

Now or Never

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Citizenship: learning by doing

Children and young people as citizens: Participation, provision and protection

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Abstract

Political Science research indicates that political participation is a learnt habit which is in decline. One strong predictor of levels of participation is efficacy, which refers to an individual's perception of their ability to know what is going on, be heard and make a difference politically. Another strong predictor is the extent to which people think an election is a real contest and therefore if it is worth voting. Participation is declining as efficacy declines, elections are seen as less competitive and people do not acquire the habit of voting let alone other forms of political participation. The most likely way to stop the decline in adult political participation is for students to acquire the habit at school. A literature review provides a basis for this diagnosis.

Author

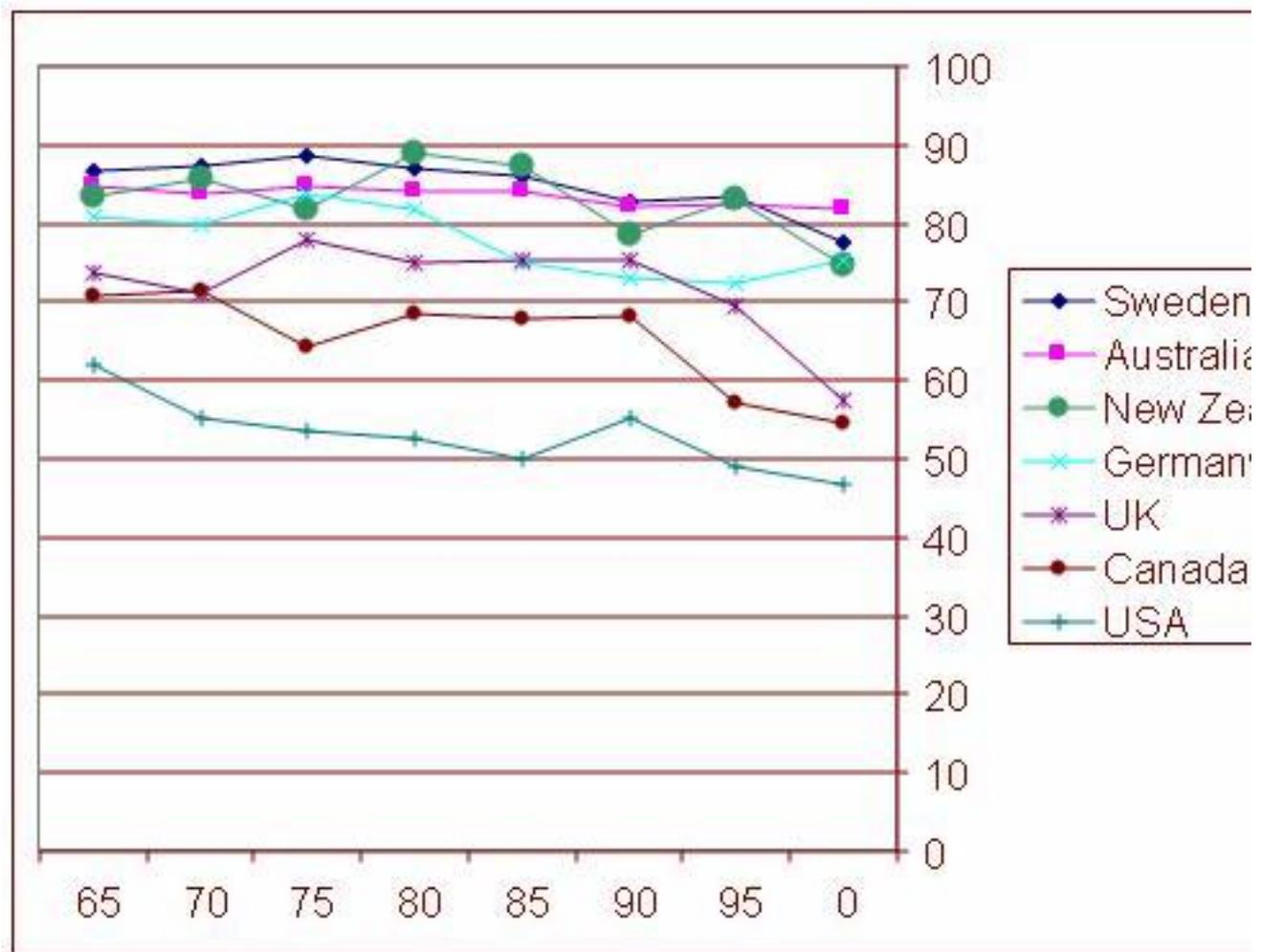
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Introduction

