Civic Participation

On Active Citizenship, Social Capital and Public Policy

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Traditionally, the term 'civic participation' has been associated with activities related to formal political rights and responsibilities. These rights include activities such as voting, affiliation to political parties, participating in electoral campaigns, contacting politicians, writing letters to government representatives, becoming a candidate in an election, and the like. The responsibilities include being aware of parties' platforms, following political debates in the news, critically analyzing those platforms and debates, and expressing freely political opinions while listening carefully to those who disagree.

In recent times, civic participation has been conceptualized in broader terms, and it is often related to other basic civic responsibilities like obeying the law, ensuring that the law is properly enacted, and promoting changes in the law whenever it fits. It also encompasses other fundamental civic duties like keeping communities clean and safe, protecting the environment, helping neighbours in need, putting the common good ahead of self-interest, eliminating discrimination and injustice, and respecting other people's rights.

Beyond these individual rights and responsibilities, civic participation is also extended to a wider set of activities that entail active involvement in community (civic) life. In this regard, it includes active participation (and not only membership) in organizations such as hobby groups, service clubs, sports and recreation organizations, school councils, environmental groups, heritage associations, neighbourhood associations, international solidarity groups, or political organizations. Moreover, civic participation is also about the active and respectful engagement in collective processes of deliberation and decision-making on matters that affect our lives. In this sense, civic participation relates to the link between the citizen and public policy.

This understanding of civic participation is consistent with the two key dimensions of citizenship noted by Kymlicka and Norman: as legal status (full membership in a particular political community), and as a desirable activity (the extent and quality of one's participation in that community). It is also consistent with the notion of citizenship endorsed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In their booklet *A Look at Canada*, produced for people applying for citizenship, we are told that "being a Canadian citizen is more than voting and obeying laws" because "being a citizen also means getting involved in your community and your country" (p. 31). Then, the text outlines ways in which people can participate to make Canada a better place. Examples include joining community groups, volunteering to work on election campaigns, helping neighbours, working with others in solving community problems, and becoming a candidate in an election.

The effective enactment of citizenship requires both distributive policies and enabling structures that promote people's engagement. One is not enough. An egalitarian society does not produce necessarily an active citizenry, and a participatory society does not necessarily lead to more equality. Indeed, it is possible to have active participation without equality of status, as in classic Athens, where civic participation was high, but it was restricted to male property owners. At the same time, a relative high degree of egalitarianism can coexist with low civic participation, as it happened in some twentieth century socialist societies and welfare state systems. In short, equality of condition and active participation feed each other in building an inclusive and engaged society, and both require appropriate public policies and institutional designs.

It is not only that civic participation go beyond political participation, but also that political participation represents only a small portion of civic and community participation. According to the last national survey of giving, volunteering and participating (published in a report entitled *Caring and Involved Canadians*), less than 3% of the Canadian population over the age of 15 are involved in political organizations. This pales in comparison to engagement in work-related organizations like unions or professional associations (21%), sports and recreation associations (18%), religious organizations (13%), community or school-related groups (10%), cultural, educational and hobby-related (10%), or service clubs and fraternal organizations (8%). Moreover, longitudinal data on Canada suggests that participation in political organizations is declining, while participation in social and community organizations is rising.

The choice of community participation over formal political participation is particularly noticeable among youth. A study undertaken by the Harvard University Institute of Politics in 2000 with college students in the U.S.A. found that political involvement was low but community volunteerism was high, and that youngsters were seeking new ways to solve local and national problems. The findings of the study show that students chose community volunteerism over political involvement as the preferred means of civic participation: 85% claimed that community volunteerism is a better way than political engagement to solve important issues facing their communities, and 86% stated that volunteering in the community is easier than volunteering in politics. Not only easier, they say, but also more pleasant: 97% believed "enjoyment of

activity" is an effective factor in motivating them, but only 7% strongly agreed that political activity is enjoyable. These attitudes translate into action. Whereas 60% of college students were or had been involved in community service during the past year, only 16% had joined a government, political or issues related organization, and a mere 7% had volunteered or planned to volunteer in a political campaign. Similar findings were reported in another study conducted in 1999 by the League of Women Voters. This study found that in the U.S.A. more young people preferred to volunteer than vote: while only 32% youth voted in 1996 and less than one in five voted in 1998, more than half (51%) of them wanted to become more involved in community and volunteer activities.

