

Culture, Participation and Civil Renewal

Social capital and civil renewal

The increased appreciation for the value of an active civic life comes from several sources:

Academic

- A revival of interest in ‘civic republican’ thought and practice, which has always prized civic and political participation.
- Interest in the importance of social capital generated by Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000).

Practical

- Wide acknowledgement that neither the state nor the market can solve social problems alone; that individuals are best off where they can rely on the help of friends and the goodwill of fellow citizens; and that public services work best where the public takes an active role in them.
- Recognition that regeneration that focuses only on improving the physical infrastructure and built environment of an area or investing money into its public services will rarely prove enough to regenerate the communities that live in it: it is also essential to strengthen local communal bonds and civic life.

Bowling Alone?

Much research and policy thinking in this area has been stimulated by Putnam’s work on **social capital**. This can be characterised roughly as:

the social ties and shared values or norms, such as trust and reciprocity, that facilitate co-operation to mutual advantage.

Putnam has stressed that not all forms of social capital are positive: close social ties among people of a similar type (‘bonding social capital’) can be used to exclude ‘outsiders’ and sustain privilege. It needs to be complemented by networks that link people of different backgrounds (‘bridging social capital’). But at the most general level, researchers have convincingly linked high levels of social capital with low levels of crime, unemployment, ill health, mental illness, corruption and government inefficiency.

Putnam tends to emphasise the value of bonds of trust and co-operation between ordinary citizens (‘horizontal social capital’). Recent government thinking and policy in the UK, however, while affirming the importance of horizontal bonds, also stress the importance of habits of participation in political affairs and public services (‘linking social capital’). So when policymakers talk about promoting **active citizenship** or **civil renewal**, they mean both **strengthening bonds of trust and co-operation between people and increasing public participation in civic and political life**.

Three types of social capital

Type of social capital	Type of participation	Contributes to
Bonding Ties among people who are similar to each other in certain respects (age, sex, ethnicity, class)	Horizontal	Social support, especially in times of ill fortune such as poor health, bereavement or victimisation
Bridging Ties among people who are different from one another	Horizontal	Social cohesion, democratic dialogue, civic identity
Linking Ties with those in authority	Vertical	Democratic life, responsive in services, legitimacy of public institutions

Adapted from Véronique Jochum, Belinda Pratten and Karl Wilding *Civil renewal and active citizenship: a guide to the debate*, NCVO, 2005

The role of culture

While research and debate about social capital and civil renewal have flourished over the last decade, there has been little systematic investigation of the contribution that heritage and art might make to these. When policymakers talk about promoting active citizenship, they tend to cite the need to do more to increase public involvement in reducing crime or improving schools, rather than engaging people in book clubs or conservation societies. The ‘civil renewal agenda’ has tended to be set by the Home Office and other ‘hard’ government departments.

Yet the cultural sector is well positioned to contribute to community life and active citizenship:

- The UK has long and still vibrant traditions of amateur cultural activity, including popular or working class cultural activity.
- Cultural initiatives can engage people who are otherwise hard to engage – people with learning disabilities and those suffering from mental illness, offenders and those who have dropped out of school.
- Culture alone can build the sort of identities of place and interest on which shared civic endeavour depends.

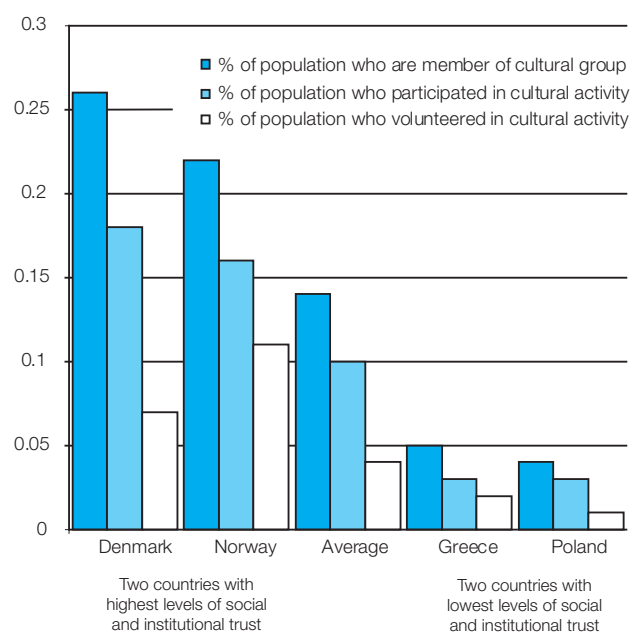
New findings from ippr

ippr research demonstrates that:

- countries with higher levels of cultural engagement also have higher levels of social and institutional trust.
- people who participate in cultural activities are more likely than the average UK citizen to believe that other people are fair, helpful and can be trusted, and to have trust in the police, legal system, politicians and Parliament.

These relationships remain even after controlling for other factors, including income and education. So where two groups are alike in terms of education or income but one is made up of people who participate in cultural activities and the other of people who do not, the group that participates will be more trusting than the group that does not.

