Out of Favour and Other Avoided Activities

Understanding and appreciating the popularity of political activities is equally as important as exploring the reasons behind unpopular political activities. In order to recognise the relevance of their status as less popular forms of engagement and whether their unpopularity can be overcome, aided or encouraged, we must explore why they hold this status. There are two main reasons for the relative unpopularity of certain political activities: because they require resources (time, money, skills) or because they may be criminal offences (such as rioting, affray or violent disorder), including actions such as flag burning, burning cars and combative political action.

Unpopularity of political actions among the respondents lies in two camps. One group of political activities requires resources which the respondents are not able to provide. These include time commitments, financial expenditure and skill sets. The second group of political activities which are unpopular do not hold illegal statuses in and of themselves, but are usually offences under the Public Order Act 1986 – riots, violent disorder, affray and breach of the peace (including disorderly conduct, assault and threatening behaviour).

Letter writing and emails

Writing is one of the most direct ways in which people can highlight their views on a variety of issues. Whether it is to a local MP, a lobby group or media outlet, political pressure via writing email, letters or sending petitions is simple and direct. The development of internet communication makes writing as a form of pressure much easier. Networking sites help to gather more participants to add pressure; emails assist in the development of draft letters to be passed around; and
search engines are useful in locating addresses, email addresses and other details of individuals and groups to be pressured. The internet has encouraged people simply to ‘sign and send’.

Among the respondents, the few who do write or email letters about political issues consider it a better way of recording the argument than a verbal conversation, whereas the respondents who consider this method ineffective believe that there are other methods which are likely to get a better response. Very few of the respondents wrote letters as a form of political action; some of them see this from the other side (they are councillors or work for MPs) and so they see the action as inefficient. A slow and ineffectual response to written forms of political action leads respondents to take alternative action.

Writing letters is quite an individual activity, unless as part of a mass programme. It can be used to complain to or to request something from an MP or to petition local councillors, for example. However, it is usually very direct and personal. Quite a few of the younger people surveyed considered writing as a form of political action in the context of Amnesty International campaigns, which they took part in mainly within a school framework.

7. Farah

I always write letters… I think that writing letters is something that we should all do, perhaps people think that it’s not going to have any effect because people are writing the same letter and just signing their name and maybe it won’t make a difference but you know I do believe that it puts pressure on people and it’s only by writing letters that you can get your voice heard and attending demonstrations and whatever, so I write a lot of angry letters.

20. Sana

It is a political action because you have to write and make your arguments, writing to councillors and MPs to anyone who received a service and write it down, it achieves more than a verbal conversation, it goes on record and someone has to respond to it… I fax my MP, not as much as I used to, I have written once or twice to the local paper, sometimes they don’t get printed anyway.

Letter writing is not that popular because it is considered ineffective and slow, and there are other formats or methods that the respondents consider to be a better use of time and effort. They see letter writing as