

A Generation Apart?

Youth and Political Participation in Britain

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British Journal of Politics and International Relations,
Vol. 4 (2), pp. 167–192, 2002.

DOI: 10.1111/1467-856X.t01-1-00001

Abstract

Conventional wisdom holds that young people in Britain are alienated from politics, with some claiming that this reflects a wider crisis of legitimacy that should be met by initiatives to increase citizenship. This article addresses these areas, presenting both panel survey and focus group data from first-time voters. It concludes that, contrary to the findings from many predominantly quantitative studies of political participation, young people *are* interested in political matters, and do support the democratic process. However they feel a sense of anti-climax having voted for the first time, and are critical of those who have been elected to positions of political power. If they are a generation apart, this is less to do with apathy, and more to do with their engaged scepticism about ‘formal’ politics in Britain.

Introduction

Conventional wisdom suggests that young people are becoming increasingly disengaged from politics and the democratic system.¹ Current thinking is that this development calls into question the legitimacy of the political system itself, and that this is leading to the rise of a disenchanted and irresponsible youth generation. This is characterised by their apparent ‘unwillingness to obey the law, to play by the rules, or to pay for the needs of others’ (Mulgan and Wilkinson 1997, 218). A number of predominantly quantitative-based studies have measured this apparent youth disillusionment using such indicators as (declining) party membership, political attitudes, and voting behaviour (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992; Heath and Park 1997; Jowell and Park 1998). In terms of voting at recent elections for instance, young people continue to turnout in lower numbers than do their older contemporaries. Using BES data, Swaddle and Heath (1992, 37) suggest that while the official turnout at the 1987 General Election was 75.3%, this compared with only 66% of 18-24 year-olds who voted. In 1992 the corresponding figures were 77.7% and 61% (Butler and Kavanagh 1997, 295), and in 1997, while the general turnout was 71.4% (the lowest poll since the war) the estimated turnout rate for 18-24 year olds was only 68% (Jowell and Park 1998, 26).

However, there is an increasing recognition from some quarters within the academic literature on political participation, that whilst young people may be less interested in formal ‘politics’² than other (older) age groups (Heath and Park 1997, 6), this development is neither inevitable (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992, 84; Bynner and Ashford 1994, 2), and nor does it signal a disinterest in politics *per se*. Instead, some authors have concluded that young people *are* concerned about matters that are essentially ‘political’ in nature, but that these concerns lie beyond the boundaries of how politics is conventionally understood.³ Bhavnani (1994) argues that many published, predominantly *quantitative* studies of political behaviour have tended to contribute to an understanding of politics that is tied far too narrowly to the domain of elections and parliamentary activity; her research reveals that young

people *do* take part in various types of ‘political’ activity, although this action is often discounted from being ‘political’ by conventional political science and by young people themselves. This criticism of mainstream political science has been echoed in a number of other recent studies (Gaskin, Vlaeminke and Fenton 1996; Industrial Society 1997; London Youth Matters 1997; Roker 1997; White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000).⁴ It has also been suggested that, young people *do* care about certain political issues such as environmentalism and animal rights (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992, 214; Bennie and Rudig 1993, 42; Mulgan and Wilkinson 1997, 220), but these are often ignored by mainstream political parties and elected representatives who in the past have tended, certainly at the 1997 General Election, to focus upon middle-aged, middle-England issues (Kimberlee 1998, 89; Leonard and Katwala 1997, 112).

As well as its emphasis on electoral politics, much published political science tends to rely heavily upon quantitative techniques, such as questionnaire-based political surveys. Such an approach assumes that there exists a common understanding between the researcher and the research participant about the definition and the meaning of politics; it is arguable that this common meaning may well not exist, and that studies reliant on such an approach may not by themselves fully address what (young) people perceive the ‘political’ to be. As White, Bruce and Ritchie (2000) demonstrate, once young people are invited to discuss politics in their own terms, thus widening the definition of politics, then there is evidence of much higher levels of interest and activity by young people. Indeed, it may be that the limited way in which young people are encouraged to view ‘politics’ and discount their own ‘political’ activity may offer an explanation for their apparent disinterest in such matters, as interest in politics varies widely depending on one’s view of what politics is. Given that young people are more likely than older contemporaries to regard ‘politics’ as ‘what goes on in parliament’ (as a relatively *remote* activity), rather than in terms of ‘things that affect my life’ (which indicates a close proximity to one’s concerns), it is perhaps not surprising that youth are also more likely to record higher levels of disinterest in politics (London Youth Matters 1997).

