Engaging Behaviour: Behavioural economics and citizen engagement

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Contents

Abstract

Declining citizen engagement is a concern across government. Furthermore, there are significant discrepancies between rates of engagement across different sectors of society. This report uses the insights of behavioural economics to examine citizens' motivations for civic and civil engagement. We conducted focus groups with citizens who, evidence suggests, are less likely to engage than the average, but who 'bucked the trend', in order to analyse what drove them to do so. Whilst typical policy responses aim to manipulate the 'external factors' of cost, effort and information, we found evidence that suggested it was time, not money, that constituted the main 'cost' to getting involved.

We also examined the internal drivers of engagement, noting the significance of habit, loss aversion and the tendency to honour public commitments in driving engagement. Lastly, we found that the triggers of engagement were often located in social networks – both institutionalised and informal – and policymakers must connect with citizens through these networks if they are to raise levels of engagement.

Main messages

- This report responds to concerns about the perceived decline in citizen engagement. It uses a behavioural economic framework to offer solutions to this decline. A lack of citizen engagement should be of concern to policymakers for a variety of reasons. First, high levels of engagement are needed to ensure democratic legitimacy. Second, modern public services increasingly rely on citizen involvement if they are to work effectively. Third, citizens' involvement in the provision of public goods can enhance individual and communal well-being and strengthen social ties.

- There are significant discrepancies between rates of participation across different sectors of society. Certain groups record levels of engagement which are noticeably lower than average. These trends are particularly pronounced among young people, aged between 18 and 25, and those from some black or minority ethnic backgrounds. We conducted focus groups with citizens from these groups who, evidence suggests, are less likely to engage than the average, but who 'buck the trend'.

- The traditional, market-based tools of policymaking are closely bound up with 'rational choice theory'. Typically, this led to policy responses that manipulate the 'external factors' of cost, effort and information. In focus groups, when presented with this conclusion, the response was overwhelmingly dismissive. No participants raised the issue of the 'costs' of engagement unprompted. When it comes to the external factors to boost engagement, focus group members argued that it was time not money that constituted the main 'cost' to getting involved. It was also found that the initial decision to engage involved recognition of the personal benefits, notably the provision of CV-building opportunities.

- We also examined the internal drivers of engagement, these include: the force of habit; the role of loss aversion; and the tendency to honour stated commitments. Whilst these factors were significant in driving engagement, we found that it also takes an initial 'push' from someone else. Above all, we found that evidence from the focus groups and literature showed that the triggers of participation were centred on social networks – both institutionalised and informal. Policymakers must respond to the different ways in which different groups get involved and to the changing nature of social networks in the modern world.

Executive summary

Policymakers have recently expressed concerns about a perceived fall in levels of citizen engagement. The trends associated with this decline are not confined to the UK, and have been evident in many industrialised countries. They include a dramatic fall in the membership of political parties, a drop in electoral turnout and surveys which indicate a consistent lack of trust in politicians and traditional political institutions.

Citizen engagement matters for a variety of reasons. First, high levels of engagement are (arguably) needed to ensure democratic legitimacy. Second, modern public services increasingly rely on citizen involvement if they are to work effectively. Third, citizens' involvement in the provision of public goods can enhance individual and communal well-being and strengthen social ties.

There are significant discrepancies between rates of participation across different sectors of society. Certain groups record levels of engagement which are noticeably lower than average. These trends are most pronounced among young people, aged between 18 and 25, and those from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

This report uses the insights of behavioural economic literature to examine citizens' motivations for civic and civil engagement. We conducted focus groups with citizens who, evidence suggests, are less likely to engage that the average, but who 'buck the trend'. In doing so, we hoped to identify those motivational factors that led to engagement, and which might have wider pertinence for policymakers.

Two focus groups were carried out. The first comprised eight 16-25 years olds who regularly took part in activities related to civic activism, civic participation or civic consultation. The second consisted of eight individuals from black or minority ethnic backgrounds who were involved in civic participation or civic consultation activities.

The traditional, market-based, tools of policymaking are closely bound up with a model of human behaviour known as rational choice theory, which forms the mainstay of classical economic theories on how we reach our decisions. Typically, this led to policy responses that used financial incentives or disincentives (subsidies, taxes, tax relief), offered additional information to highlight the rationality of certain choices, or resorted to simple coercion by

way of regulation. These tools all manipulate the 'external factors' of cost, effort and information.

Rational choice theory adopts two key assumptions: the first is that an individual is ultimately self-interested, and will seek to maximise their own utility wherever possible; the second is that individuals are rational; for a given decision, they will weigh up the costs and benefits they stand to incur and opt for actions which maximise the benefits they accrue while minimising costs. If we apply these premises to concrete examples of collective action – voting, say, or taking part in a political protest – the logical outcome in almost every case appears to be inaction (e.g. the effort of voting greatly outweighs the slim likelihood of one's vote making a difference).

In focus groups, when presented with the view that financial costs made a difference to engagement the response was overwhelmingly dismissive. No participants raised the issue of the financial costs of engagement unprompted. However, when asked by the group administrator to discuss their perceptions of the costs they incurred through participation, the key aspect raised was time not money.

We argue in this report that although behavioural economics is currently in vogue, there are limits to its application. First, there are concerns about freedom and individual choices, which make applications of this approach more applicable in some areas than others. Second, behavioural economics has little to say about the structural challenges that citizens often face and which limit their ability to act in certain ways. However, these concerns aside, behavioural economics can provide a more accurate and holistic overview of the factors affecting engagement behaviour, particularly those generally neglected by rational choice theory.

In addition to the external (generally, rational choice) drivers of behaviour, we considered the internal and social drivers. On the internal drivers, a common theme of the literature was that, when attempting to engage the public in negotiation on specific and technical policy matters, there also needs to be recognition that 'heuristics' (that is a variety of biases and cognitive shortcuts) are likely to play a prominent role in their choices. Perhaps the most powerful heuristic is the force of habit. Other important internal drivers were the role of loss aversion (a desire to ensure that a situation did not deteriorate further) and the tendency to honour stated commitments. In the focus groups there was also a clear desire from participants to honour commitments once they had made them, particularly when given to friends or family members.

The social drivers of change were also significant. Our focus groups revealed that the initial spurs to engage were almost always linked to people's involvement in particular social networks. In some cases, the decision to engage was taken in response to a particular event affecting an individual's local or cultural community, in others it was due to a personal request.

We conclude with several recommendations for policymakers. When it comes to the external factors to boost engagement, as noted above, a lack of time was the crucial factor. The focus of policy to encourage involvement, therefore, must be on compensating for the time involved. This could be by working with employers to allow more volunteering opportunities in work time. It was also found that the initial decision to engage involved recognition of the personal benefits, notably the provision of CV-building opportunities. Once there was an initial decision to engage, this often 'snowballed' into other areas and greater commitment.

Internal factors to boosting engagement include the well-known approach of getting stated commitment on when, where and for whom to engage. This activates citizens' often latent desire to get involved. However, we found that this desire can take an initial 'push' from someone else. A consequence is that government should actively work with community groups, and other organisations that provide engagement opportunities, to fund active community 'recruitment strategies'. The evidence also showed that citizens also respond to people like them (or people who share certain backgrounds). There is a large amount of work on 'imitation' and the greater use of role models to encourage involvement could be explored further. This could be a particularly powerful way of getting young people more involved.

In terms of social factors, evidence from the focus groups and literature showed that the triggers of participation were centred on social networks – both institutionalised and informal. Even where the decision to participate was in response to a chance event, action was generally coordinated through a pre-existing social group. Yet, policymakers must respond to the different ways in which different groups get involved and to respond to social networks as they are, not as they were. This means providing information and links on social networking sites to encourage engagement, as well as providing information via traditional institutions, such as trade unions, schools and religious organisations.

Chapter 1: The problem of disengagement[1]

> ***Main messages***
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> *This chapter examines the extent of the fall in citizen engagement. It provides details of the decline and some of the main theoretical explanations for it. It also provides an account of why this decline matters. An important challenge for policymakers is to ensure that levels of citizen engagement reflect the diversity of society; another is to ensure that those citizens who do have a desire to get involved are able to do so. We conclude the section with a brief discussion of levels of engagement between different groups.*

Perceptions of a decline in citizen engagement are a concern across government. The trends associated with this decline are not confined to the UK, and have been evident in many industrialised countries. They include a dramatic fall in the membership of political parties, a drop in electoral turnout and surveys which indicate a consistent lack of trust in politicians and traditional political institutions. These trends have dramatically altered the political landscape in recent decades. They also cause profound challenges, not only for government but for democratic society in general.

The causes of these changes have been variously ascribed to the decline of traditional class structures, rising affluence and higher levels of education, improved access to information, the growing power of the media, and changes to the political elite.[2] All of these factors alter citizens' behaviour, changing the way we approach decisions, our perceptions of the significance of our actions, and our expectations of outcomes.

This report uses the insights of behavioural economics to examine citizen's motivations for civic and civil engagement. As well as drawing on a growing theoretical literature, we conducted focus groups with citizens who, evidence suggests, are less likely to engage that the average, but who 'buck the trend'. In doing so, we hoped to identify those motivational factors that led to engagement and which might have wider pertinence for policymakers. The first group comprised eight 16-25 years olds who regularly took part in activities related to civic activism, civic participation or civic consultation. The

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[2] See Russell J. Dalton, "Cognitive Mobilization and Partisan Dealignment," *The Journal of Politics,* 46: 1 (1984); Colin Hay, Gerry Stoker and Andy Williamson, "Revitalising Politics: Have We Lost the Plot?," (Paper presented at the *Revitalising Politics: Have We Lost the Plot?* conference, London: Hansard Society, November 5, 2008).

second consisted of eight individuals from a black and minority ethnic background (these participants were over the age of 25) who were involved in civic participation or civic consultation activities. These focus groups provided us with specific case studies from which we have suggested some wider possibilities about the role of motivation and engagement in the UK.

'Citizen engagement'

The idea of citizen engagement refers to citizens' involvement in administering and overseeing the institutions providing 'public goods' (i.e. those that are defined as 'non-excludable and non-rival'[3] such as schools, hospitals, roads and parks). People's engagement with the provision of public goods in the UK encompasses a very wide spectrum of activities, from voting or signing a petition, right through to serving as a local councillor or volunteering in the local community. For the purposes of this study, we divide engagement activities between the two categories[4] set out in the Evidence Annex of the Department for Community and Local Government's (DCLG) 2008 White Paper.[5]

- *Civil engagement* includes all those activities which require citizens to engage with other citizens, such as volunteering.