Political participation is declining, particularly amongst young people. Given the stability of early patterns abstention, indications are that the current non-participators will continue to do so. In order to increase participation in the future, young people need to acquire a desire to participate before they leave school. Otherwise, as each cohort graduates from school student to elector without the motivation to take part, then the current trends of non-participation will continue. Given that teenage views on political participation influence a lifetime of participation attempts to reverse the trend are needed in these years. This paper looks for explanations for the decline in participation and suggestions as to what citizenship education could do to reverse the trend. If action is not taken to encourage participation when students are at school then it will never happen.

Declining Participation

Turnout at Parliamentary elections as % of age-eligible electors



Data from International IDEA *Voter turnout since 1945*. The election closest to each half decade date was used

A core component of citizenship in a democracy is participation in political activity. The most basic, defining, democratic right and responsibility is to vote in elections. Without a voting citizenry there is no democracy. But, election turnout is in decline in New Zealand and internationally (see graph). There are of course many other forms of political participation but voting is the easiest, most visible, and the most routinely counted. Also, for many political issues local action can staunch the symptoms but it takes government action to make a lasting change - for instance we can choose to take a bus but only the government can address air pollution, or we can give money to famine relief appeals but only government actions can reduce third world debt.

In the western world there is growing concern at declining levels of participation. Of particular concern is the increasing non-engagement amongst young people (UK Electoral Commission, 2004, 2002) and the worrying signs of alienation and cynicism among young people about public life and participation, leading to their possible disconnection and disengagement with it (Kerr, 2003). We might argue that as each generation reaches middle-age and positions of influence it despairs of the attitude of the young. However statistics do suggest that the non-participation of the young is both higher and lasting for longer. Participation, when it occurs, is of a different nature being more apolitical, such as helping in a soup kitchen (Horwitt, 1999) and individual rather than collective action (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003). A UK study found that young people increasingly feel disconnected from the wider society, are proud of being outside and against the mainstream, and have opted out of party politics (Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995).

Impact of efficacy

Efficacy, a composite measure of one's feeling of worth and place in the world, is associated with a wide range of behaviours. It is a state of mind, a habit and a self-fulfilling prophecy. Broadly it is people's belief in their own ability to know what is going on, be heard, and make a difference (Bandura, 1977). One particular form of efficacy is political efficacy which was originally described as "...the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, 1954: 187). In political terms the literature distinguishes between internal and external political efficacy: perceptions of self and government.

Internal efficacy is broadly self-confidence or 'beliefs about one's own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics' (Niemi et al., 1991: 1407). Important components are thinking that politics is interesting, and that it is not too complicated to understand. In surveys these two aspects are measured by asking people the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statements 'Sometimes politics seems so complicated it is hard for people like me to understand what is going on' and 'During election campaigns, political parties and candidates discuss issues that are of real interest to me'. Interlinked with interest in politics is the extent to which people think that politics is relevant to their lives.

In contrast, trust in the ways in which governments respond to citizen demands are at the core of external efficacy. It is often seen as 'beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands' (Niemi et al., 1991: 1408). There has not been the same consistency in how external efficacy is measured with some asking respondents how much they trust government and others asking people the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement 'people like me don't have any say in what the Government does'. Both measure aspects of the feeling that government is responsive to citizen views.

