lakin, C. (2004) 'The effects of taxes and benefits on household income, 2002-03' *Economic Trends* 607 June, London: Office of National Statistics.
3. Scott, J. (1994) *Poverty and Wealth: Citizenship, deprivation and privilege* London: Longmans.
4. Blandy, S., Lister, D., Atkinson, R. and Flint, J. (2003) *Gated Communities: A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence*, ESRC Centre for Neighbourhood Research.
5. Williams, C. (2003) 'Developing Voluntary Activity: Some Policy Issues Arising from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey' *Social Policy and Society* 2 (4).
6. Lister, R., Smith, N., Middleton, S. and Cox, L. (2003) 'Young People Talk about Citizenship' *Citizenship Studies* 7 (2).

For related Warwick IER research, for example into the New Deal for Communities, see the IER website.