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Nonetheless, young people, like their older contemporaries, appear to be sceptical of the way the British political system is organised and led. This is not a new revelation.⁵ Discontent with the British political system became a visible phenomenon from the 1970s onwards with the publication of a series of key studies that uncovered a general sense of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Britain, one that was more pronounced amongst young people (Royal Commission 1973a; Marsh 1977).⁶ This picture of the general population was supplemented by two studies specifically addressing young people's attitudes towards politics and government. In comparing young Britons with their American, German and Italian counterparts, Dennis, Lindberg and McCrone (1971) paint a negative picture of young Britons' support for government and political institutions, demonstrating a generally unfavourable sense of national identity and a critical disposition towards Britain's role in the world.⁷ In a similar vein, Hart (1978, 46) uncovered a 'lack of basic trust or faith amongst British teenagers' in the functioning of British democracy.

The events of the succeeding years have done little to challenge Marsh's (1977, 115) contention that in general people regard politics as 'a remote and unresponsive system run by cynical and aloof politicians'. If anything, the growing sense of remoteness and disenchantment with politics has vindicated the authors of the minority report of *The Royal Commission of the Constitution* (Royal Commission 1973b) who urged urgent action to address what they perceived to be deep-seated problems with the functioning of British political institutions.

At present there appears to be widespread disillusion with politics and political institutions, with a series of recent indicators suggesting that young people are less engaged than older age cohorts. If there is a crisis of legitimacy in Britain with respect to politics, then this crisis is perceived to be deeper when consideration is given to young people using conventional quantitative attitudinal or behavioural measures. In comparison with older age cohorts, young people are less likely to vote in elections, less likely to be members of political organisations, express less interest in politics, and are much less likely to

offer a party political identification (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992; Heath and Park 1997; Jowell and Park 1998). Furthermore, young people are reported to be highly disillusioned with the operation of politics, and display very low levels of system efficacy (Gaskin, Vlaeminke, and Fenton 1996; Industrial Society 1997; White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000). Park (1995) suggests that a trend is emerging, in that the gap between young people's interest in politics and that of older age cohorts has widened between 1986 and 1994, while others have gone so far as to suggest that there is evidence of a 'historical political disconnection' amongst young people in Britain (Wilkinson 1996, 242).

Drawing on conventional political science indicators, and relying on predominantly quantitative approaches, such studies tend toward a characterisation in which young people appear to be set apart from the rest of the population. This perceived gap might be explained by either a generational or life cycle effect.⁸ Parry, Moyser and Day offer tentative support to the life cycle interpretation in relation to conventional (electoral) political participation (1992, 170), whilst also identifying signs of a 'generational imprint' (1992, 160) in relation to unconventional (protest) politics. Heath and Park (1997), whilst cautiously prefacing their comments with the caveat that generational and life cycle effects can never be definitively disentangled, lend guarded support to life cycle factors. Jowell and Park (1998, 14) are slightly less hesitant in concluding that the 'trend towards less engagement in politics among the young... appears to signal a generational change rather than just an effect of the life cycle at work'.

However, the evidence from the key studies of the 1990s fails to offer conclusive support for either of the two theoretical conceptualisations, and the only area in which there appears to be unanimous agreement is in relation to the difficulty of disentangling the complex mixture of life cycle and generation effects. Rather, research throughout the 1990s has tended to lend support to Parry, Moyser and Day's (1992, 155) contention that 'all in all... it seems impossible to rule out either process'. Indeed, even major proponents of the generational argument agree that there is no definitive way of rejecting either life cycle or generational interpretation (Abramson and Inglehart 1992, 201).⁹

Contextual Changes – A Period Effect?