- *Civic engagement* signifies activities which involve interaction between the citizen and the state.[6]

Data on political engagement collected by DCLG encompasses a very broad range of activities, from filling in a consultation questionnaire to volunteering for a community group and from voting to serving as a school governor. The range of activities classed as 'civic' (involving interaction between citizen and state) is broad, and *The Citizenship Survey* breaks these down into the following areas:
- *Civic activism*: regular involvement either in direct decision-making about local services or issues, or in the actual provision of these

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[3] Samuelson cited in Sarah Gillinson, *Why Cooperate? A Multi-Disciplinary Study of Collective Action* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2004), 12; Joseph Stiglitz, *Economics of the Public Sector* (New York: Norton & Co., 2000).
[4] Obviously, this divide between civil and civic engagement is not entirely clear-cut. A school governing body, for example, involves elements of civil and civic activities in that citizens who take part work both collaboratively with other governors, as well as interacting with the school's staff and the local authority. However, these terms provide the best description of the two broad means through which engagement takes place.
[5] Department for Communities and Local Government, Evidence Annex - *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* (London: HMSO, 2008), 14.
[6] The state in this instance refers not simply to the central government, but to all institutions of national and local government, including public services. Civic activities might therefore include serving as a local councilor, attending a political protest or taking part in a consultation group on local services.

services by taking on a role such as a local councillor, school governor, magistrate or special constable.

- *Civic consultation:* active engagement in consultations about local services or issues through activities such as attending a consultation group or completing a questionnaire.

- *Civic participation*: wider forms of interaction between citizen and state, such as contacting an elected representative, taking part in a public demonstration, or signing a petition.

The figures on trends and participation rates analysed during this report focus on these categories – civic and civil engagement - and the activities they incorporate.

The decline of traditional political engagement in the UK

There has been a cultural shift in advanced industrial societies in recent decades, a process carefully mapped by sociologist, Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues. Changes in religious belief, attitudes to work, family life and sexuality are transforming political, social and economic life.[7] In the UK shifting attitudes towards traditional forms of political participation are much discussed. In his study on changing patterns of participation, Paul Whiteley highlights two quotes, one from Almond and Verba's study of British political culture undertaken in 1959, and the other from the retirement speech of Betty Boothroyd, the outgoing Speaker of the House of Commons, in 2000. While Almond and Verba refer to 'norms supporting political activity' and a 'highly developed' role for citizens or subjects, Boothroyd – speaking forty years later – warns that "the level of cynicism about Parliament, and the accompanying alienation of the young from the democratic process, is troubling."[8]

There has been a fall in levels of traditional political participation. Turnout for both local and national elections has experienced a steep decline. The General Election of 1950 saw a turnout of 83.9 per cent, yet figures have dropped dramatically, particularly after 1997, sinking to an all-time low of 59.4 per cent in 2001 and only recovering slightly to reach 61.3 per cent in 2005. After 1998's historic low of 28 per cent, turnout in local elections has hovered just above the 30 per cent mark, with some wards recording figures as low as 12 per cent. Membership rates for political parties have seen a similar

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[7] Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton University Press, 1989) and subsequent work.
[8] Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 315 and House of Commons Official Report, 26 July 2000, Cols 1113-14, cited in; Paul Whiteley, "The State of Participation in Britain," Parliamentary Affairs, 56 (2003).

collapse (see Figure 1.1): the proportion of the UK electorate who were members of one of the main political parties fell from 3.8 per cent in 1983 to just 1.3 per cent in 2005.[9]

Figure 1.1: Party membership as a proportion of the UK electorate, 1964-2005
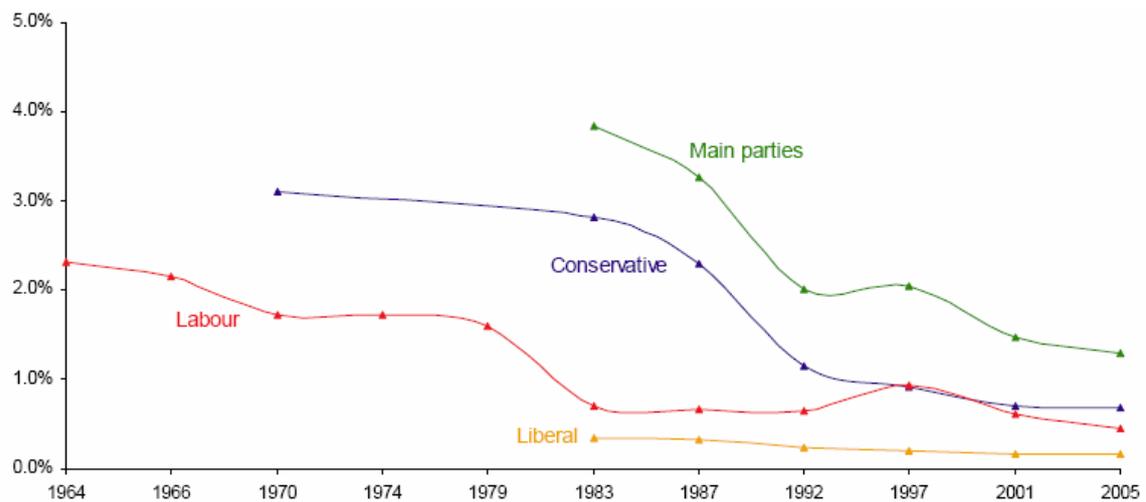
Source: Membership of UK Political Parties, House of Commons Research Report SN/SG 5125, 2009, 11.

Even compared to other European countries with relatively low rates of party membership, membership rates in the UK have declined faster, and have dropped lower, than all other European countries (see Figure 1.2) Similarly, in a global survey ranking countries according to electoral turnout, the political inclusion of disadvantaged or minority groups, membership of political parties, citizens' stated interest in – and active engagement with – politics and political protest, and the efforts made by public institutions to promote political participation, the UK was found to have the lowest levels of political participation in the developed world.[10]

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[9] House of Commons, *Research Report SN/SG/5125, Membership of UK Political Parties, by John Marshall* (London: HMSO, 2009), 11.
[10] The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Index of Democracy 2008* (London: Economist Intelligence Unit, 2008).

Figure 1.2: Trends in European Party Membership (low membership countries), 1961-2005
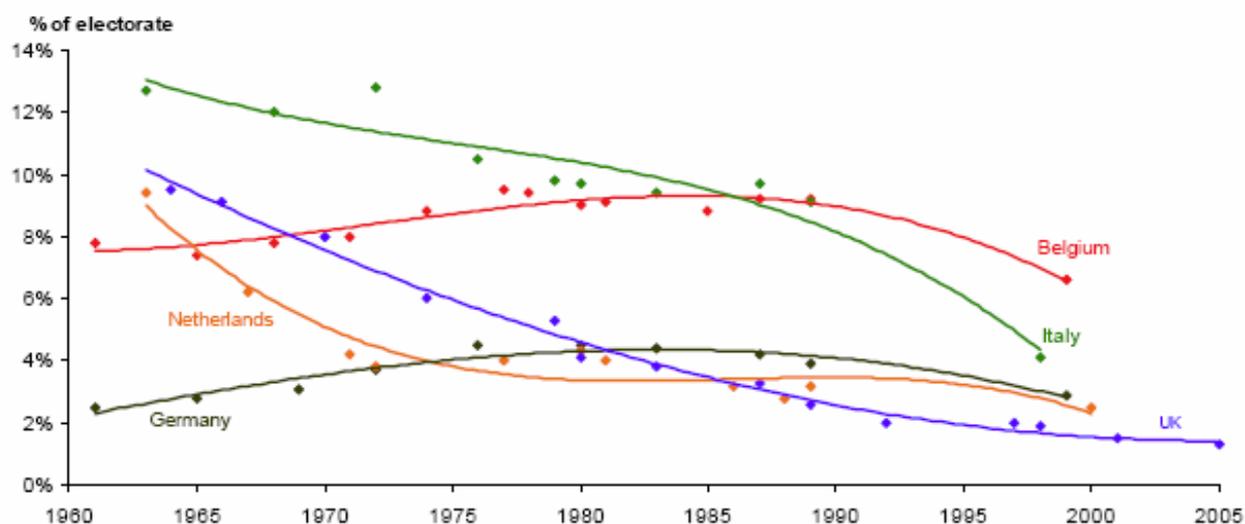
Source: Membership of UK Political Parties, House of Commons Research Report SN/SG 5125, 2009, 25.

However, whilst measures of traditional forms of political engagement demonstrate a clear decline, this does not signify the wider collapse in political involvement. There is some evidence to suggest that traditional forms of civic engagement linking citizen and state are being replaced by less formal, non-partisan forms of engagement. Higher levels of education and growing use of information technologies, particularly amongst young people, suggest party political divisions may be replaced by less traditional avenues of campaigning and political activity as new generations become politically involved.[11] A recent survey found that whilst just 3 per cent of respondents had paid a membership fee to a political party, 37 per cent who had donated money to a charity or campaigning organisation, many of which are increasingly coordinated online.[12] There is strong evidence that forms of web-based political participation are increasingly prevalent.[13]

Evidence also suggests a latent desire amongst citizens to get more involved, which is currently untapped by policymakers. Figures from the 2009 Audit of Political Engagement and the Citizenship Survey reveal that, while 48 per cent of respondents reported they would like to be 'very' or 'fairly' involved in local

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[11] Dalton, "Cognitive Mobilization and Partisan Dealignment", 266. Although, British citizens are still generally more likely to divide along partisan political lines than citizens of other industrialised nations.
[12] Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 6: The 2009 Report*, 25.
[13] A recent notably example being the use of social networking site, Twitter, to force the oil trading firm, Trafigura, to drop a high court injunction against the *Guardian* newspaper. David Leigh, 'Trafigura drops bid to gag Guardian over MP's question', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 13 October 2009. www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/oct/13/trafigura-drops-gag-guardian-oil

decision-making, only 17 per cent had attended a public meeting or rally, 26 per cent had been in contact with a local councillor and 22 per cent had been involved in a discussion group on local services or problems.[14] In some senses, the new forms of engagement discussed by Inglehart will create opportunities for more people to take part in certain forms of collective action, particularly those relating to social networking, online communication and the collation of information. A move towards these channels of participation will provide a boost to certain aspects of social capital. Yet, in other ways, this shift will pose challenges, particularly for government.

