

'Participation, Participation, Participation' - discussing active citizenship.

Paper for presentation at PSAI conference 2006.

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I would like to thank Ivo Hartman and Judith Baltus of the Instituut voor publiek en politiek in Amsterdam, Alex Markham, Malcolm Rawlings and Nina Morris of the Electoral Commission UK, Zandria Pauncefort of the Institute for Citizenship, London and Cecilia Fonseca and Teresa Petrangolini of the Cittadinanzattiva, Rome for their assistance.

INTRODUCTION

An active democratic citizenry ensures broad deliberative participation and can strengthen democracy as decisions to which more people contribute are likely to be better and ones to which people are more likely to adhere (Honohan, 2005:173).

In recent times much attention has been paid to the concept of active citizenship. In 2005 the Council of Europe launched its year of Citizenship through education. Later that year the Democracy Commission in its final report recommended a number of specific actions to enhance what it called active democratic citizenship. Active citizenship is also an issue of significant personal interest to an Taoiseach Bertie Ahern and was reflected in the launch of the Task force on active citizenship by him earlier this year.

This paper through an examination of the recent discussions and developments in Ireland aims to: explore definitions of active citizenship; analyse the current debate in Ireland; assess good practise and recommend the part an Independent Electoral Commission in Ireland would play in enhancing active citizenship.

WHY ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP ?

Reduced to its roots 'demos' (people) and 'kratos' (power), democracy is the 'rule of the people'. Popular control, where citizens are sovereign and have an *'equal right to a say and to make their contribution'*, is intrinsic to democracy (Beetham, 2005 :2). A healthy democracy, therefore, requires active citizens, for *'without citizen participation and the rights, the freedoms and the means to participate, the principle of popular control over government cannot begin to be realised'* (IDEA, 2002: 14)

Dahl argues that a fully democratic system contains

1. Effective participation, where citizens have sufficient and equal opportunities to make their preferences, to put questions on the public agenda and so forth
2. Enlightened understanding where there are plentiful and equal opportunities for citizens to develop and state their choices in a matter;
3. Voting equality at the decisive stage where every citizen is assured of the equal weight of his/her judgement at the decisive stage of collective decision-making;
4. Control of the agenda where citizens decide as to what issues are covered by the above processes;
5. Inclusiveness where citizenship powers are granted 'to all mature persons with a legitimate stake in the polity'. (Held, 2006: 271)

In practice, however, democracy is 'critical and contestable' (Arblaster, 1987:1). It is critical to the extent that it is not perfect. No system of democracy fulfils the above criteria for a fully democratic system. Yet democracy is also dynamic and fluid, it is 'contestable' in that it is open to reflection, reform and renewal.

The recent endeavours at a European and national level to promote active citizenship have, to varying degrees, attempted to enhance the quality of the democratic system through emphasis on citizen (re)-engagement. Yet what is meant by active citizenship?

WHAT IS ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP ?

Citizenship tends to be discussed in terms of the relationship between the State and the citizen where rights and responsibilities are confined to territorial boundaries. Faulks describes citizenship as '*a political concept, defined by a package of rights and responsibilities that express the form of social membership in a given political community. It is both a dynamic and contested concept as rights and responsibilities change over time*'. (2005:2). It has also been defined as '*the capacity to fully participate in society by making personal contributions to the common good, being recognised as a unique individual, and finding public space in which to self-develop, change, and mature.*' (Dennard, 2006).

Liberal theorists view the protection of and the maximisation of individual interests as the core role of a political system and thereby stress the legal dimension of citizenship. Communitarian perspectives, on the other hand, highlight individuals' relations within society and argue that citizenship is 'socially embedded'. (Taskforce on active citizenship, 2006:1).

