Executive summary

The benefits accrued by an engaged and active citizenry are widely known and have a significant impact on society. For some time, scholars and policy-makers have recognised that a wide range of activities fulfil important social and political functions and can have a positive effect on the lives of the individuals taking part. Civic engagement of this kind is also a fundamental principle of citizenship, an underpinning element of a healthy democracy, and is important in the development of cohesive, tolerant communities.

Despite this, recent evidence points to a decline in civic engagement in many countries. In general terms, people are less likely to become involved in civic life across a wide range of different activities. Recent survey evidence has traced a decline in electoral turnout, civic activism, volunteering and numerous other settings for civic action.

This is troubling in itself but the real issue is the fact that participation is highly stratified in favour of the most affluent groups in society. Put simply, people living on lower incomes are far less likely to vote, volunteer, become involved in their communities, or participate in a number of activities that would be associated with an engaged and vibrant citizenry. This inequality in civic participation is supported by a wealth of research evidence and has serious implications for the health of democracy, and of society at large.

There are solutions to these problems. Recent evidence suggests that targeted initiatives focused on increasing civic engagement in deprived areas can have a positive effect on the level of engagement. Investment in the civic infrastructure of deprived areas can also pay dividends and help arrest the decline of civic engagement.

The evidence presented here suggests that:

- A significant and problematic divide in civic engagement exists on the basis of socio-economic status.

- This disparity in participation has a wide range of negative impacts on society, both for individuals, communities and for the quality of government.

- Previous attempts to encourage civic participation have met with mixed success because they generally fail to address the problem of inequality in participation.

- Some areas of the country maintain social structures which inhibit participation. These are usually areas of high deprivation.
Targeting resources and democratic innovations on deprived neighbourhoods like these is essential if attempts to promote civic engagement are to be successful. A focus on developing the civic capacity of deprived areas might also prove valuable.

A fuller account of the points made here can be found in Rod Dacombe, *Civic Participation in Theory and Practice*, London: Palgrave, 2017.
I What is civic engagement? And why is it valued?

1.1 The foundation of a healthy democracy is the engagement of citizens in a wide range of activities which serve to underpin both the functioning of government and a cohesive society. Established thought on citizenship and democracy holds that it is only through engagement in civic life that individuals can realise their potential as citizens, and a high level of civic participation is prized as an indicator of strong democratic performance.

1.2 There are many forms of civic engagement. At one end of the spectrum we might think of formal political action such as voting, organised protests, signing a petition or writing to an elected representative. Other forms, such as participation in voluntary associations, engagement in community activities or informal civic action, are less obviously connected to the formal structures of democracy but are nonetheless still important to the proper functioning of society.

1.3 Coherent and effective democratic societies rely on a multiplicity of different kinds of engagement. Indeed, a diverse and vibrant civic life has been demonstrated to be essential to democracy – declining citizen participation is a strong indicator of poor democratic health. It is therefore a cause of concern that participation in many forms of civic activity has consistently fallen since the latter half of the twentieth century.

1.4 In order to understand the true extent of its importance, it is important to clearly spell out the range of benefits associated with participation in civic life. There are numerous values associated with an engaged citizenry that have been understood from the earliest writing on democracy. These have now been empirically-verified through decades of research and include (but are not limited to) the following.

1.5 Civic engagement has clear benefits for government. Where citizens are engaged with public decision-making the actions of government reflect a greater plurality of views resulting in better-designed and more efficient public services. Similarly, citizens involved in this kind of activity tend to have more confidence in the workings of public agencies and feel a sense of confidence that government officials are working for them.

1.6 There are also benefits that can be accrued by the individuals involved. Civic engagement has been associated with better employment prospects, educational attainment and health outcomes. It also has an educative function, and through involvement in civic life, individuals learn a wide range of skills which allow them to better engage with other areas of public life. In short, civic engagement makes better citizens.

1.7 Beyond this, there are also wider social gains that can be made based on the increasing the reserves of social capital in society that result from a more engaged populace. Civic engagement is associated with greater levels of tolerance, better knowledge of public affairs, and higher levels of trust and reciprocity across society. In all, the overwhelming weight of evidence points to a series of benefits associated with civic participation which are felt in numerous areas of social and political life.