If participation is increasingly taking place independent of political institutions, there is a danger that lines of communication between citizens and politicians may be severed. In the light of the growing importance of citizen engagement, coupled with evidence on a decline in traditional forms of participation, the challenge for policymakers, political parties and governmental institutions will be to adapt to these changes, coming up with new ways of maintaining links with a more cognitively mobile and better informed public. If they are to do so successfully, they will need to be able to both understand and influence people's political behaviour.

Why does citizen engagement matter?

Citizen engagement matters a variety of reasons. First, high levels of engagement are needed to ensure democratic legitimacy. Interaction between citizens and the state is an important part of a democratic system. As Dalton puts it:

> *"Democracy expects an active citizenry because it is through discussion, popular interest and involvement in politics that societal goals should be defined and carried out in a democracy. Without public involvement in the process, democracy lacks both its legitimacy and its guiding force."[15]*

At the local level, our political system depends on the voluntary involvement of citizens serving their community as councillors, magistrates, school governors and special constables. In turn, such posts rely on the backing of others for their legitimacy. Widespread apathy and abstention call the mandate of elected officials into question; local elections in the UK regularly see turnout

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[14] Department for Communities and Local Government, *Evidence Annex - Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* (London: HMSO, 2008).
[15] Russel J. Dalton, "Citizen Attitudes and Political Behavior," *Comparative Political Studies,* 33: 6/7 (2000), 927.

falling below 30 per cent and even the general election in 2001 saw more voters abstain than back the winning party. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley refer to a "looming crisis of democratic accountability, which could pull parliament's democratic mandate into question.[16]

Second, modern public services rely on high levels of involvement if they are to work effectively. The most recent proposals on public service reform all centre on the ways in which the active involvement of users could serve as a tool to improve service outcomes. A recent report from the Public Administration Select Committee reported that citizen involvement in the provision of public services

> *"reduces the risk of providing unsuitable or inappropriate services, as users will often be in the best position to judge their own needs. In addition, user involvement can encourage people to better understand their own service needs and improve their confidence. This, in turn, can have positive effects on the outcomes they want to see, such as improved health or educational progress."[17]*

The government has been keen to pursue this agenda; as former Cabinet Office Minister Ed Miliband MP argued,

> *"[p]ublic services must respond to and mobilise the expertise, ideas, time, and willpower of people using them. What I call the 'letterbox model' - where the service was just delivered to the user – doesn't see us as participants who can shape our own lives".[18]*

In recent years, there has been a sustained move towards the idea of 'co-production' – sharing responsibility for public service delivery and outcomes between service users and providers.[19]

Third, citizens' involvement in the provision of public goods within their communities can enhance communal well-being and strengthen social ties.[20]

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[16] Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, "Citizenship and Civic Engagement: Attitudes and Behaviour in Britain," *Political Studies,* 51: 3 (2003), 443.
[17] Public Administration Select Committee, *User Involvement in Public Services: Sixth Report of Session 2007-08* (London: HMSO, 2008), 13.
[18] Ed Miliband, Speech to 5th Annual Guardian Public Services Summit, 7 February 2008 in House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, *User Involvement in Public Services* (London: HMSO, 2007) 9.
[19] Simon Griffiths, Beth Foley and Jessica Prendergrast, *Assertive Citizens: New relationships in the public services* (London: SMF, 2009)
[20] Mandeep Hothi, *Neighbourliness + Empowerment = Wellbeing: Is There a Formula for Happy Communities?* (London: The Young Foundation, 2008).

As Bekkers puts it, "citizens participate in voluntary associations not only to advocate their interests in politics, but also to find meaning in life, to express their social identity, to contribute to the well-being of others and to improve the chances on the labour market – among many other things."[21]

Who engages?

In terms of the UK's domestic political culture, one of the more concerning aspects of the transformation of civic and civil engagement is that it has left us with a situation in which there are significant discrepancies between rates of participation across different sectors of society. Yet, without a suitably representative cross-section of the community engaging politically, there is a danger that of the needs and views of that subset of the population who do engage are prioritised above others.

Certain groups now record levels of engagement which are noticeably lower than average. The data collected by CLG suggests that these trends are most pronounced among young people, aged between 18 and 25 (figure 1.3), and those from black or minority ethnic backgrounds (figure 1.4).

Figure 1.3: Participation by form and ethnicity

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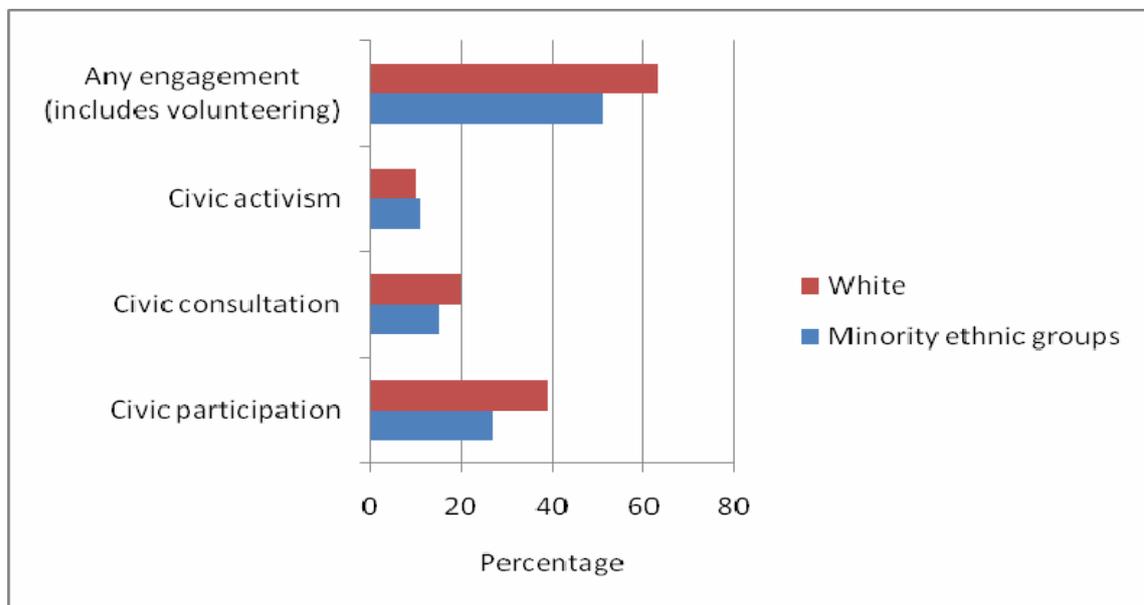
[21] Rene Bekkers, "Participation in Voluntary Associations: Relations With Resources, Personality, and Political Values," *Political Psychology,* 26: 3 (2005), 439. The positive effects of such 'social capital' have been most notably articulated in recent years by the American political scientist, Robert Putnam.
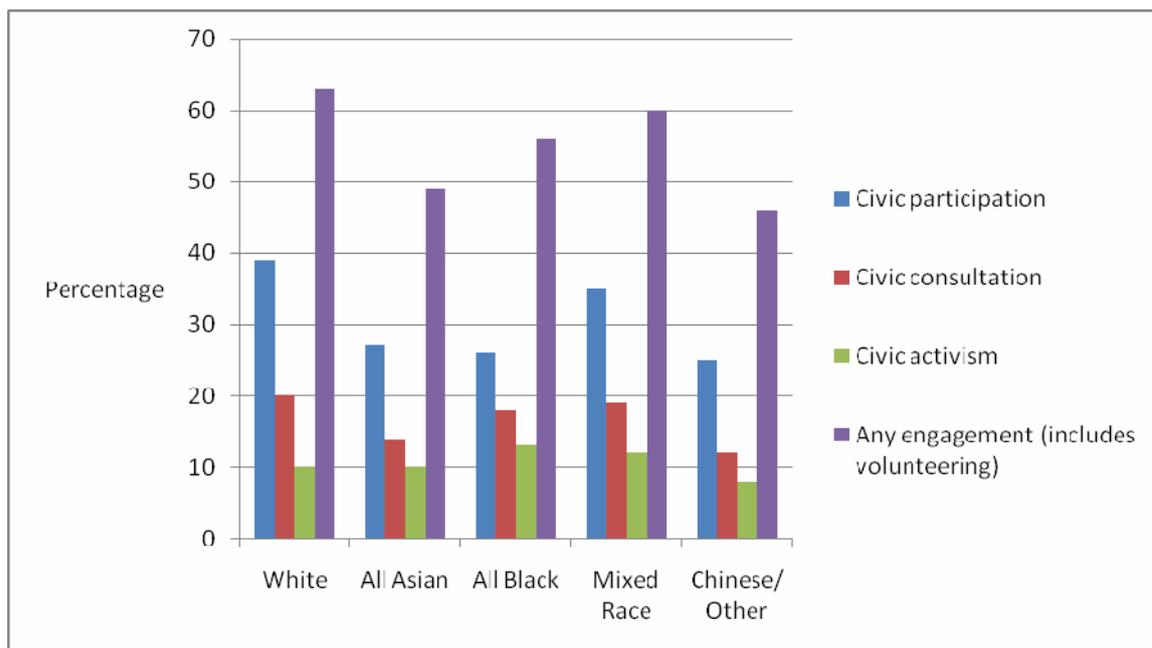
Figure 1.4 Participation by form and age
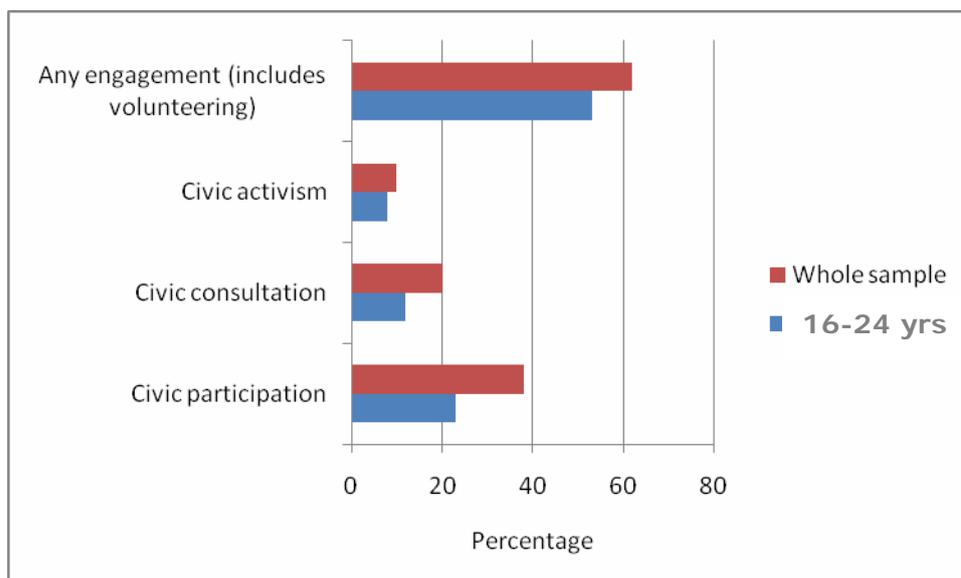
As figure 1.3 shows, rates of civic participation, consultation and activism are lower for younger people that the wider population. Figure 1.4 shows a slightly more complicated picture, but it is notable that there are lower rates of consultation and participation amongst black and minority ethnic groups that the white population. If those participating are to be as representative of the

communities they serve as possible it will be the task of policymakers to address these gaps.