Several other authors have argued that the current generation of young people is a generation that has been set apart by their vulnerable position and life experiences in a complex and hostile society - one which is a far cry from the world inhabited by previous generations of young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Miles 2000). In early post-war Britain the advent of the welfare state and success of the economy led to the transformation of young people's lives as economic independence and empowerment was realised for the first time (Abrams 1959; Lewis 1978). Osgerby (1998), however, charts the experience of British youth as the onset of economic crisis in the 1960s sowed the seeds for a far harsher economic climate during the 1970s and 1980s, heralding a period of economic re-adjustment for young people and an era of instability and insecurity.¹⁰ Furthermore, these fundamental shifts in the economy have been compounded both by an accompanying weakening of family and community relationships, and the rapid development of technology in the 1990s.

Such radical structural changes have impacted on the socialisation of young people to such an extent that some have contended that young people's lives today are characterised by a combination of risk and uncertainty in relation to a number of complex life choices, the end result of which is that young people's routes to adulthood have become far more problematic (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). It is also argued that the transition to adulthood has become both extended and individualised (Miles 2000). Consequently, young people's primary concern has become to insure their immediate future against a variety of perceived risks, whilst maintaining independence as a longer-term goal (Bynner, Ferri and Sheperd 1997). Given that young people's lives are characterised by such short-term expediency (Williamson 1997) it may be that they literally do not have time for 'politics'.

A further recent development that may have impacted upon the current generation of young people's appetite for electoral politics, is that there has been a decisive shift away from the kind of participatory, interactive politics of the past. Political parties now seem less equipped and disposed toward embracing, fostering and nurturing new (youth) talents. Critically this is not to contend that groupings such as Young

Labour and Conservative Futures (the successor to the Young Conservatives) are necessarily marginal within their respective organisations. Rather their importance lies in their continuing ability to recruit and socialise a distinct elite of potential candidates and advisers rather than as a mass network of supporters. This reflects the centralisation of power that has occurred within leaderships and the trend towards what Panebianco termed the reliance on ‘electoral professionals’ as opposed to the traditional voluntary organisation of a party’s grassroots (Panebianco 1988). Hence the widespread perception that much of mainstream political debate is now conditioned by the work of so called ‘spin doctors’ and ‘image makers’ (Franklin 1994). Governed by the need to offer a coherent voice and stay ‘on message’, the major office seeking parties appear increasingly presidential and conservative in tone and outlook. These qualities are not generally thought of as ones that would make politicians especially attractive to younger people. Nor is the underlying process of party politics likely to attract interest because, as Cloonan and Street argue, it now ‘for (the) most part requires a politics of passive consumption rather than active participation’ (Cloonan and Street 1998, 35).

Taken together, these processes and changes might indicate evidence of a ‘period effect’, in that they are societal, and are thus experienced universally across the generations. However, due to young people’s position in society, they experience these changes somewhat differently from older generations. This may help to explain any generational differences in terms of political engagement and orientation that have been observed in recent years in many published quantitative political science studies.

Research design

In this article, we aim to examine the engagement that young people have with politics in Britain – by exploring their attitudes to political processes, institutions and players. However, we are also interested in gaining insights into what informs their views on these matters. Inevitably, this involves us in a search for *meaning*, in which we propose not only to develop an understanding of their orientation to ‘formal’¹¹ politics, but also to reveal their subjective experiences of politics, as well as their perspectives on what

politics actually means to them. In addition, we will examine whether they are concerned about matters that are essentially 'political' in nature, but that lie beyond the boundaries of how politics is conventionally understood (and studied).

