

Civic participation and social responsibility

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The new coalition government has pledged to move away from big government to one of ‘big society’, in which civil society is to be revived and given a greater role in tackling social problems.
- Civic participation is not in decline. Indeed, much of the evidence suggests it is currently vibrant.
- Membership of trade unions, political parties, churches and traditional women’s groups has fallen, but membership of new social movements, non-governmental organisations and pressure groups concerned with various new areas of public concern have flourished.
- The nature of membership and participation has changed, but this ought not to be interpreted as decline: rather, there are rational reasons for supporting organisations that require little active involvement beyond financial support.
- The expansion of the welfare state has not weakened civic participation. In many instances the state has promoted and strengthened the voluntary sector, the welfare state has acted as a spur to further voluntary initiatives and, rather than being in competition, the state and the voluntary sector have complemented one another.
- There has been little fundamental change in the relationship between states, citizens and civil society over the twentieth century, and much consistency of thinking about such issues across the political spectrum.
- Key drivers of the changing nature of civic participation include the rise of affluence and access to higher education, the growing authority of expertise (and the attendant trend to transfer political subjects to ‘neutral’ expert bodies), and the related transformations in social and political trust.
- In an increasingly complex world, the public has opted to support civic groups through arms-length, ‘cheque-book’ activism. This has been a calculated decision to trust certain types of organisation to act on its behalf when dealing with other experts.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE ‘BIG SOCIETY’

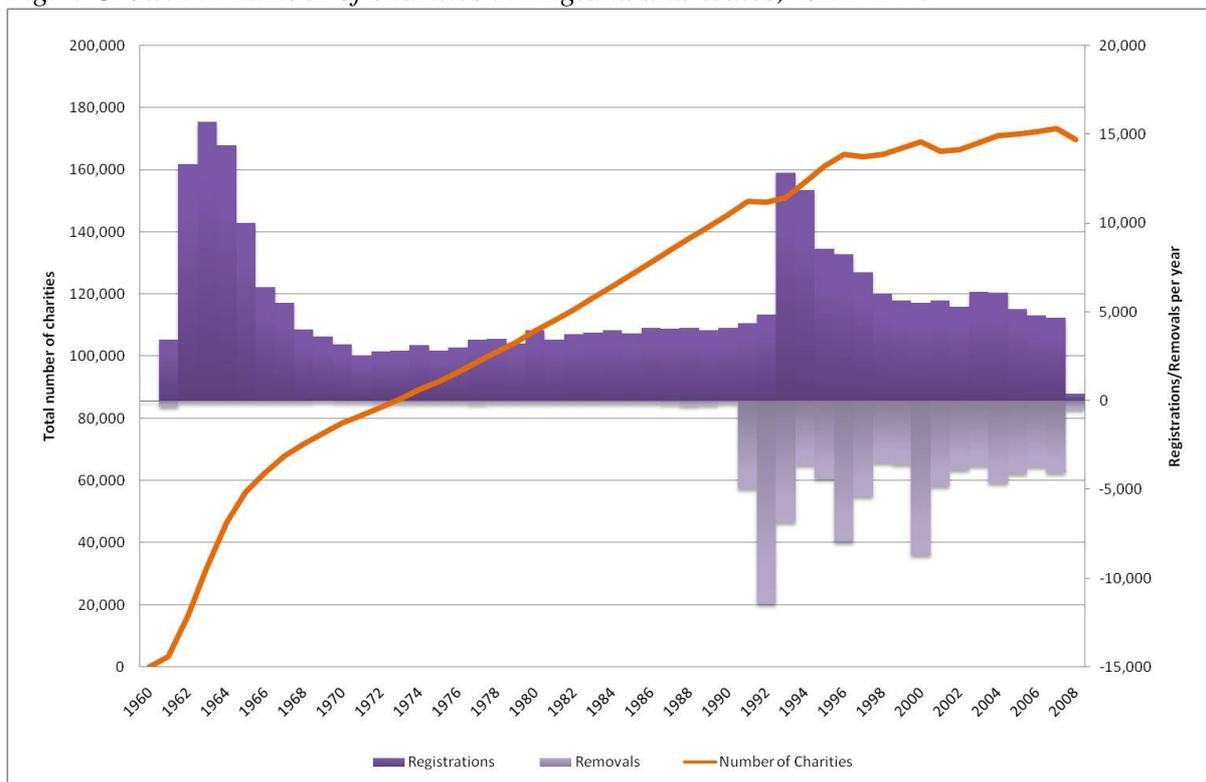
The new coalition government has pledged to move away from big government to one of ‘big society’. The big society proposals assume that government alone cannot solve complex social problems. Instead, by making the public services more accountable to citizens, by decentralizing power and by expanding the opportunities for civic participation, it is hoped that an active citizenry will play a quantitatively and qualitatively greater role in tackling problems that affect communities. The package of policies is predicated on the notion that there has been a decline in civic participation and that this can be attributed partially to the

