
R E S E A R C H

Q U A R T E R L Y

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Coming apart—or coming together? New findings on social participation and trust in Britain

With the help of survey data¹ that have recently become available, it is for the first time possible to begin to take a systematic look at how levels of trust, participation and confidence have changed in Britain over the last few decades. While a fuller analysis is still ongoing at LSE and NCVO, initial results throw light on some fundamental changes in British society, including the role of voluntary sector, which, in turn, suggests important policy implications. Key findings include:

- General trust in other people declined sharply from 1990 levels of 44%, to 30% in 1995. Since then further decline has stopped, and levels of social trust remain at 1995 levels.
- Those who participate most actively, as both members and volunteers of voluntary organisations, have far higher levels of trust (44%) than those who do not participate (23%).
- Since 1990 there have been increases as well as significant declines in levels of public confidence in key social institutions.
- The biggest drops in confidence are in Parliament, the church, the police and major companies (drops of 7 to 10 points).
- The biggest increase in confidence is in the education system, where confidence has risen by 19 points to two thirds of the population.
- The proportion of the population participating in associations and voluntary activities (50%) has remained largely the same over the past twenty years.
- Participants are more likely to be of a higher socio-economic status (ABCI), to have a higher level of income, be educated to a higher level, and attend church regularly.
- Participants are more likely to be trusting, they are more tolerant, more concerned about the conditions of others and more willing to help others, they are more interested in politics and are more politically active, they socialise more with friends and colleagues, and have a stronger sense of civic duty.

Changing society

A fierce public and academic debate about increased social isolation and accelerating loss in the moral and social fabric of society is taking place around the world. Robert Putnam's new book "*Bowling Alone*"², describes the United States as a nation of loners who distrust each other ever more, disengage from participation in voluntary associations, and have little confidence in common institutions like government. Americans, it seems, are increasingly 'unconnected and disconnected' from the social fabric of society. Can we reach a similar diagnosis for Britain? And, specifically, how does the voluntary sector fare in that regard?

The voluntary sector does indeed play a central role in the way British society is organised. It provides services in fields such as health and social care, education and community development. But more important for the current debate is the web of social relationships created by people's participation in social clubs, community and church groups, and voluntary associations of all kinds. These groups bring people from diverse backgrounds together, and create the invisible bonds of trust and shared understanding, that provide some of the bedrock of modern societies. Participation and mutual trust are closely related—and the voluntary sector serves as the crucial nexus of this relationship.

With the help of the 4th wave of the European Values Survey, which has now become available, it is for the first time possible to take a systematic look at how levels of trust, participation and confidence have changed over the last few decades. While a fuller analysis is still going on, initial results throw light on some fundamental changes in British society, including the role of the voluntary sector, which, together suggest some wider policy implications.

Slight decline in participation

Over the past twenty years, participation in voluntary associations, either as a member or volunteer has been fairly stable, declining slowly from 55% of the population in 1981 to 50% in 1999. Thus, the general population is evenly split between people who are and people who are not involved. Not all parts of the population are

equally involved, however. Those with lower incomes and educational levels are less likely to participate in voluntary activities.

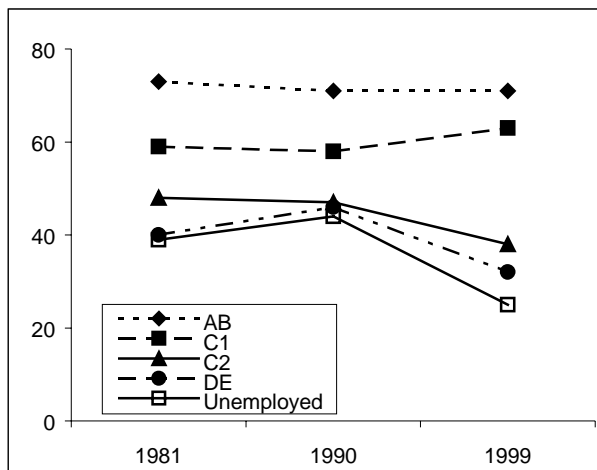
People who associate in clubs and associations also spend more time with colleagues; they claim to be more tolerant of immigrants coming to Britain, and of minorities more generally. At the same time, those who participate consider themselves to be more religious (60% compared to 41% for non-participants), and are generally more satisfied with their life (62% compared to 52%). They are also more likely to express civic concern by reporting crime, throwing away litter, helping people in their neighbourhood, and being more involved in their local community.

While overall interest in politics increased from 42% in 1981 to 49% in 1990, it fell to 37% in 1999. However, participants in voluntary associations are more likely to follow politics daily in the news and are also more likely to discuss political issues with their friends. Significantly, those involved in the voluntary sector are also more likely to have taken part in political action such as signing petitions or joining demonstrations.

The data indicate that the voluntary sector contributes to the social cohesion of British society; it creates part of the social fabric among people in this country. In this way, the voluntary sector contributes to stability and inclusion. However, it has been less successful in including a large section of the British public, in particular those from a lower socio-economic background and those who are unemployed.

It is clearly shown in Figure 1 that participation by social classes C2 and DE declined 10 and 8 percentage points between 1981 and 1999, with most of the drop taking place in the 1990s. In fact, for the unemployed, levels of participation are 14 percentage points lower than twenty years ago. Clearly, the voluntary sector has not been successful in actively involving this socially excluded part of the population. The full policy implications of this pattern become apparent if we look at how these findings relate to trust and confidence.

