

## Briefing Paper 73

### The idea of a ‘civic core’: what are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales?

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#### Introduction

Policy statements from the Coalition government, such as the Giving White Paper (Cabinet Office, 2011) indicate a desire to increase the proportions of the population who are engaged in volunteering and charitable giving. These calls to action largely rest on headline figures such as the aggregate volunteering rate at a particular point in time. This paper seeks to demonstrate that we need to look behind headline figures if we are to understand patterns of civic engagement in the UK. **In particular, the paper focusses on the extent of individuals’ formal civic engagement activities, moving the question on from whether people take part in formal civic engagement to how much they take part in these activities.**

The paper builds on a Canadian study (Reed and Selbee, 2001) that highlighted how a small group of people contribute a large proportion of formal civic engagement. Our research shows that a similar ‘civic core’ exists in the UK. The paper also points out that non-engagement is actually quite limited: few people contribute nothing on all three dimensions of engagement. Additionally, our paper provides information on individuals’ multiple engagement activities, exploring if and how people engage in more than one form of civic engagement. We have focussed on three formal types of engagement: volunteering, charitable giving and participation in associations.

## Data

The analysis uses the 2007-8, 2008-9 and 2009-10 waves of the Citizenship Survey, providing a sample of 27,976 respondents across England and Wales. Respondents are asked how many hours they spent giving unpaid help to organisations in the past four weeks, how much money they have given to charity in the past four weeks, and how many types of civic association they have taken part in over the past 12 months. Please see the Appendices in the full Working Paper for question wording.

Overall, these three survey measures capture formal aspects of civic engagement. It is recognised that informal types of volunteering, such as helping neighbours, are not captured here. It is anticipated that further work on the civic core will expand to examine this additional dynamic in due course.

## Defining the core

Reed and Selbee (2001) defined the civic core as the smallest grouping of the population who, collectively, accounted for two thirds of all efforts in a particular sphere of activity. Ordering respondents from highest to lowest contributions on the three dimensions of civic engagement allows for the

identification of those individuals who have contributed most to these formal types of engagement.

The paper's focus is on relative, rather than absolute contributions to civic engagement. Nevertheless, the analysis led to threshold values for membership of the three core groups. One would have to have contributed 14 or more hours volunteering in the past four weeks to be in the volunteering core; given £30 or more to charity in this time period in order to be in the charitable giving core, and participated in three or more types of organisations in the past 12 months in order to be part of the civic engagement core.

We define a 'primary core', consisting of those who belong to the core on at least two out of the three dimensions of volunteering, charitable donations, and participation in associations. The 'secondary core', consists of those who are in the core on one of these dimensions.

## Describing the civic core

The British 'civic core' can be defined as just over a third of the population that provide 90% of volunteering hours, four-fifths of the amount given to charity, and nearly 80% of participation

in civic associations. Broken down, the primary core comprises 8.9% of the population and the secondary core about 27.1%. Proportionally, effort is concentrated in the primary core – half of volunteer hours, two-fifths of charitable giving, and just under one-quarter of civic participation. The secondary core provides around 40%, 40% and 50% of effort respectively. Just under two thirds of the population do not appear in the core on any of the three dimensions of involvement. This does not, however, mean that they have no engagement whatsoever: they account for 13.1%, 19.0% and 22.9% of volunteering, charitable giving and participation in different civic associations. **Only 15.4% of the population record no volunteering, associational participation or charitable giving at all.**

### **Who is in the Civic Core?**

Results show that the civic core are more likely to be highly educated, say that they are “actively practicing their religion”, in professional and managerial occupations, middle-aged, and are likely to have lived in their neighbourhood for more than 10 years. **There is also an imbalance in geographical distribution, with core**

**members being most likely to live in the least deprived parts of the country.**

### **Distribution of civic engagement, normative expectations and the concept of proportionality**

Reed and Selbee explored the concept of proportionality by determining the extent to which it could be shown that social groups contributed an amount of civic engagement effort that was equivalent to, below, or above their share of the population. Underlying this notion was the expectation that the contribution made by a group of the population should be broadly in line with its share of total population.

This paper questions the utility of the concept of proportionality. It is argued that whilst this concept may be of interest to those who seek to expand particular forms of participation, there are no normative guidelines as to how much volunteering, charitable giving or participation in civic associations we ought to expect from any one social group. When is a group seen by society to have ‘done its bit’ for civic participation? In all likelihood, low levels of formal engagement may be explicable in terms of levels of illness, lengthy or inconvenient working hours and/or a lengthy journey to work, a

heavy load of informal engagement responsibilities (such as caring for relatives or members of the wider community), low income, or the lack of opportunities to participate.

## Conclusions and implications

The Coalition Government's policies, indicating a desire to increase the proportions of the population who are engaged in volunteering and charitable giving, may underestimate the extent to which people are already engaged in their communities, and may also neglect the overlap between the different forms of pro-social behaviours examined here. There are many ways in which individuals contribute to the functioning of communities and we find that there is not a substantial problem of non-engagement – only a small minority of the population (some 15%) seem to be completely disengaged from the various forms of activity analysed here. It is likely that this minority will further decrease in size once we take account of informal engagement activities. **The general lesson for policy is that undifferentiated appeals for people to do more need to be tempered**

**by an acknowledgement of individual circumstances.**

The strong geographical gradients found indicate that the 'core' groups tend to be concentrated in the most prosperous locations. This poses a substantial challenge to policy. A feature of Big Society discussions has been an emphasis on localism. Our figures suggest that (to the extent that we assume that engagement is a local matter) the most prosperous communities are those best placed to respond to the transfer of responsibilities to voluntary organisations and volunteers. This will require creative thought about how best to steer voluntary resources to areas where they are most needed.

## References

- Cabinet Office (2011) *Giving White Paper*, London: HMSO, Cm. 8084.
- Reed, P and Selbee, K. (2001) The civic core in Canada: disproportionality in charitable giving, volunteering and civic participation, *Nonprofit and voluntary sector quarterly*, 30, 761-780

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