dependency culture encouraged by ‘big government’. This paper tackles some of the central questions raised by the coalition proposals and argues that instead of decline civic participation remains vibrant and that it has constantly evolved over the last few decades.

2. THE STATE OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic participation in Britain is not in decline. Participation can be measured in different ways, through organisational growth, overall income of the charitable and voluntary sectors, or (perhaps most importantly for participation) individual involvement. All of these measures suggest that civic participation is vibrant. For example, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations estimates that in 2007 there were 870,000 UK civil society organisations (CSOs) (NCVO, 2009). For charities specifically, there are around 170,000 in the UK, a figure that has climbed steadily since the establishment of the modern registration system in the 1960s (see Fig.1). A 2009 survey found that volunteering was undertaken informally by 57% of adults in England, and formally by 43%, in the twelve months preceding interview.

Fig.1: Growth in number of charities in England and Wales, 1960-2008



Source: Unpublished data, David Kane, NCVO

A golden age?

Tales of golden ages and modern decline are common in analyses of civic participation. These decline narratives operate by celebrating a supposedly ideal period in the past (for example, Victorian philanthropy), and then describing all subsequent developments as regrettable deviations. These analyses often present compelling cases, *within their own terms of reference*. For example, literature on social capital equates ‘desirable’ participation with forms of association that were common in the mid-twentieth century, but have declined since.

Within its own terms, this case is undeniably true. Membership of traditional women’s groups has withered: e.g., the Mothers’ Union had 538,000 members in the 1930s, but only 98,000 by 2009. The numbers of those attending Church regularly has been in steady decline since the early twentieth century. And the membership of the main political parties halved between 1960 and 1980, and has halved again since.

Narratives of decline tend to assume that change from their norms is to be deplored. It sometimes follows that easy interpretations are sought to explain such decline: perhaps that the rise of the welfare state has taken over the roles of traditional voluntary bodies, promoting a culture of dependency that makes citizens less willing to participate in communal and self-help organizations. The reality of change is more subtle.

The renewal of civic participation: a ‘democratic phoenix’?

It can just as easily be argued that civil society has undergone constant renewal and revitalisation. Not only has the number of CSOs steadily increased, but new forms of civic engagement and new areas of civic concern have emerged.

