

Active citizenship policies under successive governments have not catered for society's marginalised groups

By Democratic Audit

*Successive Governments of all main parties have championed the politics of active citizenship in seeking to create greater legitimacy for their policies and foster a healthier climate of political engagement. In assessing these efforts **Cristiano Bee** argues that these policies rest on a top-down understanding of the government's role in relation to citizens, and that these efforts have failed to cater for marginalised groups in society.*



Successive Governments haven't cracked the engagement puzzle (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The debate on 'active citizenship' has become prominent throughout Europe. Comparative research shows that this has become a key factor for enhancing the democratic bases of contemporary societies. Here, two interrelated notions, civic engagement and political participation, intertwine to model democratic political systems around open systems of governance, based on principles of transparency, openness, accessibility and accountability of policy processes and, ultimately, political leaders.

Part of the research conducted by the 7FP Project, [PIDOP](#) (Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation), has focused on the establishment of policies of active citizenship in different European Countries, including the UK. Shaping active citizenship, motivating civic engagement and increasing political participation have formed some of the key political priorities in the UK under successive governments. These began with the citizenship reforms promoted under the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, and continued under Tony Blair's New Labour from 1997 under the guise of 'active citizenship'. Key political needs, such as the widening of the bases of political participation on the one side, and stimulating civic engagement on the other have seen this particular set of issues gain traction on opposing sides of the ideological spectrum.

The definition of active citizenship has been influenced by a series of contextual factors and social problems and determined by various ideological viewpoints that have shifted their meaning and practice across time. The literature that commented on the version of active citizenship proposed by conservatives in the 1980s highlights

that this had strong neoliberal connotations. Examples of this lively debate and analysis are evident in the works of [Brehony](#), [Faulks](#), [Fyfe](#), [Heater](#), [MacKian](#), [Marston](#), [Smith](#). [Kearns](#), among others, has argued that this model of active citizenship is highly individualistic and not based on a collectivist understanding of the structure of human welfare. It is exclusivist in its own right, and the empowerment of citizens is based on property ownership which favours the creation of different classes of citizens.

Political ideas and discourses surrounding active citizenship became then prominent towards the end of the 1990s. Indeed, the civic republican account for citizenship that shaped some New Labour policies was initiated by Tony Blair in 1997. From a neoliberal perspective that was based on the guarantee of individual freedoms at a community level, active citizenship assumed communitarian and civic republican characteristics as shaped by the New Labour agenda.

Arguments that emerged in the literature, however, criticized the approach promoted by New Labour across time. [Davies](#), for example, in comparing this approach with the New Right definition of active citizenship, outlines that while there were important differences in *modus operandi*, each drew on common political principles. In particular, in comparing New Labour's approach to community and deliberation with the *Habermasian* ideal-typical model of civic engagement and public participation, he outlines a series of critical issues that emerge from a closer analysis of actual policies. Overall, the partnerships developed under New Labour embedded 'the principles of "contributory consensualism" – the duty of citizen activists to mobilize community resources in pursuit of non-negotiable government policies'

[Michael Marinetto](#), meanwhile, argues that New Labour's policies of community involvement 'have not been accompanied by a substantive transfer of executive power from the centre to local institutions and people'.

Controversial issues: some results from the *PIDOP* project

This criticism emerges from the data that we collected in the *PIDOP* project. This involved a qualitative analysis of policy documents and interviews with representatives of NGOs which work with minority groups. The results confirm that civil society activists – even if acknowledging the principles of active citizenship put in place by New Labour – are critical of the top-down logic upon which they are based. Instead, these activists prefer an approach based more on social need than on institutional priorities.

When looking more specifically at the approach to integration policy, it is worth underlining the high exclusionary value that is attributed to active citizenship. Overall the recognition of a set of social problems generated by a failed approach to integration and immigration policy resulted in the promotion of active forms of citizenship by increasing trust and confidence in marginalized communities and in the development of strategies aimed at breaking down barriers between communities, minorities and organizations. Although the initial community cohesion strategies and integration policies were criticized due to their assimilationist guiding principles, it is the events of 7/7 and the growth of resentment towards new immigrants in Britain that pushed forward an integration policy based on a path to citizenship which entails the adaptation of minorities into the mainstream cultural setting.

Overall from our research, the criticism towards this approach emerges quite prominently both in the analysis of policy documents and in the interviews with NGO activists. The civic republican values of participatory democracy and civic engagement as well as the communitarian principles of cultural and civic identity and solidarity are the principal objectives that influence the activities and values of civil society.

Instruments such as civil dialogue are considered key to strategically build community cohesion and shape intercultural exchange between weak and dominant public spheres in Britain. These viewpoints characterize, from our point of view, the basis of a 'counter-discourse' emerging from the civil society activists that, on the one hand, criticizes recent institutional approaches to active citizenship, as being 'one-sided', and, on the other hand, does not acknowledge the approach undertaken by Gordon Brown's Government, as it is considered to being based exclusively on the commitment of minorities to assimilate with the mainstream culture.

Our research provides emphasis of the ambiguities inherent to the discussion surrounding the approach to active citizenship over the years. In conclusion, we can argue that the notion that has been put forward does not completely account for the full inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups in the civil society and in policy

processes.

*Note: this post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. This post is a reviewed extract of the research article 'Active Citizenship in the UK: Assessing Institutional Political Strategies and Mechanisms of Civic Engagement', *Journal of Civil Society* 10(1), pp. 100-117. The shortened URL for this post is: <http://buff.ly/1qkkAKh>*

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