II The Problem of Inequality in Civic Engagement

2.1 Despite the importance of these activities, it must be said that civic life in the UK is in poor health. Civic participation in the UK has dropped dramatically in recent years. For instance, interest in public affairs has declined markedly since the turn of the century. People are today less likely to attend public meetings, sign petitions and demonstrate a working knowledge of public
issues. Voting and democratic participation has been experiencing a broad period of decline (particularly in local politics). Formal volunteering has fallen, declining by 15% in the last decade. Community activism can often be the preserve of a very few committed individuals, rather than diffused throughout society.

2.2 From a democratic perspective these indicators of declining civic participation might not be of particular concern if they occurred uniformly across all social groups. But the overwhelming weight of evidence tells us that this is not the case, and in fact civic participation is highly polarised. Although there are distinctions in the level of participation between a wide range of social groups, the most emphatic finding of the research in this area is of stark inequalities in civic engagement based on socio-economic status (SES). In short, people living on higher incomes, with higher levels of educational attainment, in white collar employment and exhibiting a wide range of other indicators of high SES are far more likely to participate in almost every form of civic engagement.

2.3 Research evidence suggests this is the case across almost all forms of civic action. People living in high income households are twice as likely to engage in civic activity than people on low incomes. Figures from the Office of National Statistics suggest that 57% of adults in England and Wales with annual household incomes of £75,000 or more participated in formal volunteering; nearly twice the proportion of those living in a household with an income of £10,000 or less. These inequalities in participation are deeply problematic, and constitute nothing short of a crisis in democracy in the UK.

2.4 When it comes to formal democratic participation, recent decades have seen the emergence of a significant divide in electoral turnout on the basis of social class. As is the case with other forms of citizen engagement, the distinctions between voters and non-voters on the basis of SES has increased significantly over recent years, and there are few indications that this is changing.

2.5 This is a fairly new phenomenon. Until relatively recently, turnout at General Elections was consistently high across all SES groups, exceeding 80 per cent in the 1980s. However, recent elections have revealed a stark, and increasing differentiation of the electorate, with turnout amongst the poorest in the UK declining at a faster rate than other social groups, and remaining consistently lower.

2.6 The corollary of all this is that civic engagement in the UK is increasingly polarised. This problem is supported by clear research evidence and should not be understated. Indeed, the worsening divide in citizen participation constitutes nothing more than a crisis of democratic and social life in the UK.

III The Consequences of Inequality in Civic Engagement

3.1 There are numerous consequences that follow from the situation sketched above. The underlying problem is obvious but worth restating: given the numerous benefits that recent research has associated with civic participation, it is deeply concerning that these are less likely to be enjoyed by the poorest groups in society.

3.2 Low participation amongst deprived social groups results in clear democratic problems. At the 2010 General Election 75% of the richest citizens in the UK voted, in comparison with 53% of the poorest. The resulting lack of electoral voice given to the poorest has significant consequences:
research evidence suggests that the preferences of the wealthy are more likely to be reflected in policy outcomes than other SES groups.

3.3 There are also effects of the disengagement of the very poorest that are felt on the structure of society in the UK. The most deprived citizens are less likely to enjoy the opportunity to develop the kinds of civic skill required to advance in public life. Consequently, the majority of elected officials, senior positions within the judiciary, the diplomatic service and FTSE 100-listed directors are comprised of people from high-SES backgrounds.

3.4 But this is not simply a matter of representation and democratic control. These issues actually raise wider problems for individuals, for society, and for good government. If the benefits associated with civic engagement are not enjoyed by the most deprived groups in society, then the development of the norms of tolerance, civic-mindedness and positive orientation towards the actions of government will similarly be concentrated amongst the wealthiest groups.

3.5 As a result, the social potential of people living in deprived areas is not realised, with the opportunities and voice associated with civic engagement concentrated amongst the best-off. Low civic engagement amongst the poor can be linked to health inequalities, educational disadvantage and disconnection from the labour market. Put another way, low civic engagement can be seen as part of the condition of poverty.

IV Tackling turnout inequality

4.1 Despite the weight of the research findings presented above, there are ways to effectively address these problems. The existing evidence points to a series of interventions which, if properly implemented, can encourage participation amongst the poorest citizens, and can develop civic infrastructure in deprived areas.

4.2 However, change is needed. Recent attempts to increase civic engagement have consistently failed to affect participation amongst the most deprived groups. A wide range of different initiatives have been put in place over recent years. Attempts have been made to promote citizenship education, specific social groups have been the target of initiatives aimed at increasing turnout, and nationally-focused attempts at increasing the level of volunteering have been put in place. Initiatives like these have failed to arrest the decline of participation amongst deprived groups.