The interest for community participation seems to be higher than the interest for political participation, and it may be on the increase, but it is still below past levels. Putnam reports that between 1973 and 1994, the number of people in the U.S.A. who took any leadership role in any organization decreased by more than 50%. Attendance in club meetings also decreased, from 12 club meetings on average per year in the seventies to five club meetings on average per year in the nineties. The time devoted to organizational life also fell during the same period, decreasing from 3.7 hours per month in 1965 to 2.9 hours per month in 1975, and to 2.3 hours per month in 1985. Putnam also reports that civic engagement expressed in participation in town meetings or school affairs showed a decline of about 40% over the last twenty years. For the Canadian case, the *Caring and Involved Canadians* study mentioned above found a noticeable decline in participation in civic activities between 1997 and 2000, particularly among people with higher levels of education and income. In that period, membership in organizations or groups decreased from 74% to 67% for university graduates and from 73% to 63% for upper income households. During the same period, the total number of hours volunteered declined by 5%, and the rate of volunteering decreased from 31% to 27% (with a larger decline among those with university degrees, from 48% to 39%).

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Membership in most organizations has also declined, although some professional organizations have experienced an increase. However, in most cases involvement is restricted to mere membership, and this does not necessarily mean active participation or real human connections. As Putnam pointed out in a visit to Canada, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), to which he belongs, has boomed in the last two decades, growing from about 300 thousand to 34 million members. At first sight, this suggests a positive sign of civic participation. However, as Putnam noted, his total membership activity in the AARP consists of the 36 seconds it takes to write a cheque for eight dollars, and the time it takes to flip through the pages of *Modern Maturity* magazine. The point here is that an increase in membership is not always an increase in connections.

In the same meeting, Putnam was asked about the reasons for the decline in community involvement. After exploring several hypotheses that included factors related to gender, age, income, government interventionism, and architecture (like the shift from front porches to the backyard), Putnam concluded that the main explanation is television. In the last decades the number of multi-set homes has skyrocketed, and now the average person in North America spends between 3 and 4 hours per day watching television.

Television is making us more homebound and isolated, and less likely to engage in our communities. According to Statistics Canada, Canadians aged 15+ spend on average 5.5 times as much time watching television as participating in civic or voluntary activities. Putnam argues that the more time people spend in front of a television, the less likely they are to vote, to join a group and to trust other people. The Internet is expanding the network of connections to a planetary level, but it is not necessarily increasing involvement in local communities. As Putnam noted, "the fact that I don't know the person across the street would astonish my father more than the fact that I am talking to people across the globe everyday." In the booklet *Canada: a cultural profile*, published by the Catholic Immigration Centre, newcomers to Canada read the following: "Watching television is a favorite national pastime and people who spend too much time in front of the TV are called 'couch potatoes." If we are devoting so much time watching TV and surfing the Internet than engaging in our neighborhoods, we may become 'civic couch potatoes.'

In any case, partly because of television, and partly because of other factors, we are voting less, we are participating less in community groups, we are less connected to our neighbours, and we are exchanging ideas less often about public affairs. While public spaces shrink and shopping malls proliferate, and while politics becomes an activity to be performed by professional politicians and a spectacle to be watched by the rest, civic deliberation and civic participation continue to decline.

Does it matter that we are less civically engaged? The available evidence suggests that it does, as civic participation results in a variety of personal and social benefits. For instance, there is a positive impact of social connections on physical well-being. People who are involved in community groups are healthier and tend to live longer than people

who are not. It is not that people who are already healthier join groups, but the other way around, that is, there are positive physiological effects of connecting with other people, of cultivating friendships, of feeling attached to a community and of engaging in meaningful collective projects. There is also a body of educational research on the relationship between student achievement and the involvement of the community in children's' education. Crime is also lower in communities where the levels of engagement, trust and reciprocity (that is, social capital) is higher. Civic participation also enhances the process of political representation. When more opportunities are given for people to put forward opinions and preferences, and when these opinions are seriously taken into account, decisions are more likely to be not only better, but also sustainable in the long run.

Moreover, civic participation, particularly when it is linked to good processes of deliberation and decision-making, develops democratic capacities. In other words, good civic participation nurtures the development of an informed, critical, responsible and engaged citizenry. By participating in local democratic processes, we learn many things. For instance, we learn to listen to each other, exchange ideas, solve conflicts, reach consensus, develop creative solutions to problems, organize, administer public resources, move from individualism to solidarity, and probably more importantly, find our own power to transform reality. Because participatory democracy is based on public deliberation, it is reflective and allows us to explore collectively all options. This is different from the logic of formal politics, which is based on opposition, debate and eloquent speaking. Moreover, as the literature on participatory democracy consistently tells us, meaningful participation in governance allows individuals to learn about themselves, develop reciprocal bonds with neighbours and peers, define and eventually share common goals or values, and collectively take on the challenges and responsibilities of citizenship at the organizational, provincial, or national level (see, for instance, the works of Abers, Bai, or Berry et al.). The existing empirical evidence strongly suggests that the process of developing democratic capacities is a long term one, and can be learned mainly by doing, as a hands-on, minds-on, real world experience.