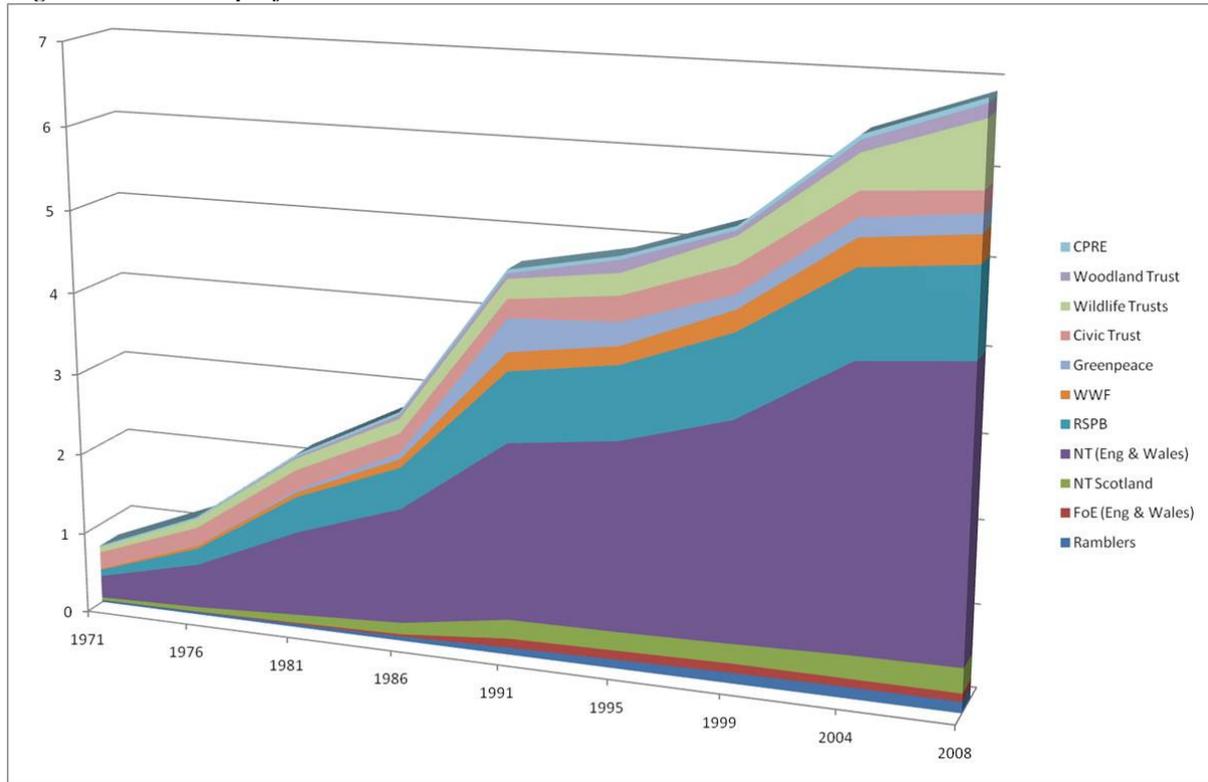
For the United States, it has famously been argued by Robert Putnam that participation in voluntary associations has fallen, resulting in a decline in social capital and ultimately democratic citizenship. When such an analysis has been applied to the UK, the evidence is less compelling. Drawing on a number of surveys conducted by political scientists since the early 1960s, we have concluded that there is no real problem with the levels of civic participation in Britain.

Of course, a lot depends on the data used. The problem with much of this literature on civic participation is that the evidence base is highly selective, leading to questionable conclusions. Unfortunately for historical analysis, there is no definitive data to refer to. What is clear, however, is that forms and patterns of participation have undergone significant change in the twentieth century, and continue to do so today.

Understanding change, therefore, is the key issue. If mass political parties, the churches and women’s groups have seen declining levels of participation, new social movements, pressure groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have often seen quite spectacular growth.