In order to explore these issues, we have adopted a longitudinal research design, combining quantitative (panel survey) and qualitative (focus groups) methods. The first stage of this research was conducted in June 1998. This was a regional panel survey of 1,597 'attainers'¹² drawn randomly from across Nottinghamshire using the electoral register as our sampling frame.¹³ The second wave of this panel survey (carried out in June 1999) is assessed in this article. Participants included all those from the original 1998 sample who had indicated that they were interested in taking part in further research for the project. Of this group of 867, returns were received from 425 young people - an overall response rate of 49.6%. Based in Nottinghamshire, and using the electoral register as our sampling frame, our survey cannot therefore be representative of all young people of this age group in Britain. However, our intention is to present an indicative picture of youth orientation to, and understanding of, politics. Our combined methods approach would seem to provide a reasonable basis upon which to achieve this objective.

There is an important literature that considers the relative merits and problems associated with panel surveys (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996; Oppenheim 1992).¹⁴ Notwithstanding the methodological issues associated with such research designs, our underlying rationale for conducting the 1999 panel survey was to consider the views of the respondents one year after they had joined the electoral register. This would enable us to make direct comparisons with the 1998 data, and to track any significant changes over this period that there might be in terms of the attitudes of the young participants in our study. Given their relative inexperience politically, this age cohort is unlikely to have formed deep-seated views about politics, parties, politicians and political institutions (especially when compared with their older contemporaries). The panel survey method therefore enables us to

monitor changes in the political views and outlook of young people as they accumulate experience of engaging with formal politics (through elections in this case).¹⁵

The panel survey data was augmented by a series of six focus groups¹⁶ held in August 1999¹⁷ that were designed to uncover some of the deeper perceptions and meanings that the young people in the survey attached to politics and political activity. Through this research, we were able to gain a deeper insight into their views and opinions than was possible through the panel survey alone. For example, where the survey respondents indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement, *It is important to vote in local elections*, the focus group research afforded us the opportunity to delve into the reasons behind such a response. Survey research by itself does not aim to provide this depth of insight, and in this respect the focus groups provided an opportunity to contextualise the data gained from the survey, and supplement that data in very important ways. The focus groups also allowed the participants to express themselves in their own words using their own language – as we shall see in the *Results* section below, this is important, given that the young people in our focus groups were encouraged to communicate to us *their* meaning of ‘politics’, rather than respond to conventional definitions.

Results

The main findings from the survey and from the focus groups are integrated and reported in the following sections. Figures from the survey that are reported in brackets refer to 1998 data and are reviewed in order to give some indication of any shift in overall views and orientations amongst our survey members.

Political engagement

The results indicate that, far from being apolitical and apathetic, young people do have an interest in political issues. Firstly, we found from the survey that a majority of this age cohort *do* discuss politics

with their friends and family at least ‘some’ of the time, if not more often (50.9%). We then wanted to find out how much interest young people had in political affairs. When asked about national politics, over seven respondents in ten replied they had *some* or more interest, the same proportion that had reported so a year previously. Interestingly, there were significant levels of engagement with local affairs, which by definition are less high-profile, and do not receive the same media attention as national issues. More than two-fifths (44.8%) said they had at least ‘some’ interest, four times the number who had none (11.1%), but marginally less than had indicated an engagement with local political affairs in the first wave of the survey a year previously (51.8%).

Table 1 here

These results seem to contradict the conventional view that young people take little interest in political affairs. We tested these ideas further through the focus groups. We found from these sessions that the research participants recognised that there was some apathy amongst certain layers of young people when it comes to voting and elections, but that they considered that professional politicians should shoulder some of the blame for this state of affairs. A consistent message expressed in all of the focus groups, was that politics is not aimed *at* young people. This reflects the findings of much previous qualitative research (Bhavnani 1994; White, Bruce, and Ritchie 2000) that suggests that if young people appear to exhibit a lack of engagement with politics, it is because they perceive the world of formal politics to be distant from their lives, and broadly irrelevant - that politics has little *meaning* for them. A common complaint was that *‘there is no encouragement for us to take an interest’*. An overwhelming majority of the participants agreed that if politics were targeted more at young people, then they would take a more active interest:

‘All politicians complain that they are not getting through to the younger generation, but they don’t give the younger generation any real reason to be interested in politics’.

'young people choose to exclude themselves because they find no connection with themselves [and politicians]'.