This report is in line with the delivery strategy for Public Service Agreement number 15 (PSA 15), the third indicator of which was focused on the participation in public life of disadvantaged groups. The Agreement states: "all groups within society should have the opportunity to participate in community activities, but disabled people, people from ethnic minorities, and young people are under-represented in civic activities and decision-making roles."[22]

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the importance of political engagement for modern governments and has also discussed the recent trends which have contributed to a decline in traditional channels of participation. Although falling rates of citizen engagement could have major repercussions for government – in terms of democratic legitimacy, public service provision and social cohesion – policymakers are struggling to reverse the trend. Doing so successfully will require a full assessment of the drivers of behaviour in this area. We therefore turn to the theory of behavioural economics as a useful model for analysing engagement behaviour.

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[22] HM Treasury, *PSA Delivery Agreement 15* (London: HMSO, 2009), 5.

Chapter 2: Insights from behavioural economics

Main messages

This chapter sets out some of the assumptions of rational choice theory, the approach to much public policy, and questions its usefulness in examining citizen engagement. However, we also recognise some of the limits to behavioural economics. We then set out the framework used in this report to assess the drivers of engagement: which we describe as external, internal and social. Whilst external drivers are included in rational choice approaches the others are not. Finally we set out the methodology used in this report and give details of the focus groups we carried out.

While a great deal has been written on the decline of political engagement, both in the UK and in the developed world, this study takes an innovative approach to analysing the problem by drawing on insights from behavioural economics. Recent work supported by the Economic and Social Research Council in this area argues that "little is known about the link between interventions designed to stimulate participation, the level and depth of civic engagement and policy outcomes".[23] Whilst the work of the Economic and Social Research Council-sponsored project will complement this study, its main findings will be published after this report.

The discipline of behavioural economics has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years, particularly in policy circles. Much of its appeal lies in a gradual appreciation of two facts: that meeting many of the modern challenges confronting policymakers will rely on persuading individuals to change their behaviour; and that many of these behaviours cannot be addressed through the traditional reliance on market-based incentives and disincentives.[24]

The traditional, market-based tools of policymaking are closely bound up with a model of human behaviour known as rational choice theory. This model forms the mainstay of classical economics. Rational choice theory makes a number of important assumptions about the decision-making process, namely that individuals are essentially both rational and self-interested. In any given situation, they are therefore most likely to adopt the course of action which maximises the benefits which accrue to them, and minimises the losses – both financial and non-financial.

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[23] For more information see:
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/ViewAwardPage.aspx?awardnumber=RES-177-25-0002
[24] Jessica Prendergrast et al., *Creatures of Habit?* (London: Social Market Foundation, 2008), 10.

Economics is the social science of choice for policymakers. This has led to the dominance of the rational choice paradigm in policymaking. Typically therefore, policy responses to issues such as smoking-related illnesses, obesity or savings and pensions have employed financial incentives or disincentives (subsidies, taxes, tax relief) or offered additional information to highlight the rationality of certain choices. These tools all manipulate the 'external factors' of cost, effort and information. The heavy reliance on these kinds of initiatives reflects an embedded assumption that individuals should be conceived of as rational economic actors.[25]

Such measures continue to form the mainstay of policymaking and, in many respects, are effective. However, there has been a growing realisation that policymakers' reliance solely on the predictions of a rational actor model of behaviour may "constitute an incomplete basis for deciding how to help consumers make the right decisions".[26] Behavioural economics offers a broader view. Unlike other psychological or sociological theories of behavioural change – which tend to sideline economic arguments – behavioural economics instead makes adaptations to conventional rational choice theory and combines learning from the disciplines of psychology and sociology with traditional neoclassical economic theory, offering insights into the impact of the full range of drivers on people's behaviour.[27]

These adaptations to the neoclassical approach do not, it should be noted, imply a wholesale rejection of an economics grounded in ideas of utility maximization, equilibrium, and efficiency.[28] Rather, as prominent behavioural economists Colin Camerer and George Loewenstein have argued:

> *"Often these departures [from the conventional model] are not radical at all because they relax simplifying assumptions that are not central to the economic approach. For example, there is nothing in core neoclassical theory that specifies that people should not care about fairness, that they should weight risky outcomes in a linear fashion, or that they must discount the future exponentially at a constant rate. Other assumptions simply acknowledge human limits on computational power, willpower, and self-interest."[29]*

At the heart of behavioural economic analysis is a simple and intuitive message: in going about their daily lives, people are guided by impulse, habit,

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[25] Ibid., 10.
[26] Daniel Read, *Behavioural Economics* (Unpublished, no date), 5.
[27] Prendergrast et al., *Creatures of Habit?*, 10.
[28] Colin F Camerer and George Loewenstein, *Behavioural Economics* (Pasadena, CA: Caltech, 2002), 1.
[29] Ibid., 2.

emotions, cognitive limitations, and issues such as perceived fairness and social norms, as much as by the availability of information, or a desire to minimise costs and maximise material payoffs.[30] It also emphasises (as indeed did Adam Smith) that, contrary to much classical economic theory, we act in a social context and that issues such as social approval and status are central motivations of human behaviour.[31]

The behavioural economics literature therefore considers the actions and behaviours of Herbert Simon's *homo psychologicus*[32] and Emile Durkheim's *homo sociologicus*[33] and seeks to incorporate these into a traditional rational choice analysis of man as *homo economicus*. This more holistic model of human behaviour is contrasted with the behavioural assumptions of rational choice theory by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler in their recent bestseller *Nudge*.[34] This more holistic model acknowledges that people, as behavioural economist, Daniel Read, points out:

> *"ignore important decision factors, put undue weight on some factors relative to others, plan to do the right thing but fail to follow through with those plans, they are more sure about their decisions or beliefs than they should be, they trust others more than they should, and they even fail to do simple calculations that could solve important problems."[35]*

The effect of these tendencies is that people sometimes make decisions that are "seemingly irrational".[36] For example, a rational choice analysis might suggest that voluntary participation in collective action is not in fact rational. The act of voting or taking part in a consultation group on local services offers few direct, selective incentives to the participant (given the numbers involved in these activities, it is highly unlikely that their voice will prove decisive) and taking part comes at significant costs in terms of time and effort.

If policymakers are to be successful in raising rates of engagement they will need to look at the full range of drivers of behaviour in this area and seek to construct policies which build on these motivations. As Elster claims, "we do not seem to have any robust understanding of the relation between the two homunculi to be found within each of us – *homo economicus* and *homo*

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[30] Kjell Arne Brekke and Olof Johansson-Stenman, *The Behavioural Economics of Climate Change* (Gothenburg: School of Buiness, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, 2008), 3; Prendergrast et al., *Creatures of Habit?*, 6.
[31] Ibid., 3.
[32] Herbert Simon, "Human Nature in Politics," *American Political Science Review,* 79 (1985).
[33] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1893).
[34] Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, *Nudge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).
[35] Read, *Behavioural Economics*, 4-5.
[36] Brekke and Johansson-Stenman, *The Behavioural Economics of Climate Change*, 3.

sociologicus.[37] It is for this reason that the wider spectrum of factors incorporated by behavioural economics might offer some important insights into policymakers interested in political behaviour.

Some limits to behavioural economics

There are limits to the behavioural economic approach and areas where its application is more appropriate than others. The first of these limitations is based around the arguable illiberalism of behavioural economics, whereas the second concerns behavioural economics' relative silence about the structural problems and challenges that affect behaviour.

The first issue concerns freedom and behavioural economic approaches. Alongside the question of what drives human behaviour in a variety of policy spheres and how to alter consequent behaviours is the question of whether and in what circumstances government *should* be seeking to intervene and change behaviours. In this context there is a considerable debate about the extent to which behavioural economics and the solutions it implies are inherently paternalistic: policymakers chose options (or at least set defaults) that citizens would have chosen at their most rational or that are in the collective interest.[38] In some arenas there is a relative consensus on the appropriateness of intervention; in others the legitimacy of government action is hotly contested.

For example, many people would agree with John Stuart Mill's dictum that governments should intervene to resolve situations in which the self-interested actions of individuals result in clear and direct harm to others.[39] One recent example might be the national smoking ban. However, where individual behaviours are indirectly damaging, where resultant harm occurs at a future date or inter-generationally, or the extent of harm is contested, government intervention is more contentious. Many are wary of any attempts by government to use policy to direct people to what it thinks are the 'right' courses of action, regardless of whether current behaviour carries 'harmful' social implications.

The second concern with behavioural economics is its relative silence over structural challenges. Behavioural economics, under this criticism, provides a method of 'blame shifting'. 'Querulous citizens'[40] do not behave in the ways

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[37] Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", 141.

[38] At its most extreme this is a simple case of following Isaiah Berlin's famous warning about the dangers of positive liberty, as he understood it.

[39] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Oxford: OUP), 1859, pp. 21-22

[40] Peter Taylor-Gooby, C.L. Hastie, and C. Bromley, 'Querulous Citizens: Welfare Knowledge and the Limits to Welfare Reform', *Social Policy & Administration*, 37 (1) 2003

that government expects and wants them to. Yet governments are elected promising certain outcomes: an end to child poverty, a fall in the national levels of indebtedness or antisocial behaviour; a rise in citizen engagement and so on. To behavioural economists it is the behaviour of individual citizens that needs to change to meet these targets.

