UK Expatriate Self Identity and the UK Election: A Working Paper

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that the portrayal of 'self-image' may manifest itself in the demonstration of commitment to political affiliations. However, research among expatriates eligible to vote in country of origin elections is sparse. This is surprising given recent research suggesting that of an estimated 5.5 million UK citizens living abroad, less than 13,000 of these had registered to vote in the 2010 UK general election. Drawing on social psychology literature, this work-in-progress provides insights into voting attitudes and behaviour of UK expatriates living in New Zealand. Preliminary findings are reported in three key areas; citizenship and identity, citizenship and the franchise and level of engagement and connectivity with the UK election. Taken holistically, these findings reveal expatriate attitudes towards citizenship and voting is a complex multi-faceted phenomenon which may provide interesting insights for political marketing.

Key Words: Political Marketing, Expats, Political Connectivity, Political Engagement

Introduction

Whilst it is widely recognised how consumption and self-identity are intertwined, more recent research suggests that the portrayal of 'self-image' may also manifest itself in the demonstration of commitment to peer groups, lifestyles and even political affiliations (e.g. Miles, 1998). However, whilst the extant literature on political marketing is increasing, '*theory development within the field remains replete with problems of context, understanding and approach*' (Butler and Harris, 2009:149). A case in point is voter disengagement with the electoral process (Smith and French, 2009). Whilst some research has been conducted within the social and political literature (c.f. Sloam, 2007; Henn, Weinstein and Hodgkinson, 2006), research on political disengagement particularly among expatriates is sparse and tends to concentrate on legal and political considerations whilst ignoring psychological and sociological issues (e.g. Hughes and Dann, 2009). This is surprising given recent research suggesting that of an estimated 5.5 million UK citizens living abroad for a year or more less than 13,000 of these had registered to vote in the 2010 UK general election (The Electoral Commission, 2010b). This research attempts to address this gap by considering two specific research objectives; firstly, to extend our knowledge and understanding of the key factors related to social and self identity construction among expatriates in general and secondly; to explore how this manifests itself in relation to a specific country of origin event, namely the UK General Election of May 2010. The paper is structured as follows; initially, there is a brief synopsis of the salient literature on citizenship and the expatriate franchise and its pertinence to self and social identity. Subsequently, the research methodology is described and key findings presented before the paper ends with a conclusion.

Literature Review

The entitlement to vote has long been recognised as a fundamental element of the democratic process. Based almost exclusively on national citizenship, physical residency within a country was historically a pre-requisite to exercise this democratic right. However, in recent times the concept of citizenship has broadened to reflect changes in assumptions about the presence, absence and nature of national belonging and associated emigration flows (e.g. Chander, 2006). The evolution of transportation and communication technologies facilitates the engagement of emigrant populations with events, people and institutions in their state of origin (Nagel, 2002). Consequently, the whole notion of citizenship has become an increasingly difficult concept to define as Klusmeyer (2001) suggests: "*No single definition can adequately capture the complex, multidimensional character of citizenship*" (p. 9). That said, the extant literature in this fields suggests there are two generic dimensions encompassed within the notion of state citizenship (e.g. Bosniak, 2000). The first dimension relates to the formal legal status of the individual and frequently an associated entitlement to vote. The second dimension relates to the '*lived experience of participation in national life…. through collective identity and sentiment*' (Barry, 2006:20).

For many sovereign states, a fundamental issue when considering citizenship and the expatriate franchise and the right to vote is the consideration of 'extra-territorial' political participation reconciled against the appropriateness of allowing such individuals to participate in policy making to which they are not directly subject (López-Guerra ,2005). Different sovereign states have different interpretations as to the acceptability and appropriateness of this. However, many sovereign states increasingly recognise that "*migration decouples citizenship and residence*" (Barry, 2006:17). As a result, formal voting rights for expatriates exist in a large number of sovereign states but the rules regarding their implementation vary significantly. In the case of the UK, citizens who have been registered to vote in the UK within the last fifteen years are eligible to vote in UK parliamentary and European Parliamentary by post or proxy (The Electoral Commission, 2010a).