Consistently, survey-based research shows that those with high efficacy get involved in politics and those with low efficacy do not (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Austin & Pinkleton, 1995; Balch, 1974; Blais, 2000; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, 1954; Clarke & Acock, 1989; Converse, 1972; Craig & Maggiotto, 1982; Craig, 1979; Craig, Niemi, & Silver, 1990; Finkel, 1985; Fraser, 1970; Good & Mayer, 1975; Hawkins, Marando, & Taylor, 1971; Horwitz, 1999; Langton & Karns, 1969; Morrell, 2003; Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991; White, 1968). The classic political culture studies of the 1960s argued that stable democratic institutions are generally a result of high levels of internal and external efficacy both of which are created through socialisation (Almond and Verba, 1963/1989). Almond and Verba argued that self-confident citizens believe in their ability to participate and do so (207). Voters tend to feel that they can make a difference while non-voters are more likely to think that they are powerless to influence politics.

Explanations for declining participation

Declining participation, particularly by younger people, suggests then that levels of efficacy are lower than in the past. In the USA surveys show that people feel a decline in the effectiveness of their vote (Teixeira 1992). In a survey of young people in the USA one quarter said that they 'don't think their vote makes a difference' and the same proportion agreed that 'they do not have enough information about candidates' (Horwitz, 1999). Debate thus centres upon reasons for this generational decline in efficacy. Echoing the political culture interest in socialisation, many of the suggested reasons are societal rather than individual. Common suggested culprits are changing media, decline in family discussion and in respect for the wisdom of elders. The most influential set of ideas are those relating to social capital as espoused by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (2000).

Putnam argues that the decline in levels of social capital explains the decline in electoral participation internationally. To summarise brutally: when social capital is high, then people feel part of society and are interested in what happens to others so politics matters to them. Social capital depends upon people interacting, doing things in a variety of groups, getting to know a wide range of people, experiencing being involved with others. The interaction does not need to be political engagement. Joining groups of any kind, for instance sports clubs, music groups, church, unions, social groups are all important

because they bring people together and everyone has experience, and hopefully some understanding, of the lives of others and how political issues affect them. Social capital is in decline in western democracies as people focus on self and family and are less involved in group activity. To explain his title ...quot; people go bowling alone or with family now rather than with work colleagues or friends and thus have less social interaction.

Another strand of work seeking to explain changing levels of participation takes a rational choice approach and looks at the thinking and motivation of individuals. Most recent is Mark Franklin's (2004) study on voter turnout in established democracies since 1945. He argues that patterns of voter turnout are generational and change in relation to the competitiveness of the election when people could first vote. Competitiveness is important for a number of reasons. There is evidence that a sense of anger at the status quo, and vicariously the government responsible for it, leads voters to participate and to believe that their votes will count for something (Tolchin 1996). In addition, the closer the competition then the more electors will be exhorted for their vote because it could make the difference. Early experience of voting sets a pattern and view about the usefulness of voting. Voting will be repeated if it felt worthwhile and if the result was worth the costs of time and energy. Voters felt that they made a difference if they thought there was a real competition and if they understood how their vote influenced the result. Again the link back to ideas of efficacy, in this case external political efficacy.

Clearly ideas related to social capital and the rational choice arguments relate back to efficacy. Franklin's generational predisposition is based on external efficacy while Putnam's stress on involvement with others enhancing the relevance of politics links to aspects of internal political efficacy.

Participation encourages participation

A strong finding from Franklin's (2004) study was the persistence of early behaviour: those who voted when they first could were more likely to repeat the behaviour and those who did not vote were likely to not vote again. Surveys of non-voters consistently find that many are repeat non-voters. In the New Zealand 2002 post-election survey a third of Māori and a fifth of non-Māori non-voters said that they had not voted in the past either (Vowles et al, 2004). Some writers suggest that political participation leaves a psychological imprint on those who act (Green & Shachar, 2000). More pragmatically, those who have voted are familiar with the process whilst for some who have not there may be apprehension at what it entails (Horwitt, 1999) and embarrassment at admitting this lack of knowledge: 'Like internal efficacy, this orientation concerns one's self-confidence in a political environment' (Green & Shachar, 2000). In contrast participation by providing familiarity with the process increases confidence and thus internal efficacy (Finkel, 1985). The idea that repetition creates familiarity and confidence is commonplace.