Cultural engagement across countries

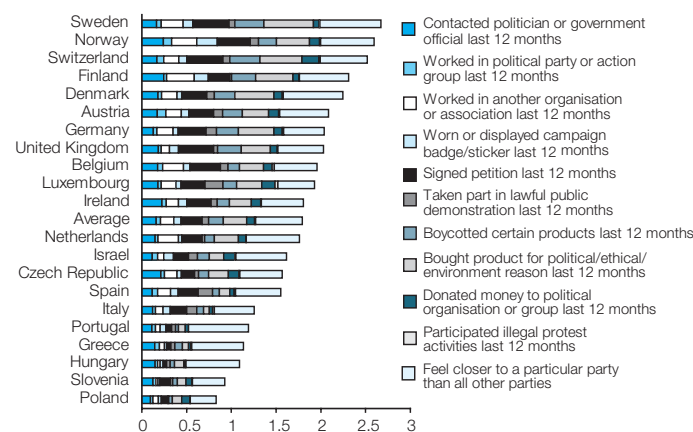


Participation in the UK

It is often assumed that overall levels of active citizenship have fallen in the UK. In fact, volunteering appears to have held up well, as has membership of civic organisations. At the same time, some trends provide cause for concern:

- While there is no crisis of civic participation in the UK, we are far from a top-ranking performer – see graph below.

Civic participation across countries

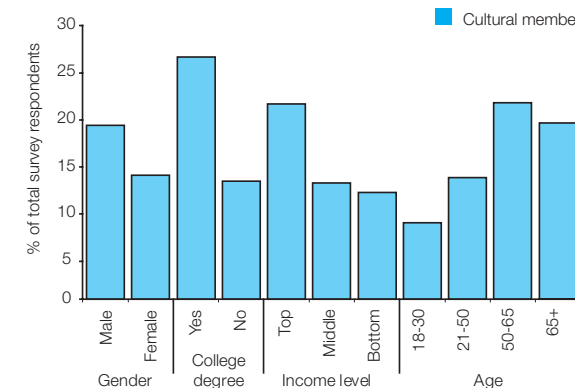


- The UK has experienced dramatic falls in levels of formal political participation, with voting, political party membership and confidence in the political system all in steep decline.
- Participation appears to be taking an increasingly class profile. The withering of many active working-class institutions over the past 20 years, along with growing activism among the middle classes, appears to have created a significant ‘participation gap’. Those in the highest socio-economic group, for instance, are twice as likely to volunteer formally as those in the lowest socio-economic group.

Cultural participation in the UK

Patterns of cultural participation appear to mirror this broader pattern: while overall levels of cultural participation are quite high, they have a distinct class bias. Membership of cultural groups is concentrated in the more affluent and educated sections of society and it is probably still true that the middle classes benefit most from publicly subsidised art and heritage. Encouragingly, though, other evidence demonstrates that the picture is more mixed when it comes to sex and ethnicity, and members of minority ethnic groups are actually *more* likely than their ‘white’ counterparts to be members of cultural organisations.

Socio-demographic profile of membership



Right tools for the right job

Cultural institutions, of course, exist to do many things other than promote associational life. Furthermore, some sorts of organisations and initiatives will be much better suited to engaging citizens and building connections than others. As Geoff Mulgan has argued in a new ippr paper, *Culture, creativity, community and civil renewal*:

‘care is needed in designing a cultural dimension into any strategy for community renewal. It is not culture per se but rather particular kinds of cultural activity that make the difference. Far more clarity is needed as to which problems are being solved, why and with what tools.’

As a general rule, initiatives that bring people together and actively engage them in ‘doing’ art or heritage, or involve them in running arts and heritage organisations, will do more for civil renewal than initiatives that engage people alone, or cast them in the role of ‘viewers’ and ‘listeners’. Local, community-based, organisations are probably better placed to engage people and support voluntary and amateur activity than regional or national ones – though these too have a role to play.

Challenges for the cultural sector

Arts and heritage activities already make an important contribution to our civic life, but it is clear that the cultural sector could do more. In the future, cultural bodies need to ask themselves four sets of questions:

Has our organisation reviewed how it could contribute to civil renewal? Could we benefit from a strategy to promote social capital and active citizenship? Are we missing opportunities to boost public engagement in civil life?

Should we be developing strategies to promote greater community or amateur involvement in cultural activity? Are we engaging people just as visitors, viewers and listeners or are we encouraging them to become practitioners? Are we maximising the use of volunteers, supporting them, and making good use of their time?

Are we doing enough to engage the public in the governance of our body? Are we giving them a chance to make their voice heard? Are our governors drawn from beyond the usual suspects? Could we make use of new democratic processes – citizen’s juries, web-based forums – to inform our decisions and make ourselves accountable?

Are we doing enough to promote civil renewal among disadvantaged and marginalised groups? People from socially excluded groups and communities have most to gain from arts and heritage activity, but do we have strategies to engage them in our work and governance?

briefing



This briefing is based on a forthcoming ippr report by Emily Keaney, [From Access to Participation: Cultural Policy and Civil Renewal](#), which will be available to purchase shortly. To do so please visit www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports or call Central Books on 0845 458 9910 or ippr publications on 020 7470 6123.

For background papers by Emily Keaney and Liam Delaney, and by Geoff Mulgan, go to www.ippr.org.uk/policyareas and choose 'arts, culture, media and sport'.

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New ippr research

These days politicians and policy researchers from across the political spectrum tend to agree on the importance of promoting strong communities and encouraging civic life. Terms like 'social capital', 'civil renewal', 'active communities' and 'active citizenship' jostle for space in political speeches, government papers and comment pieces. The creation of the Civil Renewal Unit and an Active Citizenship Centre within the Home Office testifies to the importance the Government attaches to 'the civil renewal agenda'.

The role that heritage and arts can play in strengthening communal bonds and empowering citizens, however, has often been neglected. This briefing paper, which draws on a year-long ippr research project, looks at the relevance of the 'civil renewal' agenda to cultural policy and explores the contribution that cultural participation does or could make to our civic life.

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