Whilst legal citizenship is formal and official, its manifestation is a social phenomenon with sociological consequences that culminate in the individual's practice of their citizenship (Barry, 2006). Implicit within this is the identity that the individual constructs for themselves after emigration. Contemporary emigrants are more adept at adapting to '*a global system marked by flux and instability*' than their predecessors (Nagel, 2002). However, whilst some may '*choose to leave without ever looking back*' (Levitt, Wind and Vertovec, 2003: 569), others may not develop particularly strong ties with their emigrant state but instead construct social identities that may transcend national borders (e.g. Kearney, 1995). Related to this, Barry (2006) suggests emigrants' ongoing engagement with people, places and institutions at home while abroad "*satisfies their need to stay in touch, to be remembered and to remain a vital, contributing presence in their homeland*" (p.31). The regularity and intimacy of these interactions will be partly determined by attunements to self and social identity over a period of time impelled by the process and consequences of emigration. For some, this may manifest itself through the need to be assimilated into their new home state through a process of culture shedding and culture learning (Berry, 2001). However, for others such self categorisation may be a gradual process particularly when such a process is is deeply embedded within cultural dimensions (e.g. Stein, 1995). For many, this process may necessitate an ongoing involvement and engagement with their country of origin whilst living abroad (Barry, 2006:31). At one level, this may be through participation at a personal and social level in the daily lives of individuals and events within their country of origin. At another level, this may manifest itself in the nature and extent of their association with sovereign states through citizenship adopted and the accompanying opportunity for political engagement.

That said, the possession of franchise through citizenship and the decision to exercise that franchise are not necessarily interrelated. Whilst overseas franchising of expatriates is a legal enabler to engage in the political activity of one's country of origin, a review of the literature suggests that the reasons why expatriates engage in the political affairs of their state of origin is likely to be the manifestation of complex multi-faceted and frequently socially related phenomenon. There are clear implications of this from a political marketing perspective which require further investigation.

Methodology

The focus of this study is a social phenomenon with sociological consequences that potentially manifest in attitudinal and behavioural changes over a period of time (Barry, 2006). Such a focus suggests a qualitative approach to be appropriate. This allows for an examination of in-depth and 'rich' (Geertz, 1973) insights and enables the observation and recording of complex human behaviour and social systems (e.g. Feyerabend, 1981; Popper, 1965). A purposive sampling approach was adopted (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007) in which twelve UK expatriates living in New Zealand (6 in Christchurch and 6 in Auckland) who had registered to vote or were intending to register to vote in the UK 2010 general election were recruited to participate in this research. The research was in two stages. The first stage encompassed participants maintaining an 'election diary' in which participants were asked to record details such as media interaction, discussions with other parties, interaction with websites or social network sites or indeed any other contact they may have had related to the UK election and if and how these may have influenced them. In addition, respondents were asked to record their thoughts, opinions and feelings about the above as and when they occurred. At the time of writing, four diaries had been collected and the content analysed and subsequently used for 'elicitation purposes' (Carter and Mankoff, 2005) during the second stage of data collection. This stage comprised of in-depth interviews with the four respondents whose diaries had been collected and analysed. A discussion guide was developed and used as a starting point from which respondents could elaborate on their own behavioural and attitudinal experiences with reference to self-identity construction and the UK election. Interviews lasted between 41 and 65 minutes. Interviews were taped and transcribed to facilitate subsequent content analysis (Spiggle, 1994). A reiterative approach was adopted (Remenyi, Williams, Money and Swartz, 1998) thus enabling the findings of one interview to inform the next as new insights and evidence emerged.

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary findings are presented in three key areas: firstly there is a brief exploration of the relationship between citizenship and identity; secondly citizenship and attitudes to the right to vote in the UK election is examined; finally, respondent levels of engagement and connectivity in relation to the UK 2010 election are explored.

Citizenship and identity

All four respondents had retained and were intending to retain British citizenship indefinitely. At the same time, they had acquired New Zealand citizenship or returning residency status. Returning residency status effectively allows holders almost identical rights as citizenship including a right of permanent abode in New Zealand and the franchise. The retention and acquisition of more than one citizenship was perceived by all the respondents as 'insurance' of one kind or another rather than a manifestation of their commitment to a nation or in any sense reinforcing their 'Britishness'. This 'insurance' appeared to be related to a number of issues at a number of levels. Reinforcing the rational for emigrating, there was perceived to be a general sense of pessimism among each of the respondents regarding future prospects for both the UK and for the Europe Union in general. The collective focus of this pessimism was a perception of general economic and social decline. As R2 comments '*I'm glad we're over here ….no regrets on*