There was a general consensus that political parties were at least partially responsible for any youth apathy that might exist, because they persistently failed to actively encourage young people to take an interest in politics: *'they don't give us any incentives to want to know about it [politics]'*. As a consequence, the focus group participants were concerned that young people were generally *'encouraged to be passive'*. The point was frequently made that, instead of blaming young people for a lack of interest in politics, politicians and political parties should take the lead both in trying to connect with young people, and in finding ways to transform politics into a more engaging and meaningful process and activity. At present however, they were criticised for both failing to target their communication towards youth, and for consistently ignoring 'youth' issues. Ambivalence to 'formal' politics was therefore less an indication that young people were apathetic or naturally disinterested in politics, and more a product of their frustration that their views and desires would not be addressed by politicians and officials. Some adopted a fatalistic approach, symptomatic of a general mood of powerlessness:

'why bother – we're never really going to change things'

'I'm not going to change their mind'

'We've got no interest because we don't think there's going to be any change. If we thought there was a chance to change [things] we'd probably be interested'.

Political agendas

As a further indicator of young people's level of engagement with political affairs, we asked our respondents - through the questionnaires - what issues were of central political interest to them.¹⁸ The results suggest that, contrary to the notion that young people today have no interest in political matters, they *are* relatively serious observers of political affairs: the majority (75%) answered this question, and their responses were both serious and typically well thought through. Europe was the issue of most salience to our survey group¹⁹ (see Figure 1 below), followed (in rank order) by education, war and militarism, and the environment.

Figure 1 here

The focus groups too, considered what contemporary matters were of importance to young people. In a discussion about local government, the young people involved were asked what sorts of issues they would like to raise with their local councillors, given the opportunity. The responses that were given were very detailed and showed a clear understanding and awareness of events and affairs happening in their local communities. Several young people focused on issues relating to the local built environment and the way in which planning decisions affect their communities - such as the development of the local economy, the state of the housing stock, modernisation of shopping areas, traffic systems and so on. A number of very localised environmental issues were also discussed, as were issues relating to the provision and funding of education.

Together, these findings indicate that young people *are* interested in politics, and they appear to have their own agenda. This agenda focuses on a particular youth perspective (for instance, nearly all of the responses to the survey question categorised under the heading 'education' as the main issue of concern, cited the abolition of the university maintenance grant system, and the introduction of university tuition fees). It also gives emphasis to broadly post-materialist issues. Militarism,

environmental matters, civil liberties, solidarity with the Third World, animal rights, were ranked 3rd, 4th, 5th, 8th, 14th respectively out of the 16 categories used to summarise the data from this open question. The concern with environmental matters was also given special attention in the focus group discussions. Finally, the qualitative responses from the focus groups clearly indicate that young people are both aware of, and interested in topical, immediate and localised issues.

Confidence in professional politicians

The data from both the panel survey and the focus groups indicate that there is a crucial lack of confidence in politicians, at both local and national levels – this lends support to findings reported in other studies, and provides an insight into young people’s apparent disconnection from formal politics. The survey revealed that this age group is highly sceptical of the notion that political parties and elected representatives *genuinely* seek to further young people’s interests and act upon their concerns. A pattern of dislocation from formal politics is revealed when respondents were asked for their opinion of politicians (see Table 2). As was the case in the first wave of the panel survey a year previously, only a minority (19.9%) agreed that *politicians care about young people like myself*, whilst majorities took the somewhat sceptical line that, *once elected, politicians lose touch with people pretty quickly* (54.4%), and that *parties are only interested in people’s votes, not in their opinions* (57.5%). Similarly, respondents were more likely to agree (46.5%) than disagree (36.3%) with the contention that, *it doesn’t matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same*.

Table 2 here

However, the survey revealed that young people do not agree with the notion that *politicians are all the same*. Perhaps this reflects respondents’ abilities to discriminate between individual MPs (some of whom may be recognised by our young panel to perform their duties well), and MPs as a

collective body who may appear to be out of touch with voters generally. If this is the case, it suggests that, far from being politically lazy and disinterested, young people are relatively sophisticated (but sceptical) observers of the political scene.