There is also evidence that the practice of voting or not is passed across generations. Surveys in the UK and USA (Nestle, 2003; Horwitt, 1999) have found that non-voters are more likely to come from families of non-voters and that those who vote at their first election have memories of their parents voting. Discussion of politics at home also had an impact: 'Half of those who often talk to their parents about politics said they voted in 1998, compared to one quarter (26%) of those who talk to their parents about politics infrequently or never' (Horwitt, 1999). This study concludes that 'voting is developed as a habit. Some young people may start voting primarily out of the idealistic sense that their vote makes a difference; after an election or two, they begin to view voting as a duty and are much more likely to turn out to vote primarily because they feel it is something they *should do*. In this way, young people come to voting as a personal norm.'

Voting in itself is not the problem, as the numbers who routinely participate in TV votes for *Idol*, *Big Brother* or *Dancing with the Stars* demonstrate. The difference is motivation, an interest in the results, and the feeling that 'my vote can make a difference' (or in the case of the TV shows 'my votes can make a difference'). If you are not interested in the result then you are less likely to be motivated to vote.

Efficacy levels appear to be stable amongst adults, with analysis of surveys conducted with the same people over time showing little change in answers to the efficacy questions (Kenski & Jomini, 2000). External efficacy, trust in the government to be responsive is more likely to change than is internal efficacy, confidence in having the knowledge needed to vote. When people do switch from non-participation to participation then there is evidence that external efficacy increases (Finkel, 1985). Internal efficacy can change as people talk about politics, consume more media coverage of politics and gain knowledge (Kenski & Jomini, 2000). So efficacy can be a result of participation as well as a predictor of it giving a mobilisation effect (Allen, 2000). Even for those with lower efficacy, who would not normally participate then the experience of participation is likely to increase efficacy and thus future participation. There is clearly a strong argument from the political science literature that intervention which creates the experience of participation will enhance efficacy and foster future participation.

What can be done at school to bolster efficacy and participation?

The literature reviewed suggests that political participation is closely related to internal and external efficacy; that efficacy levels tend to be stable and self-enforcing; and that participation and efficacy are mutually reinforcing. Knowledge about political institutions also correlates strongly with the intention of voting (Torney-Purta et al, 2001). Of course, views and actions do change during adult life but teenagers' levels of efficacy and views about politics form a strong starting point for adult interaction with politics (Nestle, 2003). Early experiences seem to have a lasting impact on efficacy so school is one important environment where efficacy could be increased. If we want the vast majority of middle-aged people to be voters in the coming decades then we need to encourage young voters to participate now. If we want more young people to have an interest in politics and the confidence to participate then we have to persuade them that politics matters to them and that they can make a difference and ensure they know how to participate. One component is fostering a sense of belonging and being part of society. Students are members of the school community and the way that they feel able to act as citizens of that community has an impact on efficacy (Torney-Purta et al, 2001; Crick, 1998). There is also a need for knowledge or 'political literacy' as it is now called in England (Crick, 1998), as this quote from a non-voter indicates: 'I don't have any idea how you would change [policies]. Tell me, how can I change it? I might be willing to do something if I would know how to have an impact on it.' (Howitt, 1999).

School is one place where intervention can provide the experience of participation. The IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta et al, 2001) collected the views of over 90,000 14 year olds, their teachers and head teachers in 28 countries on citizenship and education issues. It suggested that the level of efficacy that students feel in the school environment has an important impact on their efficacy in relation to national politics: 'Young people daily experience the school as a social and political system. Solving problems that arise there in interaction with others can foster a sense of membership in this community' (p134). School efficacy was high amongst students who felt that they were encouraged to express their views at school and where students had a role in school councils or their decision making bodies. So experience of being treated as a citizen of the school was important in fostering an interest in politics and an intention to vote.