Behavioural economics has little or nothing to say about structures, from a class-bound society which severely limits opportunity, to a political system which fails to reflect the views of much of the population. Responsibility for change is shifted from government to citizen, whilst the structural impediments to successful outcomes remain unaltered. Whilst this project draws on many of the important insights from behavioural economics, and examines the external, social and internal factors that motivate engagement, questions around structural barriers to engagement are largely outside its scope.

A more holistic view of behavioural drivers

This report seeks to highlight the potential of behavioural economics to provide insights for policymakers attempting to increase rates of political engagement. Intuitively, it might be expected that a group of people with a common interest would naturally come together to pursue that goal. However, this assumption is explicitly rejected by rational choice theory. The application of the rational choice model to the idea of collective action – most notably set out in the work of Mancur Olson – concludes that individuals will only cooperate in a very limited number of circumstances, after careful assessment of the costs and benefits they stand to accrue by doing so.

An analysis of engagement behaviour based around costs and benefits clearly has some predictive power; evidence suggests that people are more willing to take part in one-off, low cost activities, for example. However, given the very limited number of scenarios in which collective action can reasonably occur, the model clearly fails to encompass the broader variety of factors which influence our engagement behaviour.

There have been few attempts so far to examine the empirical studies on behavioural economics beyond their potential to influence one-off, rapidly-taken or yes/no decisions. 'Nudging' someone into signing up for a pension or acting as a blood donor is a much simpler ambition, and therefore process, than eliciting a sustained change in behaviour that survives with time – as is required in the behaviours associated with political engagement.

Consequently, while there have been numerous behavioural economic studies on voting behaviour – one example of a relatively simple, yes/no decision –

these have not been expanded to encompass activities such as volunteering or taking part in a protest.

Analysis of 'deeper' forms of engagement activity requires a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of behaviour than is often discussed. We use the framework of behavioural economics to draw out a more accurate and holistic overview of the factors affecting engagement behaviour, particularly those generally neglected by rational choice theory. Our approach is to consider the external, internal and social drivers of behaviour in turn:

- *External drivers* refer to those traditionally at the forefront of rational choice approaches. They include the factors that a self-interested actor might consider when weighing up a decision on a cost-benefit basis. On these terms, financial costs plus the time and effort required are set against the ease, desirability and perceived effectiveness of the potential outcome.

- *Internal drivers* refer to the array of biases and cognitive tendencies common to much human decision-making.

- *Social drivers* reflect our propensity to adjust our behaviour according to the actions, perceptions and expectations of those around us. Considering the interactions between these various drivers allows policymakers to gain a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of why people behave as they do and, crucially, how to change this.

Behavioural economics does not seek to make prior assumptions about what consumers do (as rational choice theory does) but rather develops models based on empirical observations.[41] This report takes a similar approach. We first explore the model of behaviour grounded in a rational choice theory interpretation, and the evidence on the appropriateness of this paradigm in the field of political engagement. Against this backdrop, we then consider what the literature indicates about the possible incorporation of psychological and sociological drivers, in order to identify where the insights of behavioural economics may apply.

Methodology and research focus

The behavioural economic literature offers a wide variety of factors, beyond those addressed by rational choice theory, which may play a role in individuals' choices on political participation. However, there has been relatively little empirical assessment of the extent of the role played by these

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[41] Read, *Behavioural Economics*, 12.

drivers. While the statistical evidence presents a variety of data on the reasons why people might choose not to engage, the reasons why those currently involved actually choose to do so have been less well explored. If policymaking in this area is to be successful it must expand its remit from simply removing the obvious barriers to engagement. There is a clear need to ensure that policy builds on the ways in which citizens do engage.

For this reason, we decided to focus our primary research on this area, conducting focus groups to explore the motivations of those who currently take part in activities DCLG defines as being associated with political engagement. As discussed in Chapter 1, patterns of political engagement are not consistent across all sectors of society. Young people and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, in particular, tend to record lower than average rates of participation. We therefore decided to use the focus groups to explore the motivations people who both engaged politically and came from one of these two groups – i.e. those who are currently engaging, but who we might not expect to.

We can gain a more detailed picture of trends in the participation rates of young people and those from black and minority ethnic groups by taking a breakdown of Citizenship Survey data based on the types of activities being undertaken. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 above suggest that, while young people record lower levels of participation across the board, rates of civic activism are in fact relatively high amongst black and minority ethnic groups, yet lower for consultation and wider participation activities. For this reason, we decided to use the focus groups to explore the factors at play in the types of activities for which a given group recorded lower levels of engagement.

Two focus groups were held by Penn, Schoen and Berland on behalf of the Social Market Foundation. The focus groups were held on August 11 2009 in St Albans. The first group was comprised of eight 18-25 years olds who regularly took part in civic activism, civic participation or civic consultation. The second group was comprised of eight 25-60 year olds from a black and minority ethnic background, who were involved in civic participation or civic consultation. Participants came from a range of social classes and carried out a range of different forms of engagement. Findings were discussed and conclusions developed through a roundtable discussion with academics, policymakers and practitioners held in London in November 2009.

Conclusion

This chapter set out the potential insights that behavioural economics could offer to the understanding individuals' decisions to engage. The framework of external, internal and social factors can now be applied to the empirical and theoretical findings of studies into citizen engagement, to draw out a more holistic assessment of the various drivers involved. In doing so, a number of alternatives to the dominant model of rational choice-based policymaking can be explored.

Chapter 3: External drivers

> *Main messages*
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> *This chapter sets out some of the short-comings of focusing too narrowly on the costs and benefits to individuals in explaining behaviour (a failure of some forms of rational choice theory). However, it also accepts that external factors do play a part in people's decision to engage. In particular, our focus groups showed that the main external cost to engagement was around time, not money; whilst the benefits were often around career-building activities.*

In this chapter, we examine some of the external drivers that motivate citizens to engage. These approaches are traditionally at the forefront of rational choice approaches to politics, as noted above, and include financial costs, time and effort, and effectiveness of the potential outcome. We begin with a theoretical discussion of rational choice approaches, before examining the type of external motivations that arose in our primary research.

As we have seen, policymaking has traditionally been heavily reliant on the rational choice model as a basis for behavioural analysis and, as Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley point out, under these assumptions civic engagement should therefore, under these assumptions, only occur "where the costs of involvement are low and the benefits of successful action are high."[42]

Rational choice in policymaking

The design of recent policies and initiatives on political engagement reveal an emphasis on the cost-benefit model of human decision-making. The focus is largely on boosting resources for, and reducing the perceived 'costs' of engagement. The prime example of this latter point is the relaxation of rules on postal voting, which has seen a substantial increase in its use. There has also been a strong emphasis on facilitating people's access to the information and resources which might allow them to become more politically engaged.

This has involved greater use of new technologies to disseminate information, the provision of free training for community groups and the creation of organisational templates or toolkits. The 2008 Empowerment White Paper made a number of provisions in this regard, with a new initiative for local authorities to provide 'timely information to citizens' and the introduction of 'digital mentors' in deprived communities to boost residents' ability to access

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[42] Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, "Citizenship and Civic Engagement: Attitudes and Behaviour in Britain", 443-444.

information online.[43] Recent announcements have also seen sharp increases in funds and budgets on offer to community groups; community asset management and participatory budgeting are high on the agenda, with £500,000 on offer for Community Safety initiatives and a new £4m Community Fund, plus a number of other schemes including Grassroots Grants, Green Neighbourhoods and Neighbourhood Councils offering direct funding.

Regulation is another frequent fallback for policymaking. The Government's empowerment agenda includes the creation of statutory duties for local authorities and public services to engage with citizens and "reach agreement" – rather than simply consult – as exemplified in the Sustainable Communities Act (2007).[44] The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill (2009) also imposes on local authorities a duty to respond to petitions and to involve the public to the greatest possible extent.

The most explicit reliance on a rational choice-based interpretation of motivations has been exhibited in discussions around selective incentives. While this has not yet been extensively applied in the field of political engagement, many local authorities have begun to use prize draws as a spur to encourage residents to take part in consultation activities, and there has been plenty of discussion around the use of similar rewards for voters. Those in favour of such moves juxtapose the use of incentives with the alternative of compulsion, arguing that, as Tony Wright MP put it, we should "reward civic virtue, not punish civic vice".[45] No voting incentives have so far been trialled in British elections but the 2007 report of the Councillors Commission recommended using small incentives in local government elections, such as offering voters the opportunity to enter a lottery.[46]

The issue has raised some disquiet amongst politicians. Former Shadow Communities Minister Eric Pickles described the idea as "bribes" for voters.[47] Leaving aside the polemic, there is a serious point here: in a context where, rationally conceived, the actual benefit of voting for the individual is negligible, any voter who turns out encouraged by a monetary reward will be explicitly voting for reasons unrelated to democratic accountability. Consequently, any higher turnout induced by such measures cannot be taken as a sign of

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[43] Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power* (London: HMSO, 2008).
[44] Local Works Briefing Notes on the Act www.localworks.org/?q=node/4_and "Sustainable Communities Act 2007: A Guide" www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/681480.pdf
[45] Electoral Reform Society, "Incentive Voting", www.electoral-reform.org.uk/article.php?id=47.
[46] Councillors Commission, *Representing the Future*, 61.
[47] Jill Sherman, "Voters to Get IPod 'Bribe' to Beat Local Election Apathy," *the Times*, July 10, 2008, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article4305322.ece.

enhanced legitimacy – a key aim of the focus on raising turnout. Moreover, it appears this kind of sentiment may be shared by the electorate more widely: a referendum in Arizona on a proposal to offer a cash prize to a voter picked from a lottery at each election was – somewhat ironically – rejected by voters during the 2006 mid-term elections.

Some shortcomings of the rational choice model

The disquiet around the application of a rational choice framework to efforts to boost political engagement indicates some divergence on the types of motivations which people believe should, and do, operate in this area. The drivers of engagement behaviour are as significant, in terms of desired outcomes, as the action itself. While costs and benefits clearly have some impact on the types of activities people are prepared to engage in, as discussed above, the rational choice model can provide few insights on the reasons why those who do so choose to participate. Yet evidence suggests motivations for engagement are reasonably powerful. Putting aside headlines on voter apathy and lack of trust, the recent figures on engagement reveal that the numbers of people making the active choice to engage are significant (as Chapter 1 showed).