A participatory local governance can also improve accessibility, equity and intercultural relations. Edgington and associates from the Vancouver Centre of Excellence on Immigration Studies (RIIM) note that local governance can contribute to the development of citizenship in a multicultural community by making its services more accessible and equitable, opening up the possibilities for citizen participation in the democratic processes, ensuring all constituents are able to use the services provided for them, and reinforcing the acceptance of difference and diversity within and between ethnic groups. The lessons from participatory governance experiments in different parts of the world (including my own research on the participatory budget process in Brazil) confirm this statement.

My argument here is that the theory and practice of participatory democracy can provide a helpful tool to revitalize civic engagement, particularly in marginalized communities, and especially when civic participation is connected to decision-making. A great booklet published by the Toronto Healthy City Office suggestively entitled *We've got to Stop Meeting Like This: 36 Ways to Encourage Civic Participation*, confirms once again that traditional public consultations are no longer enough, and that we need to develop new institutions and new ways to engage citizens. In assessing the different modes available for the public to participate in civic life, the City of Toronto asks four relevant questions: does the public have clear and easy access to public decisions?; do citizens feel there is any value to participating?; how do citizens get involved in the civic process?; is there a satisfactory type of participation for every citizen in the city? These four dimensions (accessibility, value, involvement and diversity of options) are important guidelines for developing public policy aimed at increasing the quantity and quality of civic participation.

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Unfortunately, many programs carried out by national and international agencies to help disadvantaged communities in Canada or abroad seem to involve working for communities rather than with them. These programs are often imbued by a charitable and paternalistic approach to development, rather than by an empowering one. From an empowering perspective, an effective way of promoting civic participation is through community organizing projects that begin with the recognition of the assets already present in the community. This leads to the concept of civil investing, a conceptual lens that provides a new way to look at communities. This concept can be particularly helpful for private foundations, government agencies or non-governmental organizations interested in promoting civic participation. Such an approach allows these agencies to see four things that are not always explicit in other approaches. First, they can notice connective structures below the official realm, such as informal networks, ad hoc groups and the like. Second, they become aware of processes other than legislative or programmatic. Third, they look at people as citizens solving problems rather than clients, a general audience, or interest groups. Fourth, instead of focusing exclusively on immediate outcomes, they look at the capacity of the community to act together.

Participatory democracy, capacity building for local governance, and civil investing and are three related strategies that can help to revitalize civic involvement. These approaches can also help to a redefine the concept of participation, moving us – as Gaventa and Valderrama suggest- from an exclusive concern with 'beneficiaries' or 'the excluded' to a concern with broad forms of engagement by citizens in policy formation and decision-making in key areas which affect their lives.

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Unless otherwise noted, "citizen" is used here in its informal sense to encompass not only legal citizens, but also non-citizens who are resident in the country.

[2] Polling on social cohesion, which was commissioned by the departments of Citizenship and Immigration and Canadian Heritage in February 2002, revealed that Canadians identify strongly with particular values and are not entirely uncomfortable with limits on some Charter rights. Indeed, the rights enshrined in the Charter are not absolute and are subject to limitation. For example, there are built-in qualifications, such as the denial of the "right to life, liberty and security of the person" (section 7) if such denial is "in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice." The "notwithstanding clause" (section 33) allows federal and provincial governments to pass legislation in contravention of particular sections of the Charter for a five-year renewable period. Finally, the Charter's preamble guarantees the protection of the rights and freedoms outlined but "subject to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society," effectively allowing for the override of any Charter right with good reason. See Radha Jhappan, "The Charter and the Courts," Canadian Politics in the 1990s, 4th ed., Glen Whittington and Michael S. Williams, eds. (Toronto: Nelson, 1995) p. 344-345.

[3] Waldron writes, "Like many duties, the duty of civic participation is not just a duty to do X but a duty to do X carefully and responsibly." Jeremy Waldron, "Cultural Identity and Civic Responsibility," Citizenship in Diverse Societies, Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 155. See, also, Robert Dahl, Democracy and its Critics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[4] Jon H. Pammett, "Elections," Canadian Politics in the 1990s, 4th ed., Glen Whittington and Michael S. Williams, eds. (Toronto: Nelson, 1995) p. 238.

[5] Anthony Sayers and Inayat Jetha, "Ethnic Minority Politicians in Canada," papers presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Toronto, Ontario, May 29-31, 2002, p. 1.

[6] T. Alexander Aleinikoff and Douglas Klusmeyer, Citizenship Policies for an Age of Migration (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002) p. 55; Pammett, p. 238.

[7] See Dahl, for example.

[8] Will Kymlicka, Finding Our Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 18.

[9] Alenikoff and Klusmeyer, p. 45.

[10] Policy Research Initiative, "Social Capital as a Public Policy Tool," www.policyresearch.gc.ca.

