

What do the public think about economic and social rights?

The Report provides an in-depth examination of public attitudes towards economic and social rights using the 2005 Citizenship Survey (Rights and Responsibilities Module). The central finding is that the concept of “rights” is not understood by the public “narrowly” in terms of a limited number of civil and political rights. Rather, it is understood more broadly - with economic and social rights also being viewed as fundamental.

The public policy context

The background to the Report is the public policy debate about the introduction of a Bill of Rights or written constitution that would build on the Human Rights Act (HRA) (1998) and further strengthen human rights protection by codifying new, additional and / or strengthened rights including economic and social rights. In 2007, the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) published an agenda-setting Report on a Bill of Rights. The Report recommended that the rights to health, education, housing and an adequate standard of living be included in any future Bill of Rights. The recommendation was underpinned by the JCHR’s new “mid-way” model for the domestic incorporation of economic and social rights. The JCHR’s recommendations were further premised on the view that economic and social rights “touch the substance of people’s everyday lives” - helping to correct the “popular misconception that human rights are a charter for criminals and terrorists”. The inclusion of economic and social rights might, the JCHR speculated, be “popular” with the public - helping with legitimacy and buy-in.

Key findings

The findings set out in this Report challenge the perception of low population support for rights overall - and the view that the public think rights are a “charter” for criminals and terrorists. They support the reasoning of the Joint Committee on Human Rights (JCHR) that economic and social rights are “popular” with the public. However, they do not provide grounds for thinking that civil and political rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the right to elections are “unpopular”. Rather, they suggest that when people are asked about their views on rights at a “higher”, more abstract level - as the rights that that *should* be enjoyed by people living in the UK today – very high percentages endorse a broad range of rights. The concept of “rights” does not appear to be understood by the public “narrowly” in terms of a limited number of civil and political rights. Rather, there is public support for a broad characterisation covering economic and social rights, as well as civil and political rights.

Further information

This CASEbrief summarises findings from *What do the public think about economic and social rights: Research report to inform the debate about a Bill of Rights and a written constitution* by Polly Vizard, CASEReport 61, <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/CASEReport61.pdf>.

The overall picture

The Report provides evidence on the rights that the public are willing to endorse at a “higher” or “abstract” level - as the rights that *should* be enjoyed by people living in the UK today. Two rights (to be protected from crime, and to be treated fairly and equally) achieved the threshold set for “universal support” (95%+). One civil and political right (the right to freedom of speech) and two economic and social rights (the right to free health-care if you need it, and the right to access to free education for children) achieved the threshold set for “near universal support” (90%+). With the exception of the right to a job, the remaining rights examined (the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to free elections, the right to be looked after by the State if you can not look after yourself) achieved the “very high support” threshold (80%+). The right to a job generated lower levels of endorsement than other rights. Nevertheless, levels of endorsement achieved the threshold for “high support” (70%+).

Variations in support for rights by population sub-groups

The Report examines the statistical significance of a list of variables that might be thought, *a priori*, to be of interest in explaining variations in support for rights by population subgroup. The explanatory variables that were systematically evaluated and reported on as part of the research exercise are:

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Long-term limiting illness or disability
- Age
- Religion and belief
- Highest educational qualification
- Country of Birth (COB)
- Social class (using the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification NS-SEC, based on the household reference person)
- Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)
- Government Office Region (GOR)

The key finding is that highest educational qualification was found to be statistically significant in explaining variations in support for each of the rights covered in the research exercise. For eight of the nine rights examined, individuals with lower level educational qualifications, or no educational qualifications, were found to have lower odds of support, relative to those with higher level educational qualifications. This was the case in relation to the right to access to free education for children; the right to freedom of speech; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; the right to free elections; the right to be looked after by the State if you can not look after yourself; the right to be protected from crime; the right to be treated fairly and equally; and the right to free health-care if you need it. However, individuals with lower level qualifications, or no qualifications, were found to have higher odds of support for the right to employment, relative to those with degree or equivalent as their highest educational qualification.

Social class (using occupational sub-group as a proxy) was also found to be an important factor. For example, statistically significant variations in support for rights by the occupational group of the household reference person were established in relation to support for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to free elections, the right to be treated fairly and equally, and the right to be looked after by the State if you can not look after yourself. In relation to support for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to free elections, the odds of support were found to be lower for individuals where the household reference person is from the intermediate and small

employer occupational sub-group, the lower supervisory, technical and semi-routine occupational sub-group, and the routine occupational sub-group, relative to individuals where the household reference person is from the higher, lower managerial and professional occupational sub-group.

