

**Education, population, poverty, tax...getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?**

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.



Gailina Liew, Director, Jersey Policy Forum



## The dangers of 'group think'

**What does civic engagement mean to you? How is it measured? Does it benefit society as a whole? Can it help to bring people together? How does it work within a democracy? Can it catalyse positive change, and help to make difficult public policy choices possible? Is social media helpful or harmful for civic engagement and democracy? What can individuals who care about their community do to inform policy decisions and tackle challenges for a better future?**

There does not appear to be a single commonly accepted definition for civic engagement. The American Psychological Association defines civic engagement as, "...individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern." The New York Times defines the concept as, "...citizens working

together to make a change or difference in the community....and includes communities working together in both political and non-political actions. The goal of civic engagement is to address public concerns and promote the quality of the community."

Definitions for other terms such as civic participation, community engagement, public involvement and citizen engagement touch on similar elements but there are subtle differences around intention and who (individual/community/government) is initiating or leading the effort that are important in specific contexts. At its core, however, it's about people engaging together and working towards common objectives for the benefit of the community.

How to measure it? The OECD focuses on voter turnout and in democratic

countries, high voter turnout is generally held out as an indicator that the government reflects the will of a large proportion of the population, and therefore has greater legitimacy. However, this measure is influenced significantly by factors including whether voting is mandatory (as, for example, in Australia and New Zealand), age, education and wealth. According to the OECD, voter turnout averaged 69% across all OECD countries in their most recent elections and older, more educated and more well-off people are more likely to vote than younger, less educated, and less well-off people.

Generally voting is no different between genders, but in the UK, women out-vote men by approximately 7%, while the opposite is true in Germany where men out-vote women by roughly 6%. Across the OECD, there is roughly a 13% difference in voter turnout between the top 20% of the population by income, as compared to the bottom 20%, but this gap is estimated at 24% in the UK. In Jersey, there are no statistics on voter characteristics aside from parish residency and voter turnout in Jersey's last general election, which was the lowest observed in all OECD nations.

Does this matter? The surprising results in recent elections (UK hung parliament, Trump in US) and a certain referendum would suggest that it does. For example, according to the post-Brexit vote analysis posted on Buzzfeed News on December 6, 2016, by James Bell, the outcome might have been different if more well-off urbanites and single young professionals had voted. Why didn't they vote?

The voting age in Jersey is 16, one of the youngest in the world. How can we motivate and encourage our youth, the people who will be creating and experiencing the future, to vote and engage more? Do we know what they care about and want for the future? Do they want to participate? Are we asking and truly listening to their responses? Can complex issues be explained in simple, clear language so that everyone who is interested can understand? Can technology help?

The internet has allowed for connectivity and access to information on an unprecedented scale. Benefits include



<sup>1</sup> On January 28, 1986, NASA launched the space shuttle Challenger despite known concerns about the integrity of an O-ring seal in cold temperatures. The Challenger exploded 73 seconds after launch, killing all seven crew. The NASA space program was suspended for 32 months for an inquiry to be conducted. The conclusions pointed, in part, to a workplace culture that was pressurized by 'go fever' and 'group think' to disregard the concerns raised by engineers about the O-ring seal.

the breaking down of information barriers, enabling access to education, support and different perspectives and the creation of new economic and commercial models that have helped many people. But this connectivity, and the use of social media, is also facilitating a fragmentation of society, and presents a challenge to democracy by concentrating like-minded people together in social circles or 'tribes' that are not constrained by geopolitical or physical borders.

Communities have historically been contained within physical boundaries and there was a common knowledge base in each community created through shared experiences and teachings. Technology, education, connectivity and ease of mobility have changed this framework so individuals may not be as rooted to their physical community as before, and the common knowledge base has been replaced by individual experiences and personalized newsfeeds. These factors may be contributing to a breakdown of social cohesion, civic engagement and voter turnout within our communities as individuals are pulled into 'tribes' beyond

their communities.

Would our communities be more resilient and better prepared for the future with a diversity of tribes working together and listening to each other? As individuals, are we content to be surrounded by like-minded people who reinforce and amplify our own views or would we benefit from hearing other perspectives to challenge ourselves and expand our knowledge base? How can we ensure that we do not fall victim to 'group think' where unpopular and politically challenging voices are smothered (as they were with devastating consequences in the space shuttle Challenger disaster<sup>1</sup>)? How do we guard against cognitive biases where we don't even know what we don't know, close our minds to conflicting evidence, resist challenge and make stupid or ill-informed decisions as a result? As a society, are we willing to risk our collective future by staying in the comfortable confines of our own 'tribes'?

We are each born with an innate curiosity and desire to explore and learn about ourselves and our environment. We can nurture this curiosity and make the

effort to ask questions, listen to each other, challenge ourselves, engage in civil discourse and debate, learn and work together to address public concerns and create a better future. We can remind ourselves to go outside of our comfort zones and make connections with other 'tribes.' We can prioritize and recognize intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning as life skills critical for a well-functioning democracy. We can encourage our youth to get involved and pursue civic engagement to inform policy development so that solutions are relevant and understandable for everyone in the community, not just for those that have the loudest voices.

### Do you agree?

Please share your thoughts by email to [contact@jerseypolicyforum.org](mailto:contact@jerseypolicyforum.org). The Jersey Policy Forum is running a series of roundtable discussions to focus on understanding social and economic inclusion/exclusion in Jersey, education and population drivers and the development of a more comprehensive dashboard to assess how well Jersey is performing beyond GDP and GVA.

THINK-TANK