1. Citizenship has a dual face: as a legal status as an equal consociate in a self-ruling polity and as a form of activity with others directed to the common good.

Addressing the first face, four trends are significant: (a) the collapse of the norm of single nationality (whereas in 1960 70% of states disallowed dual nationality, now 70% permit it), (b) the rapid spread of expatriate voting rights (nearly all the world’s democracies now have provisions for expatriate voting), (c) the gradual development of non-citizen voting rights, especially at local levels (but also at national levels – see New Zealand for most developed case), and (d) the emergence, at varying levels, of regional (supranational) citizenship or entitlements to civic statuses such as (in its most developed form) EU citizenship.

These trends point to what we might call the ‘transnationalization’ of the state which combines a recognition that the (civic) nation is not limited to the territory of the state and that the old citizen/alien distinction no longer adequately captures the range of civic statuses within the territory of the state and across states. In an increasingly globalised world, sustaining strong links with expatriate citizens (mobilising the economic and political support of diasporas) and engaging in inclusive integration of immigrant denizens is a sensible strategy for sustaining the ‘effective sovereignty’ of the state.

Addressing the second face, it is important to note that citizenship operates across local, regional subnational, national, supranational (EU) and transnational contexts. Civic engagement is not just a matter of local volunteering but also of acting in the different contexts in which one has civic standing (think for example of the importance of remittances from (and even to) the UK, or of the civil society organisations formed by expatriate citizens to act across borders). One of the great challenges today is that of enabling the reach and connectivity of civic activity across different contexts and not fixating on measuring engagement in one as if it was a way of measuring civic engagement as such. Two examples:

a) Many migrants do engage in civic action such as volunteer work in their local communities – whether this is UK citizens in France or non-UK EU (or non-EU) citizens in the UK – but many are also engaged through contemporary finance and communications technologies in transnational civic action in their ‘home’ states. Both home state and state of residence can support these activities or put obstacles in their way or, even, design mechanisms to link local and transnational action. What tends to happen is that states focus on civic action in their territory and overlook the wide forms of civic action that are going on.

b) If we consider the UK, a problem of citizenship in England is that it has a highly centralised state and a relatively weak local government structure (except perhaps in London and now Manchester, etc, with empowered mayors) so that there is no strong sense that local civic action or political involvement is effectively connected to the national level. The centralisation of political party structures has also supported the widespread sense of disempowerment at local levels, and devolution of party structures may also be an important part of re-engaging people in civic life. There is an important potential role for regional citizenship to mediate and connect
local and national levels but this is likely to require stronger forms of regional governance than currently exist.

In brief, citizenship in the 21st century is complex and messy – it runs across different contexts of governance and at different levels of governance – and characterised across OECD states, in ways that have supported the rise of populism, by a sense of disempowerment that, I think, needs politicians to worry less about values and rather more about empowerment. Unhealthy values will flourish in contexts where people feel disempowered, that their agency is ineffective.

What citizenship have to do with identity? Here we need to distinguish two issues. The first is that citizenship entails an identity – being British is a civic identity. The second is that the experience of citizenship, of one’s civic identity, is mediated through one’s other (social/cultural/economic/religious) identities. A key issue here is the relationship between one’s civic identity and one’s other identities, that is, whether one experiences one’s civic identity as being at odds with one’s cultural or religious identity or, indeed, as denigrating or demonizing that identity. One of the problems with talk of “British values” is that either these are so abstract as to be indistinguishable from the values of any liberal democratic states or they are given substance through a particular limited cultural thick interpretation of them that is parochial and acts as a mechanism for marginalizing other ways in which these abstract values can be manifest. What actually matters is that citizens have an effective sense of civic identity in the sense of identifying with the main social and political institutions of society, of valuing these institutions as a whole (which can be valued on the basis of a variety of different values!), and that requires that they experience themselves as included within them (this point applies to migrants, those in post-industrial wastelands, the elderly, etc.) – this is the sense of belonging that matters in a liberal democratic state. Pride in being or becoming British should be encouraged when it is reflective pride in these institutions, a pride which is exhibited not least by criticism of elements of them when they are failing to sustain an inclusive sense of belonging. (Nb. the patriotism of criticism and dissent is the reflective form of patriotism.) And rituals such as citizenship ceremonies can, done properly, be important – but only if the commitments made by the state in the ritual are not contradicted by the experiences of everyday life.

