

## Citizen Power

**We desperately need more people to help build a more co-operative society. To do so we must reclaim politics from the spin-doctors and corporate backers, and move it above the sterile battle for the floating voter. The desire for secure communities should be harnessed in order to moderate individualism and restore social cohesion.**

Citizen action can have a strong influence, both on government, and the quality of life. An inspiring example comes from San Antonio, Texas, where the independent community group COPS transformed the lives of the city's poor Hispanic and Black majority. Through the commitment of its many activists, who encouraged thousands to vote in local elections, COPS became 'the dominant element' in city politics, persuading the council to invest millions on vital improvements.<sup>13</sup>

Italy provides a well-known example of the value of what has become known as social capital, namely networks containing a high proportion of strong relationships, with a high level of trust and co-operation. It played a vital part in creating the vast difference between the prosperous North, and the mostly inefficient and corrupt South. The northern and central areas, which for over a century have had strong voluntary organisations and political participation, now have much more efficient regional government than the southern regions. The ability of their people to co-operate for the benefit of the community enabled them to develop much more rapidly than the South, whose cynical outlook is reflected in proverbs such as 'He who behaves honestly comes to a miserable end'.

Italian surveys over many years show that the proportion of citizens who are active in voluntary organisations and interested in political issues has a very strong impact on the efficiency of the regional government, and the overall quality of life. This factor accounts almost completely for the tendency of more prosperous regions to have better government. Research comparing the American states found the same result, though to a slightly lesser degree, It is clearly the long tradition of citizens' self-organisation that creates a climate in which regional politicians become responsive to popular concerns.<sup>14</sup>

Scepticism about the ability of ordinary people to improve society is understandable. Individuals' efforts may seem tiny when set against the power of big business and government. Some people believe that forces which are now beyond the control of individuals determine the nature of our society. It is true that the economic history of many years has shaped both our social structure and the political ideologies through which we perceive the world. These have a strong impact on political decisions, but human beings can also bring about change. Differences between similar countries in levels of inequality, and of state provision for people in need, show that public opinion and the strength of political organisations are also influential. <sup>18</sup>

Ordinary people can have a political influence if they band together to make their voice heard. The massive opposition to the Vietnam War eventually led the American government to end it. The Nuclear Freeze campaign influenced politicians to make arms limitation agreements with the Soviet Union. American student organisations pressured Nike to improve the conditions of its workers in

the developing world. Another option is joining a political party, provided it has a real prospect of winning enough votes to make a significant impact. Extensive evidence shows that the amount of canvassing by local Party members strongly influences the size of their candidate's vote. 19 Even a relatively small campaigning group can affect political decisions provided its members work together, and public opinion supports their aims. 20 The two thousand members of the Los Angeles Bus Riders Union, among the poorest people in the USA, won a remarkable court victory ordering improvements in the bus service. They convinced the court that the local Transportation Authority had discriminated by giving much less subsidy to the buses than to the trains, used mostly by white middle-class passengers.

## References

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