Statistically significant variations by gender were established in relation to support for a number of rights. The odds of support for the right to freedom of speech and free elections were found to be lower for women, relative to men. In contrast, women were found to have higher odds of support for the right to free health-care if you need it, and the right to a job, relative to their male counterparts.

Variations by ethnicity were also established in relation to support for a number of rights. The odds of support for the right to freedom of speech and the right to free elections were found to be lower for individuals from the Asian, Black and Chinese/other sub-groups, relative to the individuals from the White sub-group. The odds of support for the right to free education for children were found to be lower for individuals from the Asian sub-group, relative to individuals from the White sub-group. The odds of support for the right to be looked after by the State if you can not look after yourself was found to be lower for individuals from the Asian, Black and Mixed sub-groups, relative to individuals from the White sub-group. However, the odds of support for the right to be treated fairly and equally, and for the right to a job, were higher for individuals from the Black sub-group, relative to individuals from the White sub-group.

Religion and belief were associated with significant variations in support for rights in some cases. The odds of support for the right to be looked after by the State if you can not look after yourself were found to be higher for individuals from the Sikh sub-group, relative to individuals from the Christian sub-group. The odds of support for the right to free elections, and for the right to access to free education for children, were found to be higher for individuals from the Muslim sub-group, relative to individuals from the Christian sub-group. The odds of support for the right to a job were found to be higher for individuals from the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh sub-groups, relative to individuals from the Christian sub-group.

Age was found to be particularly important in explaining variations in support for the right to free elections and the right to health. The odds of support for these rights were higher for individuals in the higher age bands, relative to individuals in the 19-24 age band.

Area deprivation was also found to play a role. Notably, individuals living in areas ranked as falling within the third, fourth and fifth Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintiles were found to have higher odds of support for the right to a job, relative to individuals living in areas ranked as falling within the least deprived (IMD) quintile.

Variations in support for rights by equivalent household income were established in relation to support for the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the right to free elections, with higher income associated with higher odds of support. In contrast, in relation to support for the right to free health care if you need it and the right to a job, higher income was associated with lower odds of support.

Living in social housing was found to have a significant impact on one right, the right to free elections, with individuals living in social housing found to be less likely to support this right.

Variations in support for rights by country of birth and Government Office Region were established in relation to a limited number of rights.

The relative importance of “drivers” of support for rights

Some general comments can also be made as a guide to thinking about the relative importance of the different “drivers” of support for rights. As noted above, highest educational qualification was found to be repeatedly important in explaining variations in support for the rights examined. A key project finding is that highest educational qualification was found to be statistically significant in explaining variations in support for each of the rights covered in the research exercise. In general terms, highest educational qualification was also found to be relatively “influential” in terms of the strength of its affect on support for rights. In addition, amongst the variables identified as playing a role in explaining support for rights, socio-economic variables (highest educational qualification, social class, income and area deprivation) were found to be having a more influential role as “drivers” of public attitudes towards human rights, rather than “social identity characteristics” (such as gender, ethnicity, religion and belief, and country of birth) and geographic variables (such as geographical region).

Identification of significant “interaction” effects

Two key significant interaction effects were identified as part of the research exercise. In relation to the right to freedom of speech, the interaction of social class and the Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile was found to be significant. This result can be interpreted as implying that the impact of social class on support for the right to freedom of speech is influenced by ethnicity. In relation to the right to free health-care if you need it, the interaction of long term limiting illness or disability (LLID) and ethnicity was found to be significant. This result can be interpreted as implying that the impact of LLID on support for the right to health is influenced by ethnicity.

Classification scheme for profiling of the population by “rights-orientation”

A preliminary classification scheme was developed for profiling the population by underlying commitment to rights (or “rights-orientation”). A typology based on four underlying classes (each representing an underlying homogenous “rights-orientation”) was found to be optimal using the 2005 Citizenship Survey data. The four classes are: “very high overall support for rights”; “high support for a range of rights with lower endorsement of economic and social rights”; “high support for a range of rights with lower endorsement of the right to elections and the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”; and “low to moderate support for rights”. Based on the 2005 Citizenship Survey sample, 76% of cases were allocated to the “very high overall support for all rights” value orientation; 13% to the “high support for a range of rights with lower endorsement of economic and social rights” value orientation; 7% to the “high support for a range of rights with lower endorsement of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to elections” value orientation; and only 4% to the “low support for rights” value orientation. No basis for rejecting a one dimensional scale in favour of a two dimensional scale was established. This finding suggests that underlying rights-orientations can be meaningfully characterised in terms of a single scale, rather than separate scales for civil and political rights on the one hand, and economic and social rights on the other.

About the study

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