Given the variety of evidence to suggest that rational choice theory has limited use as a predictor of engagement behaviour, the issues were explored with the focus groups conducted as part of this research. What role, if any, did rational choice analysis play in their decisions on participation? When presented with the rational choice analysis (that most individuals will choose not to engage, since the costs clearly outweigh the benefits they stand to accrue through free-riding – i.e. consuming more than their fair share of a public resource or shoulder less than a fair share of the costs of its production) the response was overwhelmingly dismissive. One participant argued that the conclusion that one should free-ride, relying on others to choose to contribute, 'did not make logical sense'. Participants did not view as logical a response which relied on others choosing differently, but instead felt a rational choice would be to lead by example.

Interestingly, however, the cost-benefit analysis at the forefront of the rational model was not considered to be entirely irrelevant. No participants raised the issue of the 'costs' of engagement unprompted but all were responsive when questioned directly on the costs and benefits of engagement. While it appeared most group members had not undertaken any assessment of the costs and benefits *before* they became involved, most reported that the costs and benefits became clearer after they began to participate. Also, while costs

were mentioned, all participants felt they accrued a variety of direct personal benefits, although many of these were less tangible than the direct or concrete personal gains discussed in rational choice models.

External drivers: costs and benefits

Despite rational choice theory's calculation that the costs of collective action will generally outweigh the benefits, the drawbacks were not pronounced enough to be raised unprompted by participants. When asked by the group administrator to discuss their perceptions of the *costs* they incurred through participation, however, the key aspect raised was, unsurprisingly, time. Younger group members spoke of the impact these commitments had on their social life. In particular, those involved in more traditional civic activities found that their involvement tended to increase, quickly spreading into other areas:

> *"I became a governor in October and by December I was involved in three other subcommittees"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

> *"I do it [volunteer] on a Friday evening until 9pm and your friends are texting you inviting you out and you can't go"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

As both of these focus group members found an initial decision to engage, quickly 'snowballed' and became a bigger and bigger part of their lives. For the first member, in particular, a decision to get involved to boost her career prospects quickly became more and more demanding on her time as she took on new roles.

Other than the time and effort involved, there were few mentions of other costs. Financial costs, for example, were negligible, though a few participants spoke of the emotional costs; one member of the black and minority ethnic group reported that his involvement with a local youth group in a deprived area had "opened my eyes to a sense of injustice, which has kept me up some nights".

In strong contrast to standard rational choice theories on collective action, all focus group participants were very vocal about the *benefits* they acquired through engaging, which most believed outweighed any costs. Interestingly, altruism did not feature prominently in these discussions; all participants felt they were receiving personal benefits from their engagement, with 'personal

satisfaction' the most common phrase used. There was some division, however, on the nature of these personal benefits. For most of the young people there was some consensus that the main benefits were linked to a sense of efficacy – witnessing the visible results of their efforts and the sense of recognition and status they gained from taking part. For older members of the black and minority ethnic group in particular, their satisfaction was less closely tied to results and status and more to the act of participation itself. When asked whether they would continue to take part in their activities if they felt their contribution was not making a tangible difference, many claimed they would continue to do so.

> *"Getting benefits out of what you do is inevitable – but I wouldn't call it selfish if you go in wanting to get benefits – that is a desire for personal growth"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

> *"You always think that you don't want to do that – but then afterwards when you see that your opinion was heard and you start to change things then it makes it seem worthwhile"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

> *"Just walking down the street and getting that recognition gives me a great feeling"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

> *"The satisfaction comes from me knowing I am doing something and giving my time and resources."*
> > *Group 2: Black and minority ethnic*

This evidence throws up certain questions around the usefulness of rational choice theory as an explanatory model. Firstly, an analysis of the costs and benefits appears to have little to do with the initial triggers of engagement behaviour. Secondly, even once costs and benefits of an activity become more evident, they do not appear to reflect the calculation envisaged by rational choice economists. There is clearly a wider range of incentives at play than narrow self-interest, and even where personal benefits are discussed they tend to be less tangible than the direct, material rewards associated with rational choice theory.

Conclusion

So where does this contradictory evidence leave the rational choice model of collective action? Rothenberg argues that the rational choice model analysis rests on "a trio of very strong assumptions: (1) that individuals have full information; (2) that they are only interested in economic rewards and (3) that they maximise without error."[48] All three are obviously rarely realised in the real world. They point to the two main omissions of rational choice theory which we will explore in the following sections. Conditions 1 and 3 are related to the realities of the human decision-making process, limited as it is by our cognitive capabilities and swayed by the effects of behavioural biases. Condition 2 highlights the fact that – even if conditions 1 and 3 were met and the ideal decision-maker did exist – the rational choice model may still not form a complete picture of all the *motivations* which might induce an individual to engage.

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[48] Lawrence S. Rothenberg, *Linking Citizens to Government: Interest Group Politics at Common Cause* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 19.

Chapter 4: Internal drivers

Main messages

This chapter examines the ways in which individuals make decisions in practice. We do not have the time to weigh up the costs and benefits of each action, therefore, we use a variety of shortcuts to help us come to decisions. This is relevant when examining how we engage. From the literature and focus groups several decision-making shortcuts were discussed. First, we found that force of habit is a powerful indicator of whether an individual continues to engage. Second, individuals are often motivated by loss aversion rather than by what they could gain. This raises real challenges for government in a time of cuts to public services. Third, we tend to honour publicly-stated commitments. This technique is used by a variety of organisations that rely on individuals' involvement. Last, self-perception is an important driver of engagement: we engage if we feel that we are the 'type of person' that gets involved one issue or another or we see others 'like us' acting.

In this study, we use the term 'internal factors' to encompass all the common behavioural biases and cognitive limitations which prevent the reality of human decision-making from reflecting the rational model. Instead, the formation of our intentions and their translation into action remain subject to the influence of common behavioural traits, or 'heuristics'. These biases frequently create what are referred to by behavioural economists as 'attitude-behaviour gaps'; a disconnect between our stated intentions and the reality of our actions.

One thing to note is that, in general, a reliance on decision-making heuristics is not necessarily irrational. Given the number of decisions the average individual takes every day, coupled with the volume of information they would have to process in order to consider themselves 'fully informed' on each decision, the costs of taking each decision on the basis of a rational, cost-benefit analysis tend to become unfeasibly high. The use of cognitive shortcuts can often prove a quick and effective means of negotiating choices, particularly repeated or 'on-the-spot' decisions. Our use of heuristics is evident in all areas of life, for example continually selecting the same brand of toothpaste (even if others may offer better value for money).

However, such is the pervasive nature of these cognitive shortcuts that they may also begin to affect the way we approach more significant, less routine decisions. The political arena is no exception; Kuklinski and Quirk cite some of

the most common heuristics at play in American political decision-making as being: "attributing issue positions on the basis of a candidate's demographics or those of his supporters; using evidence about personal character to make inferences about political character; assuming that the president controls the economy; and using returns in early presidential primaries as evidence on the candidates' merit."[49]

There is some dispute over the quality of decisions made on the basis of these common political heuristics. Some authors, such as Dalton, believe the use of decision-making heuristics "can lead to reasonable political choices in most instances."[50] Kuklinski and Quirk, on the other hand, remain more sceptical, stating that "people often lack the contextual knowledge to use heuristics intelligently, or in fact use them at all."[51] This debate suggests a need for identifying the political heuristics at play in any given situation. When attempting to engage the public in negotiation on specific and technical policy matters there also needs to be recognition that – given the complexity of information they may be required to process – heuristics are likely to play a prominent role in their choices.

Shortcuts for decision making

In this section we examine the common decision making heuristics. Perhaps the most powerful heuristic is the force of habit. Many of our decisions are based not simply on present or future costs and benefits, but on the choices we have taken when faced with similar decisions in the past. This is particularly evident in decisions to engage which take place repeatedly, like voting. As Fowler highlights,

> *"studies of cohort and age effects on turnout…suggest that voting behaviour is persistent over time and related to past behaviour… Notice, for example, the turnout behaviour of respondents in the 1972, 1974 and 1976 panels of the National Election Study. About 70% of the respondents in this sample either voted in all three elections or abstained in all three of them."[52]*

In his study on variations in voting behaviour between different generations, Goerres also found that non-political factors were most important in explaining

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[49] James H. Kuklinski and Paul J. Quirk, *Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1998), 3-4.
[50] Dalton, "Citizen Attitudes and Political Behavior", 921.
[51] Kuklinski and Quirk, *Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion*, 6.
[52] James Fowler, "Habitual Voting and Behavioural Turnout," *The Journal of Politics,* 68: 2 (2006), 338.

the higher turnout of older voters, and that these factors were closely linked to the process of habituation.[53] He pointed out that "voters are influenced by their own past political behaviour. If a person is mobilised to go and vote in one election, he or she will have a higher likelihood of going to the polls in the next election."[54]

Outcomes from the focus groups with young and black and minority ethnic participants revealed a number of instances in which internal biases could potentially influence engagement behaviour. The way in which behaviour becomes habitualised was particularly evident. Participants – particularly those who engaged via traditional channels, such as school governors or activists within the church – reported that their initial involvement quickly extended into other areas, including contact with elected officials and attendance at public meetings. The specific form their involvement took gradually became less important than the process of participation itself. When asked on the potential consequences if she could no longer participate through her church, one member of the black and minority ethnic group replied, "even if it wasn't in a formal way, I would do it in an informal way."

As well as the wide-ranging influence of habits, there are a number of other common cognitive shortcuts evident in all aspects of decision-making behaviour. A first example is the role of loss aversion. Experiments reveal that most people display a tendency to place far more value on what they currently own than the value they placed on acquiring it in the first place.[55] In the case of engagement, Jordan and Maloney identify a variant of this tendency in what they term the 'minimax regret bias'.[56] Rather than viewing collective action as a simple means to achieve public 'goods', they suggest many people participate to avoid collective 'bads'. We choose to vote, for example, to guard against the regret we might feel if the outcome was worse than our present situation, rather than to seize an opportunity to improve current arrangements. Platt's study of political engagement amongst the African-American population in the United States found that people were particularly galvanised when facing a perceived external threat to their current situation.[57]

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[53] Achim Goerres, "Why Are Older People More Likely to Vote? The Impact of Ageing on Electoral Turnout in Europe," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 9 (2007), 109.
[54] Goerres, "Why Are Older People More Likely to Vote? The Impact of Ageing on Electoral Turnout in Europe", 111.
[55] Daniel Kahneman et al., "Experimental Tests of the Endowment Effect and the Coase Theorem," *Journal of Political Economy* 98 (1990), 1325–48, cited in Colin F. Camerer and George Loewenstein, "Behavioral Economics: Past, Present, Future" (2002 draft).
[56] Grant Jordan and William Maloney, "How Bumble-Bees Fly: Accounting for Public Interest Participation," *Political Studies,* 44 (1996), 17.
[57] Matthew B. Platt, "Participation for What? A Policy-Motivated Approach to Political Activism," *Political Behavior,* 30: 3 (2008), 394.