In England and Wales citizenship education was introduced with the aim of creating active and responsible participation from citizens and was expressly promoted as education for citizenship rather than just an end in itself (Crick 1998). As it only became a compulsory part of the curriculum in 2002 its success is not yet known but a large, longitudinal study is in place to track the impact of the curriculum (Kerr, 2003). In the USA citizenship education has been shown to increase efficacy levels (Madsen, 1978 and Kim & Parks, 1996).

Several studies, mostly in the USA, have gone further and considered the type of citizenship education most likely to increase efficacy and participation. The use of participation and active learning methods were shown to encourage later political participation and broader behaviour expected from active citizens (Beckerman, 1996; Hobson & Zack, 1993; Richardson 1993). Another study found 'statistically significant increases in students' ability and desire to understand and act on pressing social needs, in their willingness to devote time to addressing these needs, and in their confidence in being able to act on their beliefs as a result of their participation in these [social and community action and

involvement] programs' (Westheimer, 2003). Students with low efficacy often complained that their 'high school government classes involved mostly book-learning about history and institutions' and they were 'left with impressions of government and politics as things to be read about, memorized, and forgotten (Horwitt, 1999). Positive experiences in civic participation strengthened students' commitment to being involved and students linked their positive experiences to their desire for continued participation (Westheimer, 2003).

In a study of successful citizenship education in the USA three components were found to be important: promoting democratic commitments, capacities, and connections to others with similar goals (Westheimer, 2003). Commitment from the student occurs when they are interested in the issues and want to find out more and participate (internal efficacy). Capacities refer to the experience of the real skills needed to participate. These skills include information gathering, critical analysis, knowledge of the political system and how to plan action. Connection is with those in the community who are participating in the issue, to act as role models and to provide a real context: 'Students need to know that civic engagement is not an individual, private endeavour'.

Decision making, as a form of participation, is vital argues Allen (2000). He concludes that traditionally decisions have been presented as simple ('the king ordered the invasion of Slavic territories; President Roosevelt decided to impose a bank moratorium') rather than as a complex and contextual process. He suggests that 'Decision making viewed as process and performance permits us to see decision making as a model of conversation among citizens' and that 'From collective efforts, citizens emerge with a common history, stories of civic life together, and most often with renewed volition'. In other words, participation will enhance social capital, provide self-confidence and thus increase efficacy.

Westheimer asks 'Why would we expect students to commit to involvement if there are no problems in need of attention?' and notes that 'Schools provide opportunities "to know" but few opportunities "to do" -- an unfortunate oversight when it comes to fostering civic commitment.' Kerr (2003) similarly argues that another important component is treating students as citizens: 'It entails treating young people with respect and giving them meaningful fora in which their views can be aired and considered as part of the democratic process, whether in schools, in local communities or at national level.' Students will profit from the examination of school and community problems, using an active decision-making approach. Again the emphasis is on providing students with the experience of participation and being citizens.

Across the different studies there is a consistent theme of the need for a change in the way in which citizenship has been taught. In particular there is a stress on the need for students to experience citizenship. In the UK Crick argued that citizenship could be another body of knowledge to learn but was more importantly a chance to become an active citizen. USA studies report students seeing civics as another set of material to learn, be tested on and forget. The IEA study (Torney-Purta et al, 2001) found a marked difference in the number of students who could answer questions about their country's political institutions but could not successfully interpret a political pamphlet or cartoon. They also found that more teachers reported that they had taught the importance of voting and than students reported thinking that they had been taught the importance of voting. Consistently, across the 28 countries teachers said that they lacked good resources and materials and needed better subject training (p186).

The consensus seems to be that if we want citizenship education to create active citizens then it needs to provide positive experiences of real decision making on issues that matter to the students. Such experiences provide a good experience of participation (creating a habit), political literacy, self confidence in understand issue (internal efficacy) and the ability to make a difference (external efficacy) and links with others in society (social capital). Students who experience being citizens of their classroom, school and community are more likely to continue to act as citizens when they leave school. Those who vote the first time that they can are much more likely to continue political participation. Indications are that citizenship education can turn the tide but the longer we delay the more cohorts we will have of people who never acquire the habit of political participation.

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