[11] Aleinikoff and Klusmeyer, p. 55.

[12] Qtd. in Centre for Research and Information on Canada (CRIC), "Voter Participation in Canada: Is Canadian Democracy in Crisis?" Number 3 of The CRIC Papers (October 2001) p. 29.

[13] Richard Johnston, " A Conservative Case for Electoral Reform," Policy Options 22.6 (July-August 2001) p. 13; see also CRIC, "Voter Participation in Canada."

[14] André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Richard Nadeau and Neil Nevitte, Anatomy of a Liberal Victory: Making Sense of the Vote in the 2000 Canadian Election (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002) p. 46-49.

[15] Jon H. Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc, "Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters," paper for Elections Canada (March 2003) p. 20.

[16] CRIC, p. 22-23.

[17] See, for example, Pammett and LeDuc, p. 27-28; André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte and Richard Nadeau, "The Evolving Nature of Non Voting: Evidence from Canada," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, California (August 30-September 2, 2001) p. 1.

[18] Blais et al., "The Evolving Nature of Non Voting," p. 1.

[19] André Blais, To Vote or Not to Vote: The Merits and Limits of Rational Choice Theory (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001) p. 52.

[20] Jerome Black, "Immigrant political adaptation in Canada: Some tentative findings," Canadian Journal of Political Science 15.2 (1982): 3-27.

[21] Tina W. L. Chui, James E. Curtis, Ronald Lambert, "Immigrant background and political participation: examining generational patterns," Canadian Journal of Sociology 16.4 (1991): 391.

[22] Pammett and LeDuc, p. 27-28.

[23] Pammett and LeDuc, p. 25-27.

[24] Livianna Tossutti, "Minority Representation in Nomination and Election Contests," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Toronto, Ontario (May 29-31, 2002).

[25] Courtney argues persuasively that Electoral Boundaries Commissions could be used to enhance minority representation, particularly if the Commissions themselves are designed to reflect the demographic profile of the general population. In the case of Nova Scotia, it is noted that "'the commission could not have ignored minority representation given the presence of Acadian and Black representatives on it.'" John Courtney, Commissioned Ridings: Designing Canada's Electoral Districts (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001) p. 103.

[26] See Erin Tolley, "Political Processes," paper presented at the seminar on Intersections of Diversity, Niagara Falls, Ontario (April 25-26, 2003); Elections Canada, "Participation in the Electoral Process: The Involvement of Women, Youth and Ethnocultural Groups," Electoral Insight 3.1 (2001); Jerome Black, "Representation in the Parliament of Canada: The Case of Ethnoracial Minorities," Citizen Politics: Research and Theory in Canadian Political Behaviour, Brenda O'Neill and Joanna Everitt, eds. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 355-372; Carolle Simard, "La representation des groupes ethnoculturels dans la région montréalise: vers une participation politique accrue?" Journal of International Migration and Integration, forthcoming.

[27] Political Participation Research Network, "Diversity in Canadian Governments: The Numerical Representation of Women, Immigrants in Minorities in 13 Cities," forthcoming.

[28] Lynda Erickson, "Entry to the Commons: Parties, Recruitment, and the Election of Women in 1993," Women and Political Representation in Canada, Manon Tremblay and Caroline Andrew (eds.) (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998) p. 219.

[29] This practice has been used by Prime Minister Jean Chretien to appoint "star candidates" in particular ridings.

[30] After she criticized Bloc Quebécois leader Gilles Duceppe, Pierrette Venne was expelled from the BQ caucus and now sits as an Independent in the House of Commons. Even the Canadian Alliance, which is often perceived as the most democratic and transparent of all the federal political parties, has used this discretionary power, refusing to allow dissident Member of Parliament Jim Pankiw back into the Alliance caucus after he left to protest Stockwell Day's leadership.

[31] For example, the Constitution of the federal Liberal Party, section 2.1(b), provides that membership in the party can be denied to those who are members of other political parties.

[32] Witness, for example, the negative public reaction toward the privatization of health care. Even the title of the highly-touted Romanow Report on the Future of Health Care – "Building on Values" – is instructive.

[33] A forthcoming project of the Political Participation Research Network is aimed at compiling data on diversity in governments in a range of Canadian cities. See, also, Carolle Simard, "Les élus des groupes ethniques minoritaires à Montréal : perceptions et représentations politiques, une étude exploratoire," Politique et Sociétés 22.1 (2003) p. 29-54; Myer Siemiatycki and Anver Saloojee, "Ethno-racial Political Representation in Toronto: Problems and Patterns," Journal of International Migration and Integration, forthcoming; Erin Tolley, "'The Higher, the Fewer'? Assessing the Presence of Women at Three Levels of Government," unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of Western Ontario (2000).