The focus groups provided some evidence that loss aversion acted as a significant driver for engagement. Several participants mentioned their desire to engage had been triggered by the threat of a 'negative' event – for example, the removal of local amenities. A member of the young people's group was spurred to action by plans to demolish a local skate park, which she had used as a teenager. In several cases, evidence from the focus groups implied that it was not so much a careful balance of positives and negatives that triggered engagement, but the heavy weighting of negatives that led to action.

Another common behavioural bias is our tendency to honour our stated commitments. We are much more likely to undertake an action if we have previously publicly committed to do so in some way, regardless of the costs and benefits involved.[58] In their analysis of civic engagement behaviour, Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley found that "people who are asked to undertake a particular action are more likely to be civically active than those who are not". While stating commitment to a course of action increases the likelihood we will undertake it, this tendency is particularly marked when those who have requested this commitment are people who we value and respect, such as a close friend, a family member or someone in a position of authority.[59] They conclude that these kinds of mobilisation mechanisms are vital to raising participation levels; "exhortations to virtue are unlikely to success. Invitations to participate in (specific) activities may well be more successful. If you don't ask, you don't get."[60]

In the focus groups there was also a clear desire from participants to honour commitments once they had made them, particularly when given to friends or family members. Many reported that once they had committed to take part they felt compelled to turn up even where their participation conflicted with other engagements.

A final area in which a lack of perfect information may affect our political decision-making process is the effect of self-perception on our willingness to engage. In some cases this may lead to a representation bias. This refers to the following line of logic: "I am a fairly typical member of my political reference group. If I vote, it is pretty likely that others will vote as well. Being like me, they will tend to act like me. Hence I shall indeed vote, to bring it

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[58] Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000).
[59] Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, "Citizenship and Civic Engagement: Attitudes and Behaviour in Britain", 461.
[60] Ibid., 466.

about that others vote as well."[61] As Elster points out, "the last step in this reasoning is a slide from unexceptional diagnostic thinking to an unjustified causal argument."[62]

In the absence of concrete knowledge on the actions of others, some individuals begin to view their own behaviour as a source of information. This may in part explain why many freely choose to engage politically; they believe others like them will also choose to engage, thus increasing its effectiveness. However, some theorists believe that people's decisions to participate may simply be down to an overestimation of their own influence. As Rothenberg puts it, "a subset of the population mistakenly thinks of themselves as highly influential. They incorporate into their membership calculi their allegedly substantial contribution to the provision of collective goods (which perfectly informed contributors in large groups will recognise to be zero). Individuals whose perceptions of their efficacy put them at the upper end of the population distribution join in disproportionate numbers". [63]

The following section explores the role of social factors – the norms, choices and behaviour of those around us. Most theorists argue that social factors exert a powerful influence both on political heuristics (Dalton argues that much political decision-making relies on social group cues[64]) and even on our sense of political rationality.

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[61] Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", 144.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Rothenberg, *Linking Citizens to Government: Interest Group Politics at Common Cause*, 20.
[64] Dalton, "Citizen Attitudes and Political Behavior", 921.

Chapter 5: Social drivers

Main messages

In this chapter, we examine the social drivers of engagement. Evidence shows that the impact of the attitudes, behaviour and perceptions of others exerts a powerful influence on our actions. In particular, we found that group identification stimulates engagement. The focus groups we carried out emphasised the role of social networks – formal and informal – in triggering engagement. Policymakers, we argue, must engage with these networks if they are to boost citizen engagement.

Human beings are social animals. The existence of social networks and our attachment to these reference groups can act as a vital spur to participation, and is a factor which tends to be neglected by the rational choice model. As Marwell and Oliver put it, a vital omission of rational choice theory is that it neglects the "*interdependence* among actors, where interdependence may be defined as…behaviour that takes account of the effect of one's participation in collective action on the participation of others."[65] Potential participants in this scenario do possess some information about the actions of others and are also aware that the impact of each individual's contribution to collective goods will vary according to the choices of others. Social factors remain the key to explaining collective action, in terms of both motivations and outcomes.

The importance we attach to acceptance and membership of our social group means the impact of the attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of others exert a powerful influence on our actions. Elster defines social norms as initially arising "through the expectations of other people, together with their expression of approval and disapproval."[66] In few places is the effect of social norms more pronounced than in the field of politics. As Bekkers points out, citizens participate in the political arena "not only to advocate their interests in politics…but also to find meaning in life, to express their social identity, and to contribute to the wellbeing of others."[67]

Similarly, Platt finds that social contact serves not only as an outcome of participation, but also as a vital driver; "social and information networks raise individuals' levels of political interest and knowledge, increasing their

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[65] Gerard Marwell and Pamela Oliver, *The Critical Mass in Collective Action: A Micro-Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9.
[66] Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", 153.
[67] Bekkers, "Participation in Voluntary Associations: Relations With Resources, Personality, and Political Values", 439.

likelihood of engaging in activism".[68] On the other side of this equation there is concern that the recent public outcry over apparent electoral and political malaise may inadvertently risk reinforcing a social norm that says 'don't bother to engage politically, no-one else thinks it matters either'. Our social context is therefore central to our political values and behaviour and can act both as either an incentive for, or a barrier to, political engagement.

The first issue to note is that discussions on 'social context' can encompass a wide variety of different settings. On a personal level, it can refer to the people immediately around us, such as family, friends and colleagues, with whom we identify and have regular contact. As touched on in previous discussions of the representation bias, this forms the basis of our reference group. On a broader level, our social context can refer to the norms and identifications specific to the area in which we live and even national political trends and cultures – further discussed in the next section.

When analysing engagement behaviour, the impact of these social contexts may be complex to discern. As Kenny sets out, drawing divisions between 'individual' and 'collective' forms of participation may be useful, but also problematic, since attempting to differentiate these categories "could mask effects from the social environment on particular forms of individual activity. For example, while the act of voting is certainly performed in isolation, the process leading up to this act may well involve interactions with members of various social contexts."[69] In this sense, it is clear that social factors – over and above rational or internal factors – are instrumental in the area of collective action.

Motivations: social learning, duty and non-material incentives

For many advocates of a rational choice approach the desire for social contact and group attachment would ultimately render engagement ineffective. The coordination of action within large groups would make the temptation to free-ride virtually impossible to avoid. Yet there is much evidence which would appear to negate this claim. Firstly, the existence of large groups is in fact generally a powerful driver of further participation. As Jordan and Maloney put it, "advertising a large membership reassures the potential member that it is sensible to join: can 100,000 others be wrong?"[70] This claim attests to the significance of social learning – the ways in which we look to those around us

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[68] Platt, "Participation for What? A Policy-Motivated Approach to Political Activism", 395.

[69] Christopher B. Kenny, "Political Participation and Effects From the Social Environment," *American Journal of Political Science,* 36: 1 (1992), 259-260.

[70] Jordan and Maloney, "How Bumble-Bees Fly: Accounting for Public Interest Participation", 7.

for clues on how to behave. If those around us make certain choices, we are more likely to believe in the importance and even the rationality of those actions.

The suggestive effect of other contributors is particularly marked if the people involved are those with whom we feel a particular connection or whose opinions we value. A review of the effects of group identification on political protest amongst farmers in the Netherlands, found – perhaps unsurprisingly – that group identification stimulates protest participation and that the strength of this identification was closely related to the physical and cultural proximity of the group (regional ties were stronger, while national or European ties were weaker).[71] It also concluded that successful group mobilisation was based on social, rather than merely professional, bonds and that collective action tended to be motivated by the strength of this in-group identification, rather than out-group differentiation.[72] This suggests that the *quality* of the social ties within a group, not simply the existence of some form of connection or a perceived threat, is also significant in predicting levels of collective action.

Yet, as well as personal, non-material benefits to political participation, many participants also cite a less tangible motivation: a sense of duty. As Elster puts it: "the relevance of duty to collective action is captured in the phrase, but what if everyone did that? What if everyone left their beer bottles on the beach, stayed home on voting day, or fiddled with their tax returns? Duty enjoins us to do what we can rationally will that everyone should do."[73]

The notion tends to be grounded in a sense of historical awareness, cultural loyalty or a desire to 'give something back' to a community, particularly one from which an individual has already drawn benefits. When questioned on their motivation for voting in the 2005 general election, one respondent answered, "people died for me to be able to vote. I had this nagging voice in my head."[74] This sense of social reciprocity, to present and even historical communities, dictates a great deal of human behaviour. At its most basic level, this is encapsulated in the notion of gifts, and their role in the political economy.

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[71] Marga de Weerd and Bert Klandermans, "Group Identification and Political Protest: Farmers' Protest in the Netherlands," *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 29 (2009), 1091.
[72] de Weerd and Klandermans, "Group Identification and Political Protest: Farmers' Protest in the Netherlands", 1091.
[73] Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", 142.
[74] Electoral Commission, *Election 2005 Turnout: How Many, Who and Why?* (London: Electoral Commission, 2005), 28.

Social factors: Findings from the focus groups

If policy is to successfully build on motivations for participation, the initial trigger for political engagement is the most important area to understand. Obviously, such triggers vary widely according to personal circumstance, but there are certain common elements revealed in participants' responses. This aspect of engagement behaviour was explored in some detail with focus groups involving young and black and minority ethnic participants. Discussions revealed that the initial spurs to engage were almost always linked to people's involvement in particular social networks. In some cases, the decision to engage was taken in response to a particular event affecting an individual's local or cultural community, in others it was due to a personal request.

Throughout the discussions on motivations, this primary role of social networks was consistently highlighted. The power of suggestion, both explicit and implicitly through the behaviour of those around us, cannot be understated in this respect. The term 'social network' is obviously a broad one, and for these participants encompassed ties to friends and families, the local community, traditional institutions such as the church and more contemporary ideas of community such as the workplace. Involvement in particular social networks varies between different sectors of society. One notable difference between the two groups was the fact that, while the black and minority ethnic group, and older participants in particular, were often heavily involved in traditional, usually religious, channels of participation, the young people's group were much more likely to engage via their workplace, course of study or even through online social networking.