The focus group data reinforce the suspicion that young people have of professional politicians, and shed further light on where this scepticism comes from. The general consensus was that the political parties only really bother to communicate with people prior to elections, or if there is something particularly wrong that needs to be addressed. This view is typified by the following comments:

'The way I see it, politicians only tend to claim an interest in people when it's time for elections. If it isn't an election then they don't bother'.

'That's the only time they want to speak to you - when they want your vote'.

'It's as if they don't care. Once they've got your vote, that's it, finished'.

Typically, the young people in the focus groups had a negative image of party politics that consisted of politicians shouting at each other in the House of Commons. Such an adversarial style of politics is regarded as remote and boring, rather than inspiring – it had very little connection with young people's everyday lives. These findings reinforce the notion that politics is remote; it is conducted by people who are *different*, and whose interests and concerns are disengaged from the lived experience of young people.

Confidence in the democratic process

Interestingly, the results from both the focus groups and the survey indicate that whilst young people place relatively little trust in the custodians of the political system, they do nonetheless display important signs that they are engaged with, and have a high degree of faith in, the democratic process itself.

Having reached the age of assent more than 12 months previously, all our respondents had now had the opportunity to vote in at least one election. In line with the record levels of abstention reported for both the 1999 local elections and the European election (Henn, Weinstein, Wring 2000, 7), a majority of our respondents decided not to vote in these contests. Nonetheless, higher than expected numbers reported that they had exercised their voting prerogative in these elections (see Table 3 below).

Table 3 here

Somewhat paradoxically, although the level of intention to vote at the *next* national parliamentary election was high, the survey respondents were unsure which political party they would support in such a contest. In the previous wave of the survey, 77.6% reported that they proposed to cast their vote at the election, and over eight in ten of the 1999 wave of the panel stated the same (83.7%)²⁰. However, they were still left unsure which political party they would support when the time arises, with only 44.1% claiming to have already made this decision (this compares with 46.8% in 1998 – see Table 4).

Table 4 here

Their stated interest in the next national election is reflected somewhat in the strong commitment that they claim to have for the democratic process. Table 5 illustrates this, suggesting that by large majorities, the survey respondents considered that it is important to vote in both national elections (73.2%) and in local contests (61.6%), with only a fraction expressing support for the negative contention that *voting is a waste of time* (6.4%). However, their support for the idea of voting had fallen somewhat over the twelve months since this same group was last surveyed, with corresponding figures of 81.6%, 72.4%, and 2.4% respectively.

Table 5 here

The focus groups too revealed a high degree of support for the idea of elections, although respondents who had actually cast their votes at the ballot box were typically somewhat disappointed with the outcomes of the process. Several first-time voters complained of feeling a sense of anti-climax, frustration and disappointment. There was a strong feeling from some quarters that having had the opportunity to vote, they did not feel significantly empowered. This was all the more demoralising given that many of the research participants had expected the act of voting to represent an important and symbolic landmark in their transition into full citizenship.

Nor did voting make them really feel like they were involved in the decision making process. A focus group member said: *'I feel no different to when I couldn't vote. I can't move political molehills never mind mountains'*. Even a participant from the 'enthusiast' group 1, commented: *'There was a lot of hype and it was a big let-down'*. Several people related this concern to the commonly endorsed view that the main parties were quite similar in outlook and thus offered them a limited electoral choice. Linked to this, many participants agreed that they didn't feel well informed, and complained that they lacked access to the type of material that could rectify this personal shortcoming. These

findings from the focus groups perhaps help to account for the small decrease in levels of support for elections revealed in the survey, and mentioned above (Table 5).