Fig. 1 Participation trends by socio-economic status



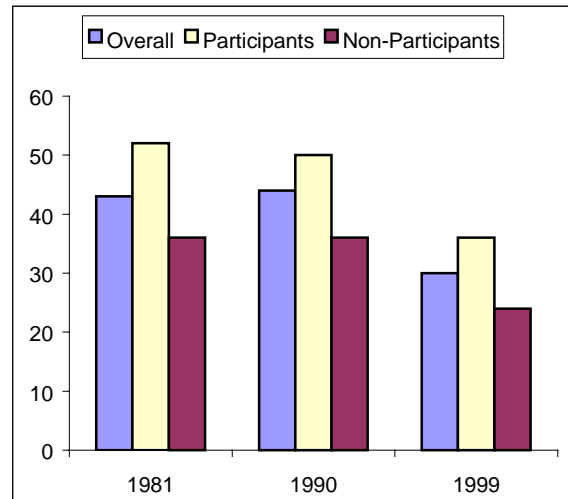
Decline of social trust has been arrested, but is still much lower than a generation ago

‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful?’ In 1959 the majority of respondents (56%) believed that people could be trusted. This share dropped to 43% in 1981, held steady at 44% in 1990, and suffered a further major decline in the mid 1990s to 30%. There was no change after 1995, so that the 1999 results showed 30% of the population trusting other people. In fact, over two-thirds of the British people believe that one cannot be too careful in dealing with fellow members of society.

As with participation, levels of trust increase with educational standard, income and social class generally—a finding that has changed little over the last few decades. People who were born in the 1970’s were slightly more distrustful than average. However, as there were no clear overall age differences in levels of trust, this suggests that the decline is truly a sign of the times, affecting even those people who grew up when levels of trust were generally higher. As the overall level of trust drops, the difference

between participants and non-participants largely remains, as shown in figure 2.

Fig. 2 Trust by participation

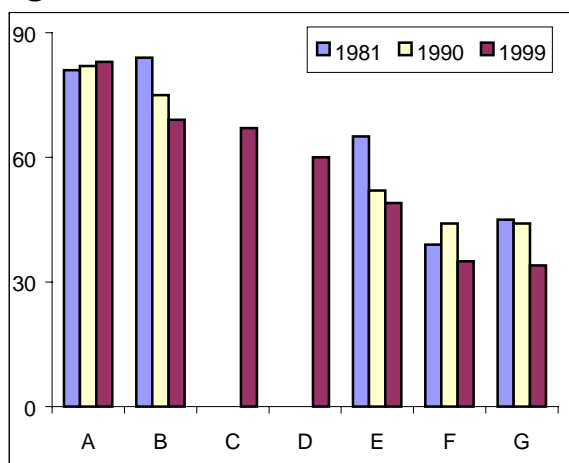


Confidence in the voluntary sector high

There have been significant decreases as well as some increases in levels of public confidence in the major institutions of British life. Between 1981 and 1999, confidence in the church dropped from 49% to 34%, the justice system from 66% to 49%, and police from 86% to 70%, parliament from 46% to 36% and major corporations from 47% to 40%. Other institutions like the armed forces, education, unions, and the civil service escaped this decline. The press inspired the least public confidence – 15%. Confidence in education grew 19 points, the largest increase.

Measured for the first time in 1999, both community groups and large charities enjoy high levels of confidence. Two-thirds of respondents had high confidence in the institutions of the voluntary sector. In fact the level of confidence people have in community associations is only surpassed by their confidence in the armed forces and the police (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3 Confidence in institutions



- A. armed forces
- B. police
- C. community groups
- D. large charities
- E. legal system
- F. parliament
- G. church

Conclusions

Clearly some important changes in participation, trust, and confidence have taken place in British society over the last decades. The persistent decline in social trust that marked the second half of the 20th century seems to have slowed down towards the end of that century. Although the public’s confidence in some institutions has declined quite considerably, other institutions have held their own, and voluntary and community organisations command high levels of confidence. In addition, participation rates in voluntary sector organisations have decreased, but only slightly over the last two decades. The picture this paints of Britain is a different one from Putnam’s description of the United States.

However, the data also contain a strong warning against complacency, for levels of trust and participation are not equally distributed across society. People from lower social economic classes, unemployed people, and those with only very basic levels of education are persistently under-represented in the well-connected web of social relationships embodied in the voluntary sector.

These findings point towards three wider policy issues to be considered:

In addition to its roles in advocacy and service provision, the voluntary sector has a part to play in involving disconnected people. Therefore it must increase its understanding of how to become even more effective in this role. In addition, this task requires the active support of both business and the public sector.

Participation in the voluntary sector is important to the creation of social trust for individuals and society as a whole. Therefore it is critical to give priority to involving disconnected people not only as clients but as members and volunteers. This includes supporting community based activities which draw people into participating locally, and reducing barriers to participation such as time off work, accessible child care, reliable public transport.

Public institutions should focus on conducting themselves in ways that are open and transparent, and to being more responsive to public concerns, in order to build confidence.

1. UK Study of the European Values Survey, 1999
2. Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster

The European Values Survey was conducted by the Centre for Civil Society at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The CCS contributes through research, teaching and policy analysis to knowledge about civil society and social economy institutions in Britain, Europe, and other parts of the world. Contacts: Helmut Anheier (020 7955 7360) and Karen Wright (020 7955 7744).

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