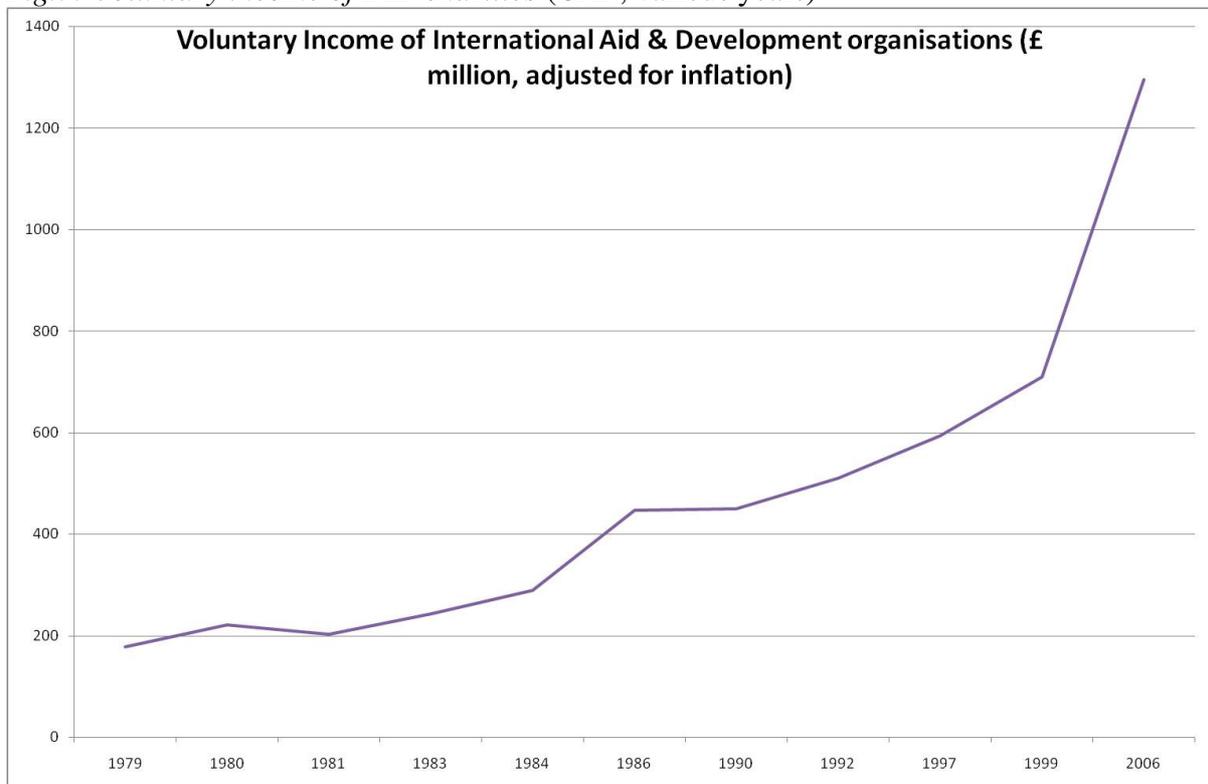
Environmental groups, for example, have dramatically expanded their membership since the early 1970s (see Fig.2). No doubt there is crossover and hence double counting, but the cumulative membership figure of all the main environmental NGOs at the turn of the millennium was 6 million.

Fig.2: Membership of environmental NGOs



To take another example, the voluntary income of international aid and development (IAD) charities has also flourished over a similar period (see Fig.3).

Fig.3: Voluntary income of IAD charities (CAF, various years)



Figures such as these have led many authors to be incredibly optimistic about the future of civil society. The protests associated with various aspects of globalisation, for example, have encouraged one leading commentator to write of a ‘democratic phoenix’. Precisely which ashes this phoenix is supposed to have risen from is unclear: such evidence as there is suggests a more continual process of growth and change.

Ongoing issues about civic participation

To replace the interpretation of the pessimist with that of the optimist would be simplistic and misleading. Problems, opportunities and tensions exist within civic life, just as they have always done. The most serious of these relates to the changing nature of membership. Attention has been drawn to how face-to-face member participation in voluntary associations has increasingly been displaced by a more distant, ‘cheque-book’ relationship between NGOs and their supporters. The significance of this development lies in the proposed relationship between face-to-face participation in associations, and greater levels of social – and, from there, political – trust.