The Democracy Commission¹, drew its definition of active citizenship from theories of civic republicanism. In particular it spoke of active democratic citizenship which *'emphasises freedom in self-government where citizens, who do not necessarily share cultural or ethnic identity but are interdependent in terms of a common fate, form an involuntary community to act in solidarity, share common goods and jointly exercise some collective direction over their lives'* (Harris, 2005: xx). It concluded that active democratic citizenship requires:

- A cognitive dimension - An awareness of interdependence, that is all groups and individuals in society are dependent on one another no matter how weak or strong. Society shares public goods that can only be *'realised if there is a significant body of citizens who have a sense of common concerns and who are prepared to take into account in their actions the common good or wider interests of, for example, the environment and culture that they share with others'* (Honohan, 2005:172).
- A dispositional dimension - This involves civic self-restraint that is taking on responsibility for what happens in society such as recycling waste, voting, taking part in jury duty and so forth.
- A practical dimension - Openness to deliberative argument. This refers to how citizens engage in politics. It is important to stress that the active citizen is not necessarily an obedient citizen. The active citizen may challenge authority, where necessary, not only for his/her own interests but in the interests of other sections of society when these are threatened. *'The point of active citizenship is to bring about deliberative participation among those who, while having many different interests and perspectives, share a public sphere and common future'* (Honohan, 2005: 174). Openness to deliberative debate is underpinned by a commitment to tolerance and recognition and acceptance of the multiplicity of perspectives that exist in modern societies and the need to respect and consider them.

At the first meeting of the task force on active citizenship, the Taoiseach borrowing from a famous John F. Kennedy quote outlined what he meant by active citizenship, stating: *'I think active citizenship is asking not what your community can do for you, but what you can do for your community.'* Although the taskforce refers to Professor Honohan's three-dimensional definition in its background working paper it has developed a wider definition of active citizenship that incorporates civic participation and

¹ Democracy Commission was established by two think tanks, TASC and Democratic Dialogue in response to concerns about declining democratic participation. In its final report entitled 'engaging citizens- the case for democratic renewal' spoke of active democratic citizenship. It made specific recommendations to engage citizens through: democratic citizenship education; increased and enhanced opportunities for participation, particularly in local democracy; the removal of procedural obstacles to electoral participation; strengthened powers for the legislature and improved transparency and accountability to assist public understanding and scrutiny of political decisions, to name but a few. (Harris, 2005:122-123)

formal volunteering/community involvement. This concept of active citizenship is reflective of its terms of reference which are to assess citizen participation across the main areas of civic, community, cultural, occupational and recreational life.

As part of its public consultation process the Taskforce states that

'Active citizenship may include membership of a residents' association or lobby group, or volunteering to help out in a local sports club or simply being active and caring about the local neighbourhood, the environment as well as larger global and national issues. For the purposes of this consultation it is proposed to focus mainly on the following areas of active citizenship: civic participation and formal volunteering/community involvement' (2006:2-3)

Recognising the invaluable role of formal (and informal) volunteering and community involvement in Irish society the author is nonetheless concerned that this broader definition risks undermining the importance of active citizenship to democracy for a number of reasons. Firstly, not all community or voluntary activity meet the three dimensions of active citizenship e.g awareness of interdependency, civic responsibility (self-restraint) and deliberative engagement.

Secondly, democracy is a process through which collective decisions impact on the day-to-day lives of its citizens. It does not require that everyone is the author of every decision. However democratic self-government at the very minimum does require that people can have their say on matters that affect them. This requires active democratic citizens as defined by the Democracy Commission. To achieve this citizens must have the capacity to fully participate. Research has, however, shown that those who under-participate (for example, young people, some minority groups, people living in socially disadvantaged areas) face barriers that undermine this capacity².

These barriers can be categorised in terms of mobilisation and facilitation. Mobilisation involves creating awareness of the relevance of politics and participation to citizens' everyday lives and requires in turn facilitation. Facilitation refers to the widespread provision of accessible information on the opportunities, methods, criteria for democratic participation. It includes the facilitation of the process of participation from ease of joining the electoral register, to accessing polling stations to opportunities for meaningful participation. Facilitation also involves regular opportunities for meaningful participation.

Barriers to active democratic citizenship include: low belief in one's ability to influence decisions; lack of perceived/real political choice; not being on the electoral register, absence on the day of polling, no interest in politics, disillusionment with the political system, lack of information/knowledge.³

² See Democracy Commission final report.