How can this be supported? Honest critical history in schools is important – acknowledging the mistakes and cruelties of the British state and trying to show where it has learned and improved on the basis of these errors, drawing attention to the role of the social and political struggles of excluded groups in changing the make-up of the state (the struggle for democracy, the struggle against empire) in a way that links civic activity to the increased legitimacy of the British state. Being able to participate in the vernacular of civic life is also important – and ideally free (or, if not, very subsidized) English language lessons for immigrants as a basic civic responsibility should be supported (even if making citizenship conditional on a language test is less justifiable). But there are also wider issues about social mixing that need to be addressed through longer range work on urban planning, schooling and making sure that we avoid spatial and job segregation in our society.

3. I see civic engagement as a duty – but would stress that civic engagement can take many forms. The partner who looks after the kids while the other partner attends a political meeting or does voluntary work or engages in a community meeting is enabling ‘civic work’ – one might push this point further and note that vast amounts of (typically gendered) care
work is done as unpaid labour and can be seen as ‘civic work’. So in this general respect, monitoring or enforcing civic engagement does not seem a plausible option. But there are some general forms of civic engagement that could be specific duties and could be relatively easily monitored and enforced. These are:

a) Compulsory voting.
b) National Civic Service.
c) The Duty to Work.

I’ll take each in turn.

a) The only good argument for compulsory voting is that it addresses the problem of a systematic lack of voting by the most disadvantaged members of society. Since we know that if people do not vote in the first 2-3 national elections that they are eligible for, they are likely never to vote, one way of addressing this point is to make voting compulsory for the first 2-3 elections that you can vote in. Personally I have no problem with unrestricted compulsory voting on condition that the ballot also includes ‘None of the Above’ so that political parties (a) cannot claim a spurious legitimacy from the exclusion of this option and (b) because it would incentivize political parties to make their manifestos have general appeal and not simply appeal to those currently likely to vote.

b) National Civic Service, e.g., as something done between 18-25 as chosen by individual, if it is properly designed with a wide range of options may be worth serious consideration not only for its civic character but also for its potential role in social mixing, that is in exposing people to others of different classes, ethnicities, sexualities, etc. Given the degree to which social fragmentation into niche groups (reinforced by social media) is prevalent in contemporary society and supports the formation of social stereotypes, the ‘enforced’ mixing of national civic service might be one counterforce to the fact that traditional sites of social mixing (church, pub, party) have suffered significant decline.

c) The Duty to Work – this is more tentative and depends importantly on the state being willing to take up the role of ‘employer of last resort’ but done sensitively it would acknowledge both that one important civic duty is to contribute through work and that work is an important social source of self-respect.

4. It seems to me to make sense to have a lower voting age for local elections than national elections both as a training ground and because votes at local elections are more likely to show the direct effect of voting and hence support participatory disposition.

I would also universalize the franchise in local voting for all (non-transient – c.6 months) residents as many states have already done – municipal governance largely concerns services to residents and all residents should be entitled to a say on how their schools, roads, hospitals, etc. are governed. This would also thereby provide an initial civic basis for the political integration of immigrants.

It is a problem with the FPTP system that vast numbers of people either experience their vote as wasted or feel constrained to vote for the ‘least bad’ option from their political standpoint. Adopting a proportional system (not AV) would provide a way of addressing this that is urgently needed as a matter of engaging people both by allowing new political parties, including regional political parties, to emerge and by pushing existing political
parties to be less lazy and less focused on marginal constituencies. FPTP may have made sense in an age where parties mapped straightforwardly on core social cleavages but it now distorts our political system in a way that threatens the basis of representative democracy (cf. Peter Mair, Ruling the Void) and is likely only to encourage political extremism.

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