

# Pathways through participation

What creates and sustains active citizenship?



## Briefing paper no.3 - Who participates? The actors of participation

### Introduction

The Pathways through Participation project aims to explore how and why people get involved and stay involved in different forms of participation over the course of their lives. It seeks to increase knowledge of people's pathways into and through participation, and improve understanding of the factors that shape their participation over time.

The project team has completed a literature review bringing together different bodies of literature on participation, which have previously been viewed in isolation. The review focuses predominantly on community development, volunteering and public participation, but we also refer to literature on social movements, everyday politics and ethical consumption.

This briefing is the third in a series of summaries highlighting some of the key points to come out of the review. It focuses on the actors of participation – the individuals who participate in various activities and to varying degrees.

### Who participates, in what?

In the current policy context participation is usually portrayed as a 'good thing', offering a range of collective and individual benefits. At the individual level, research has shown that participation can increase people's social capital (i.e. their social ties and connections) as well as their confidence and sense of self-determination, and contribute to their overall well-being. But who actually participates and benefits from participation? The boxes that follow briefly summarise the literature on who is most likely to participate in a few example activities<sup>1</sup>:

- Formal volunteering
- Charitable giving
- Voter/ traditional public participation
- Online public participation
- Local-level public participation
- Consumer activism.

#### The formal volunteer

*gives unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment (e.g. prison visitor, conservation volunteer, charity shop volunteer, school governor, local magistrate).*

- Opportunities to volunteer formally are very wide-ranging, and the demographics of volunteers vary by activity. Generally speaking however, the most active formal volunteers are within the age bracket 35-64.
- Those in the 18-24 age group register relatively low volunteering figures, and their participation has been decreasing for some time.
- Women are more likely to volunteer than men, whether they volunteer on a regular basis or more episodically.
- BME groups have been identified as participating less in formal volunteering. However, levels of involvement vary significantly between ethnic groups.
- There seems to be a positive relationship between religious practice and formal volunteering. However, social-class related factors (e.g. educational attainment and housing tenure) have an equal or bigger impact on levels of volunteering than religious practice.
- The higher qualification level achieved, the more likely the individual is to volunteer.
- Formal volunteering also increases with level of employment: those in managerial positions volunteer more than those in intermediate and routine occupations.

<sup>1</sup> Fuller profiles with figures and references to research findings are available in the [literature review](#)

**The charitable giver**

*donates money to charitable causes.*

- The youngest adults (age 16-24) are noticeably less likely to donate, and donate proportionately less when they do.
- Women are consistently more likely than men to donate. Single, childless women are particularly likely to give, as are all child-free households.
- Although BME groups are far less likely to donate to a charity or campaigning organisation, they are more likely to donate at a place of worship and to people begging. Asian people are most likely to give to overseas aid and disaster relief.
- The higher the educational qualifications attained, the more likely the individual is to give. Those in managerial and professional positions have a higher propensity to give too. However, when lower income households give, they donate a larger proportion of their income.
- There is often a positive correlation between religious practice and giving.

**The voter/traditional public participant**

*participates in 'traditional' public participation activities such as voting, contacting an elected representative, being a party member etc.*

- The most active are those in mid- to later life. At the last general election, for example, older voters far outnumbered younger voters.
- Men and women tend to participate in relatively equal numbers overall, however the proportion of women holding elected decision-making posts is still unrepresentative of the adult population as a whole. Under a third of councillors are female, for instance.
- People from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups tend to participate less than white people, particularly voting in general elections, where BME voter non-registration is much higher than for white people.
- Those in higher income and socio-economic brackets are more likely to vote and engage in other traditional political activities than lower earners and socio-economic groups.

**The online public participant**

*participates in public participation activities via the internet and other information and communication technologies.*

- Participation online mirrors offline participation: the well-educated and the high-earners are more likely to engage in online activities.
- Although retired people are less likely to use the internet than other groups, they are more likely to be civically engaged online.
- Young people's rates of engagement in online politics far outstrip their engagement in traditional forms.

**The consumer activist**

*makes ethical consumer choices such as purchasing fair-trade goods and boycotting products.*

- The most committed ethical consumers tend to be in the 30-44 age range. However, the 18-29 age group is most likely to seek information on a company's behaviour when making a consumer decision.
- In the past, research suggested that those in the 60+ age group were less likely to be committed ethical consumers. However, more recent research concludes that there is no longer a 'typical' age of ethical consumers, and the evidence suggests the age demographic of ethical consumers might be in transition.
- Some studies point to a positive female skew of 'concerned consumers'. However, this positive skew has not been confirmed in more recent studies.
- Research in the late 1990s identified the typical organic customer to be an educated, affluent professional, in social group AB and shopping at upper-end supermarkets. More recent research is questioning such findings suggesting a 'levelling out' of ethical consumerism between social groups.
- Research also suggests that educational attainment and income do not appear to be a factor in people's everyday consumer choices in the way they once were.

**The local-level public participant**

*participates in activities such as attending local authority consultation meetings or completing a questionnaire about local issues such as town planning, health and transport.*

- As well as being predominantly white and older, the most actively involved are found to be the more affluent, and male.
- Those living in rural areas have also been identified as more likely to engage in civic consultation exercises.
- Participation in decision-making varies according to the issue at stake. The NHS National Centre for Involvement indicates that young people, faith-groups and other 'hard-to-reach' groups were involved in most trusts' participation exercises on the planning and delivery of healthcare services.

## The 'typical' participant?

The different activities that we have looked at tend to attract a certain profile of people as the table below shows. In many of these activities, the well-resourced, i.e. the educated, the employed, the affluent, as well as those identified as white and older, seem particularly active. This is especially true of public participation, however this profile of the 'typical' participant does not dominate all participatory activities. For instance, younger, religiously affiliated females donate more of their disposable income to charitable causes. And a typical participant is much harder to determine within individual activities in everyday spaces, for example, in ethical consumption. Also, although BME communities are relatively inactive in formal governance roles and other forms of public participation, they traditionally participate more informally, between individuals and households, rather than in an organisational setting. Likewise the youngest adults in

society, although less involved in traditional politics, are some of the most active in virtual participatory spaces, both politically and socially.

## The inequality of participation

Despite the lack of a static typical participant across a wide range of participatory activities, the three main national surveys on participation (the Citizenship Survey, The Audit of Political Engagement and the Helping Out Survey) have all highlighted disparities between activity levels across age groups, socio-economic status and ethnicity. From these surveys and the literature more generally emerges a picture of the younger, non-white and lower socio-economic groups participating in a much less intense way across many forms of activities, raising some important questions about the voices in society that are not being heard and the inequality of participation.

The typical participant	In summary
The formal volunteer...	is more likely to be female, of a higher social grade, in a managerial position, degree educated, and middle aged.
The charitable giver...	is likely to be professional, white, female, above the age of 24, religious and living in a childless household. Higher earners are more likely to give, but not proportionally to their income.
The voter/traditional public participant...	is more likely to be white, aged 65 and above, middle class, professional higher earner.
The online public participant...	is more likely to be well educated, and from a marginally higher social grade.
The local-level public participant...	is more likely to be white, older, better educated, richer, middle-class.
The consumer activist...	is more likely to be younger and female although recent studies contradict this. Traditional assumptions that high-earners shop ethically are also being challenged.

## Further reading

To download the literature review (which includes a detailed reference list) and to comment, go to <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/2010/01/understanding-participation-a-literature-review/>

For more information on the Pathways through Participation project or to subscribe to our newsletter visit the website <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk>  
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