³ For a comprehensive list see Smyth, Graham 2005 *'Beyond the Ballot – 57 democratic innovations from around the world'* A report for the Power Inquiry, London: Short Run Press

Possible methods to promote participation include: automatic registration through Personal Public Service (PPS) Number; weekend voting; lowering the voting age; compulsory voting; postal voting; electronic voting; developing new participatory structures e.g. deliberative polls, citizen juries; direct/indirect initiatives; establishing an independent Electoral Commission. The rest of this paper will, with reference to data gathered at interviews with a number of organisations that promote active citizenship across a range of European countries, outline the possible functions, finances and governance of an Irish Independent Electoral Commission.

INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION⁴

This was one of the Democracy Commission's recommendations. In terms of active democratic citizenship it would have a specific part to play as in addressing mobilisation and facilitation barriers to democratic participation

Functions

Its core function would be to promote and facilitate political participation in a non-partisan manner.

1. Promote public awareness of the political, electoral, and registration systems by:
 - organising debates, meetings, conferences on topical political issues;
 - developing new forms of communication between citizens, politicians and civil servants through websites and the production of educational material in digital form and print. For example the UK's Electoral Commission has produced the Democracy Cookbook, a comprehensive and innovative resource pack containing independent information about how politics works, what democratic institutions do and why they matter. In the Netherlands the Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek (IPP) has created numerous user friendly and interactive websites. One such website called 'all about the elections' provides practical information on how to register, what a spoiled vote is, what can be done if you are away on the day of an election, information on whether Dutch people living abroad can vote and information on voting by proxy. Other webpages include: elections posters dating back to 1918 and information on all the Dutch political parties since then; 8 possible models of electoral systems (this is part of a discussion taking place in the Netherlands through the Civic Forum). The IPP has also developed a relatively new webpage that provides communities with methods and instruments with which they can participate in the decision-making process;
 - developing campaigns to reach specific groups that traditionally under-participate, for example young offenders,

⁴ It does not necessarily have to be called an electoral commission it could be a centre for participation.

- early school leavers, prisoners, people with a learning disability and so forth;
 - acting as an information house and training and resource base. It could provide resources in the form of conferences and educational materials for teachers of citizenship studies with specific emphasis on political literacy. This is of increasing relevance in Ireland as social and political education is extending to senior cycle. The Commission could also provide training and resources for youth workers, local authorities etc.
2. Work in Partnership. The Commission should work in partnership with community and voluntary groups involved in political public awareness work, through the provision of grants, materials and other informative resources.
 3. Report on the conduct of elections and referendums. This would facilitate comparison with similar data collected by the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland.
 4. Design and implement projects to encourage citizens to participate in political decision-making. For instance the Commission could organise citizens' juries on specific policy areas, deliberative day
 5. Review electoral boundaries and electoral law and procedures and advise the Government on changes.
 6. Conduct participation research for national and local government

Finances

There are a number of possibilities: funded in total by a Parliamentary committee or Government Department; partly funded by parliamentary committee or Government Department; no Government or parliamentary funding.

Funded in total by a Parliamentary committee or Government Department

In the UK, the Electoral Commission is financed in total by the House of Commons through the Speaker's committee that was established at the same time as the Commission.

Partly funded by Parliamentary committee or Government Department;

Another possibility is the IPP model. The IPP resulted from a merger between 2 foundations and 3 institutes. All had received their total funding from the Department of Social Welfare. This changed with the merger and the creation of the IPP in 1994. Currently approximately 50% of its funding is provided by the Dutch Ministry for the Interior⁵. The rest of the funding comes from commissions for work done for local, municipal and provincial authorities as well as from the European Union.

⁵ Interviews with Ivo Hartmann and Judith Balthus of the IPP in July 2006.

No Government or Parliamentary funding.

Neither the Institute for Citizenship in the UK (an independent charitable trust) nor the Cittadinanzattiva (an Italian citizen movement, registered as a consumers' association) receive funding from the State.

The Cittadinanzattiva believes that to do so would jeopardise its independence. A successful civic participation movement with 235 local assemblies across Italy and 76,000 members the Cittadinanzattiva's funding comes from three sources: subscriptions, campaigns and corporate sponsorship. The Institute for Citizenship on the other hand works on very limited resources and relies on corporate and charitable funding.