that decision…..There was just so much negative, negative, negative stuff' [happening in the UK]'. When respondents were asked to elaborate on these issues in more detail, specifics mentioned included the economy, law and order, health care, education, immigration, infringements of personal liberties and transport infrastructure. As R12 states: "*You know you didn't feel, you just weren't comfortable anymore….. it just didn't seem quite right. You never felt quite settled, I think probably*". That said, two of the respondents indicated that it was unlikely that they would have emigrated from the UK if they did not have children. By acquiring New Zealand returning residency status or citizenship whilst retaining British citizenship they were providing their children with 'options for the future'. At one level, this was related to providing access to rights of residency in multiple countries. By retaining UK citizenship, there was a right of abode and work within the entire European Union. By acquiring New Zealand citizenship, a reciprocal agreement allows the right of abode and residency in Australia as well as New Zealand. As R1 states; "*I recognise in the future the world is going to become much more difficult in some ways to move around… and to have as many nationalities as possible will be a good thing*" (R1). At another level, the acquisition of right of abode for New Zealand provided access to a 'safe haven' if global circumstances dictated. As R12 comments: "*you feel you're safer actually, because you feel that you're away from all the big boys fighting in the playground. You're sort of, you know, you're okay*".

UK Citizenship and the Franchise
All the respondents felt strongly about the right to retain UK citizenship because of the direct implications and consequences on legal status and in particular, their rights of abode. When questioned, all felt the right to UK citizenship should be available to their children and indeed, their grandchildren. This is reflective of the respondents' ability to decouple citizenship from social and emotional involvement with an individual's country of origin. As R2 states: "*I see it as a legal status, whether it reflects patriotism and an interest in living in a country is going to be down to the individual. I mean a lot of people that actually live in the UK they don't give a damn about the UK*" (R2). This is in contrast to respondents' feelings of nonchalance about losing the right to vote in UK elections after 15 years of living abroad. There was an 'acceptance' that this was 'appropriate' and that this was '*living with the consequences of my actions*' (R2). When asked about their motivation to vote in the UK election, all mentioned a general moral obligation that if one was franchised than one should vote [and indeed, all the respondents were eligible to vote and had voted in the general election tin New Zealand in the previous year]. That said, two respondents were partisan voters and their motivation was related to a political ideology. This was particularly the case with R11 who was still politically motivated to vote in the UK elections after seven and a half years of residing in New Zealand because '*I think those Tory bastards- sorry but I think its disgracing the quality and the class system and that makes me really, really angry still'* (R11).

Levels of Engagement and Connectivity
These preliminary findings suggest the extent of 'connectivity' the respondents perceived they had with events related to the UK election were heterogeneous. Whilst R12 felt that they were very much part of the process, the other respondents felt they were on the

'margins' or on the 'periphery' or that they felt *more like the audience rather than a participant' (R2)*. This is a reflection of how relevant the participants perceived political issues in the UK were to them as expatriates living in New Zealand. Whilst two of the respondents concentrated on specific issues and how they were unlikely to affect them directly, the other two respondents were more inclined to focus on the potential consequences of issues on friends and family back in the UK. As a result the former were less likely to feel a high level of involvement. R2 comments: *"I guess selfishly, I try not to be selfish but I guess selfishly um it's going to affect me a whole lot - whatever the outcome it's going to affect me a whole lot less over here. That's probably the true answer."* (R2). Whilst R12 states *"even though you're a step back from it, it is still important, because I mean, a lot of people know it's their jobs, it's there – you know, it's their incomes, it's their health, it's there – like the situation – like my dad in a home, you know? Things like that. It's all kind of tied up together really, yes"* (R12). This was reflected in the levels of investment that respondents were prepared to make in proactive engagement with electoral issues through media and websites. For example, whilst all four respondents had at least watched highlights of the leaders TV debate, R12 was of the opinion that *"that there was too much gloss on the tv and what is the real eye opener ….is if you go through any of the blogs…people who are writing are actually quite extreme…quite funny in some ways…I usually do that for a bit of an uplift"* (R12).

Conclusion

Compelled by recent research revealing the extent of UK expatriate engagement in the UK electoral process, this research begins to explore self and social identity among expatriates and how this may manifest itself in relation to the UK general election of 2010.Taken holistically, these preliminary findings reveal expatriate attitudes towards citizenship and voting to be a complex multi-faceted phenomenon. At one level, the UK election evoked feelings of detachment among respondents and compelled them to feel they had 'moved on'. Indeed, many of the issues raised in the course of the election were evidenced by some respondents as justification that they had indeed chosen a correct course of action in terms of emigrating from the UK. At another level, some respondents' personalised issues insofar as they were able to directly relate the consequences of political actions on friends and relatives still living in the UK. These preliminary findings suggest there are clear implications from a political marketing perspective which require further investigation and which may provide interesting insights for planning and implementing political marketing strategies to attract the not insignificant expatriate vote.

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