There is much to this argument and it might indeed be the case that the quality of membership has declined. Yet, as we will see below, two rejoinders are apparent. Firstly, it is not at all obvious that social and political trust have been causally connected. It might well be that even in a participation-rich society, in which much interpersonal communication takes place and levels of social trust are high, levels of political trust and political engagement are still low due to, for instance, the behaviour of politicians and the decline of ideology. Secondly, there may be a well worked out rationality in electing to engage in ‘cheque book politics’. As we will see, in an increasingly complex world, in which communication takes place in myriad ways and in which high technical issues cannot be understood by even educated lay people, it might make sense to place one’s trust in mass membership, low interaction, yet highly professional and technically competent organisations.

3. CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND THE STATE

It is not the case that the rise of the state has weakened either the voluntary sector or civic participation. The institutions of the welfare state, for example, have served in many ways to strengthen civic participation, and the voluntary and welfare services have worked in close collaboration over the decades.

The case against the state, and the welfare state in particular, is that it has displaced voluntary initiative and bred a culture of dependence. This is a mistaken interpretation. Undoubtedly, it may apply very well to certain classic spheres of public welfare. The demise of the voluntary hospitals is a prominent case in point, as are aspects of the social services and social work.

Yet the anti-state case fails to appreciate the sheer diversity of the welfare state (and of the state more generally), and it does not acknowledge how public welfare has often revitalised public spiritedness. Once we examine the state and the voluntary services on a sector by sector basis, a whole variety of relationships between government and civic participation begin to emerge. Some of the most prominent are as follows:

The moving frontier of social reform

Far from being displaced by the welfare state, voluntary initiative has often been prompted to go beyond statutory provision, exploring neglected issues, and pioneering solutions.

A classic example here is the rediscovery of poverty in the 1960s. Here, the complacent assumption that the welfare state had ‘abolished’ poverty was challenged by a group of social policy researchers based at the London School of Economics, notably Richard Titmuss, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend. They used the Ministry of Labour’s own statistics to demonstrate the ongoing nature of deprivation, and in doing so, reframed the notion of poverty as a relative, rather than an absolute, condition. This in turn triggered a new wave of groups campaigning on British poverty and deprivation, such as the Child Poverty Action Group (1965), Shelter (1966), Crisis (1967), and Gingerbread (1970). The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, which defined statutory homelessness, was seen as a response to the lobbying carried out from the late 1960s by such groups.

Ultimately, the idea that the state has displaced voluntary initiative misunderstands the ‘moving frontier’ that exists between the two sectors. As a major report on the voluntary sector noted in the 1990s:

[W]hen tides of change sweep through society as a whole, the contours of voluntary action also shift. When the state advances, the voluntary sector adjusts its role accordingly. When the state retreats and the market advances, as has happened in most advanced Western democracies over the past decade, voluntary organisations adapt their mission.

Prompting legislation

Certain forms of voluntary activity represent classic forms of self help and had no intention of involving the state. The consumer movement (i.e. *Which?*), for instance, has since 1957 engaged in the comparative testing of branded commodities to assist its members in making better purchases. Consumers soon found out, though, that voluntary effort alone was insufficient to deal with certain market and public sector mechanisms that impacted negatively on the consumer. They therefore called on the state to protect consumer interests through regulations on competition, restrictive trade practices, safety issues, etc. By 1980, one journalist for *The Times* was able to claim that the Consumers’ Association had ‘filled more pages of the statute book than any other pressure group this century’.

Likewise, environment and conservation groups have a long pedigree of challenging and encouraging the government to take action over specific issues. This can be seen from the work of the Coal Smoke Abatement Society and the Smoke Abatement League in the lobbying that led to the 1956 Clean Air Act that followed the devastating London smog of 1952, to the Big Ask coalition of environment and development groups that paved the way for the 2008 Climate Change Act.

Shaping the voluntary sector

It is often tempting to see great transformations in the relationship between state and civil society, particularly when these tie in with perceived political turning points like 1945 and 1979. In fact, there has been little fundamental change in the relationship between states, citizens and civil society, and much consistency of thinking across the political spectrum. Change has been a matter of emphasis, and the significance of voluntary initiative has never been seriously challenged.

William Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state, certainly did not think that there ought to be no role for voluntary effort. He wrote that the ‘vigour and abundance’ of voluntary action inspired forms of civic engagement that were ‘the distinguishing marks of a free society’. Likewise Conservative Quintin Hogg thought ‘such forms are seldom politically inspired, and form the natural barrier of defence between the individual and the State ... societies and organisations which are at once the condition and the result, at once the glory and cause, of a free society’.

Even the Labour government of the late 1940s was sympathetic to the role of the voluntary sector. Once the welfare reforms were in place, the Labour Party looked to the voluntary sector. Indeed, Nye Bevan believed state support for voluntary bodies could remove the stigma of charity and the arbitrariness of the collection box. Michael Young wrote *Small Man, Big World*, exploring the possibilities of mutual aid. Tony Crosland wrote of the need to develop individual freedom and liberty. And, back in power in the 1960s, Labour issued a series of investigations into the role of the voluntary sector in health, probationary services, housing and the young (Deakin & Davis Smith, 2011).

From 1979, Conservative administrations gave significant support to the voluntary sector, both rhetorically, extolling the virtues of non-state social action, and in practical terms, through funding initiatives such as those run by the Manpower Services Commission. From 1979-80 to 1986-87, public sector direct grant support for the voluntary sector increased by over 90% in real terms.

Since 1997, there has been a renewed attempt to define and improve the working relationships between the state and voluntary action. The Labour administrations of 1997-2010 introduced the Compact, marking a major re-evaluation of the socio-political significance of the voluntary sector, and intending to give the sector a greater consultative role in the design and implementation of policy. There were also innovations in the machinery of central government, most notably the establishment of the Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office.

Complementarity and working in partnership

Government and voluntary organisations recognise that each have their respective roles to play. Much of the energy of voluntary initiative is directed not so much at competing with the state but in complementing what it does.

Problems emerge, though, when this complementarity is formalised. Contracting, in particular, can create situations in which the energy of the voluntary group is directed at securing funding rather than promoting the interests of their clients. Also, when government control these contracts, it can detract from the vitality of the civic organisation. The social

entrepreneurial role is therefore lost and the welfare service, provided by either the state or by a civic group under contract, become indistinguishable.

In certain areas it has to be acknowledged that the voluntary sector can only achieve so much. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, international aid and development NGOs were praised for their alternative model of development which saw them better able to reach the grassroots poor than official aid programmes. This triggered an embrace of the charities by the state by firstly, the Labour governments of the 1970s and then the Conservatives in the 1980s. But the amount of aid that can be disbursed by NGOs is limited and is inevitably tiny in proportion to that disbursed through official bilateral and multilateral programmes. When the UK government cut its overseas aid budget in 1966, for example, it did so by a sum greater than the total spending of Oxfam since its formation in 1942. The NGO is not an alternative to the state. It is a complement, and one which in no ways detracts from the proper role of state intervention.

Reflections

Two conclusions about civic participation and the state stand. Firstly, the evidence of the last 60 years would suggest that it is better not to see the welfare state and civil society as distinct and competing entities. Rather there has existed an extensive network of politicians, ministers, civil servants, but also professional independent experts, voluntary groups and, in some instances, the market. The precise mix varies from sector to sector. Second, it does not follow that the expansion of the public sector has reduced civic participation. Rather it is the case that government, civil society and the market have all expanded alongside one another.

4. KEY DRIVERS OF CHANGE

There are many interlinked factors that have impacted upon the voluntary sector and civic participation since 1945. The following are the most prominent:

Affluence and education

Changes in civic participation in the last seventy years have been fundamentally driven by increasing levels of affluence. In the long Keynesian boom that followed the Second World War, economic expansion financed the mass provision of secondary and tertiary education. These trends of affluence and education have continued since, resulting in a citizenry that is wealthier and better educated than ever before. This has changed the nature of citizen interaction with leaders and institutions, replacing a politics directed by elites, with one which challenges elites. Less likely to defer to class-based, monolithic political parties, citizens have responded to the complexities of the modern world by constructing complex and personalised forms of engagement.