To meet its remit an Independent Electoral Commission would need guaranteed core state funding. This would ensure security of resources and facilitate strategic development. Given the weakness of local government in Ireland, it could not be expected that an Irish Electoral Commission would be able to fund its activities from monies paid by local, municipal or regional authorities for research. Parliamentary committee funding as in the UK has the advantage of linking the directly elected lower house of parliament with the work of the Commission. Recent research conducted as part of the UK Committee on standards in public office's review of the electoral commission found that the Speaker's committee is regarded '*as the most appropriate to provide funding for the Commission*' (Fisher, 2006:13). Another alternative would be Government Department funding. Whether funding comes from a Parliamentary committee⁶ similar to the Speaker's committee or from a Government Department the core issue would be the maintenance of the Commission's independence.

Governance

In the UK the Electoral Commission has 5 Commissioners who were appointed through an open competition overseen by Home Office officials.

The Commission reports directly to Parliament through a committee chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons. While the Speaker's Committee of the House of Commons is the pivotal accountability mechanism, a number of Parliamentary Select Committees have undertaken inquiries related to the work of the Commission.

Every year the Commission is required to submit an estimate of income and expenditure, together with a five-year strategic plan to the Speaker's Committee. The Comptroller and Auditor General, to assist the Speaker's Committee is required annually to carry out an examination into the economy, efficiency or effectiveness with which the Commission has used its resources. It reports its results and its recommendations to the Speaker's

⁶ In the course of my research I have encountered differing views on whether or not the establishment of such a committee would require a constitutional amendment.

Committee. The Speaker's Committee⁷ may modify the estimate and the five-year plan before laying the documents before the House of Commons for consideration and approval (Committee for standards in public office, 2006:15-17). Research by the UK committee on standards in public office's review of the Electoral Commission has discovered that the Speaker's Committee is not currently regarded as an effective accountability mechanism due to *'the lack of minutes being taken, the number of meetings held (of which there are too few), and the lack of interrogation and scrutiny at these meetings'* (Fisher, 2006:13-14)

The IPP is governed by a board of directors that includes members from across the political party spectrum. It should be noted however that sitting political representatives are not part of the board. Care is taken to ensure that there is gender parity and that minorities are represented on the board. Members are co-opted onto the board by board. The board is formally responsible for the IPP. It meets five to six times a year and approves the IPP's budget and activity programme. This political diversity of the board is reflective of the culture of pillarisation and political consensus that has been traditionally a feature of Dutch democracy.

Cittadinanzattiva is also governed by a board of directors. These are elected every four years at local, regional and national levels using a list system. The board meets five times a year and agrees upon the work programme and priorities.

In terms of governance it is preferable that the Irish Electoral Commission would consist of a number of Independent Commissioners supported by Secretariat appointed through open competition. It should be established through legislation and financed by the state and should be subject to the remit of the Ombudsman, the Children's Ombudsman, the Comptroller and Auditor General, and the Ethics in Public Office and the Freedom of Information Acts.

Conclusion

An active democratic citizenry is only possible if citizens are provided with accessible opportunities and mechanisms for participation. This requires the creation of institutional frameworks and the provision of resources. By increasing all citizens' capacity to partake in decision-making an independent Electoral Commission, established through legislation, fully

⁷ The membership of the Committee is currently: The Speaker of the House of Commons, as Chair of the Committee The Chairman of the Constitutional Affairs Select Committee of the House of Commons The Lord Chancellor A Member of the House of Commons who is a Minister with responsibilities in relation to local government, appointed to the Committee by the Prime Minister Five Members of the House of Commons who are not Ministers, appointed to the Committee by the Speaker of the House of Commons: i) Mr Gary Streeter MP (Conservative, South West Devon);ii) Lady Sylvia Hermon MP (Ulster Unionist, North Down); iii) Rt Hon Gerald Kaufman MP (Labour, Manchester Gorton); iv) Humfrey Malins MP (Conservative, Woking); and v) Peter Viggers MP (Conservative, Gosport). Neither the Commission's Chairman nor any other representative of the Commission is a member of the Speaker's Committee. However, the Chairman and Chief Executive may be expected to attend meetings, which usually take place twice a year. One member of the Speaker's Committee is appointed by the Speaker to answer questions from MPs on the work of the Commission. That member is currently Peter Viggers MP.

funded by the state (preferably through a Dail committee), appointed through open competition and governed in an open and accountable manner would be one concrete means of moving closer to fulfilling Dahl's criteria for a fully democratic system.

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