Traditional institutions and the local community

Ties to institutions traditionally deemed to facilitate participation, and local or cultural communities, were particularly pronounced among the black and minority ethnic group members. While party political affiliations were virtually non-existent, the church was an important catalyst of participation, particularly for older, female group members. Communal involvement and contribution appears to become a norm in certain religious communities, with members reporting they helped with the day-to-day running of the church, such as Sunday School, as well as offering other services to other members, such as counselling. One participant in the black and minority ethnic group recalled that they had become involved, "through my family being involved and going to church – and then I began to feel like I am not contributing anything really."

For the black and minority ethnic group the concrete institution of the church formed, in many cases, the basis of ties to a wider local or a cultural community. A sense of belonging within these communities was another important means of motivating collective action. Some discussed the stereotypes they felt they faced as black women, for example, and the desire to challenge and overcome these prejudices through collective action. Others felt they had been beneficiaries of community initiatives themselves and were driven by a desire to reciprocate. One participant reported he had turned from a "user to a provider":

> *"Culturally, from my background, it's something everybody wants to do. Everybody's living in poverty per se and everyone has this dream of being a Robin Hood figure. You know, going away, making it and giving back. You hear all the rappers talking about it. So it was instilled in me that if I grew up and became successful, you know, I wanted to return to my hood on my nice shiny horse and give something back."*
> *Group member: Black and minority ethnic*

Yet, for young people in particular, such traditional communal institutions are less relevant. A marked contrast in discussions with younger participants was the way in which non-traditional 'communities', such as the workplace, had provided a forum through which to engage. For example, one participant who worked as a personal trainer described how he had been approached through contacts at work:

> *"I got asked by the football coaches I work with if I had done coaching before and I said I had and they asked if I would do it on a voluntary basis"*
> *Group member: Young people*

However in these cases where activities were tied to a particular issue or profession, they were generally limited to this area and did not lead to other forms of participation.

Peer pressure and persuasion

In less formally organised social networks, the role of suggestion or persuasion from immediate peer groups was another important driver of participation. Participants cited upbringing, contacts in the workplace and the encouragement of friends and family as a crucial element of the trigger which prompted them to begin participating:

> *"My parents were really community-minded – so I have always seen these things while growing up, and got that message about giving back to the community"*
> > *Group 2: Black and minority ethnic*

> *"[On motivations] Mine was my sister nagging me to come and help out at her daughter's school"*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

> *"Loads of people kept coming up to me at work and telling me I'd be really good at it – I suppose because I am so young and normally school governors are so old and set in their ways… so I just thought I'll go and do it."*
> > *Group 1: Young people*

These kinds of drivers, over more traditional, institutionalised forms, appeared to be particularly relevant for young people's participation. Often, incentives came from within the workplace and many of the activities they undertook were directly related to their careers or course of study. A sense of efficacy – of their awareness that they possessed certain skills and that they had the ability to offer these to others – was a common strand in the discussions. Most were also keen to see the tangible results of their participation and strongly believed their contribution was making a difference.

In some cases participation was not down to a direct request, but a chance event or problem which provoked a desire to respond. In these cases too the initial recourse was to others in the community in a similar situation.

> *"You're desperate for services and you're just not getting it, so you talk to other people and find out they're in the same situation. So you start to figure out what to do, who to contact"*
> > *Group 2: Black and minority ethnic*

Benefits of participation

Yet, despite the obvious significance of social networks to the initial motivations to engage, there was little sense that participants viewed their engagement activities as primarily a social undertaking – the 'solidary' incentives for engagement discussed by Jordan and Maloney. None of the younger group members reported that their involvement in engagement

activities had reinforced or extended their friendship groups; the motivations they mentioned were more closely linked to self-efficacy and recognition than to the fun of taking part or the social contact involved. In short, they were far more concerned with purposive, rather than solidary, incentives. Unlike those who took part via more traditional social institutions, the younger group members, were not generally part of friendship groups who also participated.

> *"I have a few friends that aren't really interested in it at all – but then it is not for everyone is it"*
>> *Group 1:Young people*

> *"Most people think it is hilarious that I have governors meetings to go to – but I think, well, you should be going as well"*
>> *Group 1: Young people*

> *"I haven't really met anyone else [in terms of making friends] – though I have met a lot of people in the wider community"*
>> *Group 1: Young people*

So evidence from the focus groups pointed to the importance of social networks as the initial trigger for participation. Yet solidary incentives were less significant once participants began engaging, and the benefits most often cited were related to less tangible personal gains such as status or a sense of efficacy. In this sense, it is not necessary to discount the rational choice model, but to use the findings of behavioural economics to expand its framework. Following, we put forward some proposals on what this revised model might encompass.

Conclusion: towards a more complete view of human motivation

It is clearly impossible to draw concrete conclusions on the motivations for collective action. As Elster puts it, "the importance of mixed motivations in collective action should be clear. It is not only that different forms of collective action are held up by different motivations. A given case of collective action will also in most cases have participants who are motivated by quite different concerns."[75]

The paradox invoked by the rational choice model has presented problems, given its pre-eminence within many policymaking spheres. As Petracca argues, "rational choice omits far too much from the complex scheme of

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[75] Elster, "Rationality, Morality, and Collective Action", 154.

political life to be entirely reliable and useful as either explanatory or predictive theory."[76] But this does not mean we can discount its conclusions. Indeed, evidence from the focus groups suggests that individuals do take the costs and benefits of communal activities into account when taking decisions on participation. Rather than an attempt to replace the rational choice model with another, Jordan and Maloney sum up by stating "the history of the literature [on engagement] is of a battle to reinsert non-material incentives into the calculation."[77]

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[76] Mark P. Petracca, "The Rational Choice Approach to Politics: A Challenge to Democratic Theory," *The Review of Politics,* 53: 2 (1991), 289.
[77] Jordan and Maloney, "How Bumble-Bees Fly: Accounting for Public Interest Participation", 11.

Chapter 6: Summary of policy implications

Main messages

This chapter summarises some of the policy conclusions that flow from our analysis and brings together points made earlier in the report. It suggests policies and approaches that policymakers can use, drawing on the external, economic and social drivers of behaviour identified in this report.

The focus groups highlighted a number of common themes in the decision-making processes and behaviour of those currently engaging politically. As we saw in Chapter 3, regarding external factors, focus group members argued that it was time not money that constituted the main 'cost' to getting involved. If policymakers focused on the financial incentives to involvement (vouchers for voting, for example) they would miss the point of engagement for many citizens. Policies to encourage involvement should be based around compensating for the time, not financial costs, involved. This could be achieved by working with employers to allow **more volunteering opportunities in work time.** This would also allow citizens to develop skills, both inside the workplace and in the wider community, such as team-building, leadership and a variety of soft skills.

It was also found that the initial decision to engage often involved recognition of the personal benefits and was not purely altruistic. For many participants engagement relied on the provision of what could be called 'CV-building' opportunities. Generally, those who took part in single-issue, non-traditional activities framed their messages in terms of the potential for personal gain (by contrast, those involved in institutionally-coordinated activities tended to focus more on the benefits to the local community and wider society). One focus group member in the younger group, for example, commented that engagement was a way to set yourself apart from your peers and gain skills and experience that they did not have:

> *"I would persuade younger kids so they could see the benefits from a young age. It would set them apart from the majority of their peers and stand for difference."*
> *Group 1: Young people*

As such, we argued that **policymakers should focus on what individuals can gain from greater engagement as well as the wider social benefits.** Evidence from our focus group suggested that once there was an initial

decision to engage, this often 'snowballed' into other areas and greater commitment.

As we discussed in Chapter 4, internal factors for policymakers (and for volunteer groups looking to boost the numbers of people involved) include the well-known approach to **get a publically stated commitment or agreement on when, where and for whom engagement will occur.** (It is, for example, an approach used by those who run the National Blood Service, which signs donors up well in advance for specific appointments.)

We saw in Chapter 1 that that the proportion of people who say that are interested in engaging is much higher than the proportion that do. If this is true, there is a latent desire to get involved amongst a large section of the population. This takes an initial push from someone else. The obvious consequence of this is that **policymakers should work with community groups, and other organisations that provide engagement opportunities, to fund active community 'recruitment strategies', rather than simply providing information and awaiting volunteers to act on it.**

Again, once engaged the literature shows that in many cases this behaviour becomes habitual and is likely to continue. Citizens also respond to 'people like them'. This could be a particularly powerful way on getting young people in particular more involved. There is a large amount of work on 'imitation' and the **greater use of role models to encourage involvement should be explored further** – footballers have far greater influence than politicians for many sections on the population. Government and the Football Association are aware of this, but there is room for development around political engagement. Similar arguments can be made for singers and film stars, and in general 'social marketing' is underused. The powerful role of imitation was reflected in the comments of one black and minority ethnic focus group member, who argued:

> *"Young black men need role models. With your input they would [be more likely] to become fully active members of society."*
> *Group 2: Black and minority ethnic*

More difficult for government in a recession is the role that loss aversion has on boosting engagement. Evidence from the literature and focus groups showed the powerful effect that the threat of closure to existing services has on citizens. This is particularly problematic for policymakers as they come to decommission services (sometimes for more efficient versions). Recent

moves in public policy to **engage citizens in decommissioning processes** (such as citizens' juries and collective commissioning) offer one way around this challenge, and provide a constructive opportunity for engagement.

As Chapter 5 showed, evidence from the focus groups and literature showed that the triggers of participation were centred on social networks – both institutionalised and informal. Even where the decision to participate was in response to a chance event, action was generally coordinated through a pre-existing social group.

Interestingly, these social networks were not often political ones; although the participants were all people who considered themselves to be politically active in the community, only one person across both groups was a member of a political party. Policymakers must respond to the different ways in which different groups get involved. There is no one size fits all approach. There was a clear division between the patterns of activity between the two focus groups (which reflects Inglehart's theories set out in Chapter 1); young people were far more likely to have become involved in non-traditional activities – often through the workplace or their course of study – and to remain focused on a specific issue.

In contrast, the spectrum of activities amongst the black and minority ethnic group was much broader; six members were involved in local consultation groups or had attended public meetings; four were involved in local charities or pressure groups; three had contacted elected officials and two had taken part in public demonstrations. They were also far more likely to participate via institutions, most notably the church. As such, **policymakers must respond to social networks as they are, not as they were. This means providing information and links on social networking sites in order to engage, as well as providing information via traditional institutions, such as unions, schools and religious organisations.**