Depoliticisation and expertise

Since the Second World War, experts and professionals have played a quantitatively more significant role than in any other period. These experts were central to not only 'economic management and social policy, but also to areas of cultural taste, the urban and rural environments, consumer behaviour and the psychological well-being of communities.' Their

prominence has been central to accounts of depoliticisation (that is, the transfer of formerly political subjects to the realm of experts) that, in turn, are said to explain increased voter apathy and civic disengagement.

In fact, expertise lies behind the transformation in civic participation. Just as experts flocked to local government, to engineering, to the financial sector, to architecture, to law and to medicine, so too would they become the bulwarks of an expanding NGO sector: from lawyers like Tom Sargent and Peter Benenson who would form human rights organisations JUSTICE and Amnesty, to the engineers, scientists and development economists who would staff Oxfam and Christian Aid, and who would in turn pass through the doors of international institutions to spearhead the technocratic solutions to third world development. These 'expert citizens' displaced, to some degree, grassroots activists, and transformed the face of post-war British politics, in its broadest sense.

Changing patterns of membership, association and trust

Although the data is unreliable, there is evidence to suggest that citizens have deliberately chosen to trust certain groups over others. Rather than seeing political trust as emerging from social trust (as the social capital literature assumes), individuals have shown 'a remarkable understanding of different kinds of political trust' not dependent on their active membership of a traditional voluntary organisation. There is evidence that the public is choosing to trust the expertise of NGOs and voluntary organisations over that of civil servants and politicians. For example, a poll conducted in August 1993 found that 38% of the public trusted government scientists. The figure for industry scientists was around the same at 41%. Yet for scientists working for environmental organisations, it was 73%.

The rise of the expert citizen, driven by affluence and the expansion of educational opportunities, goes to the core of the changing nature of trust and civic participation. In an increasingly complex world, the public opts to support a civic group, through arms-length, 'cheque-book' activism, as it trusts the organisation to act on its behalf when dealing with other experts. Clearly, single issue politics is open to the charge that it reduces politics to shopping. Voters, or supporters of NGOs, have low costs of exit and can switch their affinities readily and often: this is 'cheap participation', as one study puts it. Yet active participation in voluntary groups might not help their enfranchisement either: there are complex technical issues at stake that go beyond the lay person. Supporters of NGOs have actually recognised that such experts are better placed to make one's case (albeit with 'our' experts rather than 'their' experts).

Civic participation has come to be based on a very different form of membership. It is less likely to involve weekly attendance at meetings and social gathering and more likely to involve seemingly passive direct debit payments. Yet, this membership can be mobilised at key times – to write letters, to attend protests, to be seen to support a campaign initiated from the top. These strategic mobilisations of supporters have been repeated over and over again – in Jubilee 2000, Make Poverty History, the Countryside Alliance and Live 8.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The ongoing vibrancy of civic participation make it clear that it is problematic and erroneous to define the voluntary sector according to any one criteria. It is constantly evolving and

adapting to new circumstances giving rise to new forms of activism and participation. It has grown alongside an expanding state and complemented the work of the welfare services. Attempts to control and direct its activities are likely to fail and possibly to backfire, especially if sectors call on the state for further intervention. However, its vibrancy can be embraced, and its comparative advantages exploited, but not in a manner that sees it as an alternative to state provision. Indeed, its cheque-book supporters might readily switch their allegiances if this is the role envisaged for civil society.

FURTHER READING

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All four authors are at the University of Birmingham. Matthew Hilton is Professor of Social History. Nicholas Crowson is Reader in Contemporary British History. Jean-Francois Mouhot and James McKay are both post-doctoral researchers on the Leverhulme-Trust funded project, 'NGOs in Britain, 1945-1997'. For further details see www.ngo.bham.ac.uk