4.3 Any attempt to encourage civic engagement needs to confront the issue of inequalities in participation. Broad brush initiatives aimed at tackling the decline of citizen engagement in general are unlikely to succeed and may be counter productive.

4.4 Civic education programmes, and participation schemes which are not focused in this way risk exacerbating the problem. Inequalities in civic engagement might actually be increased by such schemes as they are usually most effective amongst the wealthiest citizens. By providing more opportunities for participation, many public engagement schemes simply end up increasing levels of participation amongst these groups, widening the divide in participation between rich and poor.

4.5 Instead, attention needs to be focused on deprived communities. The evidence suggests that two strategies can be effective here: targeted public engagement schemes, and investment in civic infrastructure.
4.6 Participation schemes focused on deprived areas can be a low cost-high gain means of addressing these issues. They work when targeted on specific problems - evidence exists for the benefits of community policing schemes, participatory budgeting programmes, local school initiatives, alongside a wide range of other initiatives (Fung and Wright, 2001).

4.7 Each of these schemes shares similar features. First there is a commitment on the part of the public agencies involved to genuinely engage citizens in decision-making, rather than simply consult. This has been demonstrated to maximise the benefits of citizen involvement while increasing citizen confidence that their participation is making a difference (Fung, 2004).

4.8 Second, successful programmes generally involve a degree of co-design at an early stage. 'Top down' solutions do not work well in deprived neighbourhoods. Too often, participation schemes are presented to citizens as complete, with questions over scope, format, location and so on settled before local people are involved. Recent studies have shown that the design of civic engagement schemes is critical to the inclusion of disadvantaged people, and that many widely-accepted practises serve to exclude these groups (Dacombe, 2017).

4.9 Finally, such schemes need to be sustained over time, and citizen participation should become an accepted part of the work of public agencies. The most successful examples of such initiatives are able to make civic engagement a part of everyday life in deprived communities.

4.10 Maintaining regular participation over time in this way has a number of benefits. The results of participation can be communicated to participants, holding public agencies to account and increasing citizen confidence that their participation is effective. Sustained participation also means that initiatives can work as 'schools for civic engagement', increasing the participants' knowledge of the issues addressed and also developing a wider range of important skills such as public speaking, the ability to understand complex arguments, and budgeting. Successful schemes can also broaden participation over time, as more citizens come into contact with the work of the scheme.

4.11 Alongside targeted initiatives such as these, the potential for increasing civic engagement in deprived communities is increased by investment in the civic infrastructure of areas exhibiting high levels of poverty.

4.12 Research has shown that deprived areas can often lack the kinds of physical and social structure necessary to foster civic engagement: the number of voluntary organisational based in such areas tends to be low, communal facilities are often lacking and organisational infrastructure such as shops and leisure facilities are missing.

4.13 Deprived areas like these are often described as suffering from 'concentration effects' of the poverty suffered by their residents, where the cumulative effects of deprivation mean that the opportunities for engagement are far more limited than in areas where the social profile is more diverse. In short, it isn't simply having a low income that is the issue – rather, the root cause of the problem lies in the combination of factors affecting areas suffering from high levels of deprivation. This evidenced by the spatial data on deprivation, which indicates pockets of intense deprivation corresponding to areas exhibiting low levels of civic engagement.
4.14 Tackling this problem is complex but effective steps can be as simple as opening up public spaces and buildings for community use, or publicising volunteering opportunities to local people – both approaches successfully employed in recent years.

4.16 It might also involve investment in local voluntary organisations. Using local councillors’ discretionary funds to provide grants to support informal community activities is one way to address this issue. Similarly, investment in the capacity of voluntary organisation through training in areas such as grant applications and accounting has proven successful.

4.17 Initiatives like these work because participation is a habit. Gains made in some areas of civic life can be felt elsewhere. People who volunteer are more likely to vote, become active in civic affairs and become more generally involved in community activities.

4.18 To conclude, the crisis in civic engagement can be addressed. But only if it is correctly diagnosed and the problems of inequality of participation positioned at the core of any attempt to tackle the decline in participation that has been traced in recent years. Introducing targeted programmes aimed at increasing civic participation in deprived areas can be effective, as can investment in civic infrastructure. But without steps such as these, the crisis outlined in this submission can only worsen.

References


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