To pursue this issue, we asked the focus group participants to take part in a qualitative sentence completion exercise. They were asked to set out their thoughts about voting and elections, as a reaction to the part-sentence, ‘Now that I have had an opportunity to vote, I feel...’. The responses from each of the 45 young participants have been coded and reproduced in Table 6 below. Their written responses were unequivocal. Whilst nearly a fifth (18.7%) of respondents were satisfied both with the general process of voting (category 7), and that their voices would be listened to in a serious way by politicians and decision-makers (category 5), over eight in ten (81.3%) held negative views now that the elections were over (categories 1-4, 6, and 8-9). The largest group (28.8%) of the young people in our study considered that casting their vote in an election had made, and would continue in the future to make, no difference to their lives or to the world around them. A noticeable minority stated that there was no party that shared their concerns (11.7%), whilst one in six (16.6%) claimed to be disappointed that there was insufficient political information available upon which to make an informed choice about how best to cast their vote. Again, this more qualitative data helps to reveal some of the subjective experiences of politics that the young people in our study have, and provides an insight into what lies behind their apparent disconnection from formal politics.

Table 6 here

Increasing young people's political participation

Whilst they may be generally frustrated that the outcomes appear to provide them with little opportunity to influence the world around them, young people are clearly predisposed to the idea of elections. So, how might this general support for the democratic process be translated into increased participation in elections?

In the Government's *Representation of the People Act 2000*, certain proposals were suggested that were designed to solve the problem of low election turnout in Britain. In the survey, we asked the young respondents whether or not they considered that these methods would increase or decrease their likelihood to vote in elections. The results indicate that in all but one case, the largest group of respondents claimed that such scenarios would make no difference to their likelihood to vote (see Table 7). The one exception to this rule was that a majority of young people (55.9%) claimed that spreading voting over more than one day would increase their attendance at elections.²¹ Nonetheless, the findings clearly indicate that for all cases, those who view the introduction of these procedural changes positively outweigh the numbers of those who view them negatively. This is perhaps not surprising, given that people are unlikely to report that making the voting system more flexible would reduce their propensity to vote. The net turnout differences between those who would be more likely to vote, against those who would actually be *less* likely to do so, is set out in Table 7.

Table 7 here

These ideas were further tested through the focus groups. Most groups welcomed the proposals to change the way in which voting was conducted. In particular, there was again popular support for the proposal to extend the voting time period beyond a single day. Participants thought voting in supermarkets, on the telephone or through the Internet would probably encourage turnout amongst young people. Where there had been a good deal of consensus in most of the discussion about the proposed electoral procedural changes, the subject of compulsory voting caused a marked divergence in opinion when it was raised in the focus groups. Some welcomed the proposal because they felt it to be an elementary democratic duty of citizens to go to the polls. One person cited the Australian system as an example of how this can work:²² *'In Australia, I think there's a law that makes it compulsory, I*

think that could be quite a good idea'. But other participants, noticeably in the 'sceptics' focus group, adopted a contrasting standpoint. One member of this group drew support when they stated:

'It's your right to vote for the party you want. If there's no party you shouldn't have to vote. You've got the right not to vote'.

Fellow group members continued with a sustained attack on a rule change they believed would be 'impractical', 'stupid', 'undemocratic', 'counter-productive' and encouraging of uninformed participation.

However, before we asked about these ideas for increasing electoral turnout among young people, we again invited our young participants to take part in a qualitative written sentence completion exercise. We presented them with the part sentence, 'I would be more likely to vote in the future, if...', and asked them to respond. The findings of this open-ended exercise are reproduced in Table 8. Significantly, the data indicate that the young people in the focus groups were more responsive to issues of *political substance* than they were to the procedural, mobilising mechanisms examined above. The results suggest that young people would be more likely to cast their vote in electoral contests if: they had more information about the political parties (26.7%); there were a party that they considered represented their views (11.7%); there was evidence that their views would be seriously listened to by politicians and decision-makers (18.3%); or there was a greater choice of political parties available (6.7%). Combining these four categories, we can observe that issues of political substance have a higher priority amongst young people than do introducing initiatives designed to increase the accessibility of voting, by a margin of 3.5:1. This qualitative data provides an interesting insight into young people's response to the procedural initiatives that have been suggested (and in some cases piloted) that are designed to *mobilise* the electorate and increase voting turnout. While these reforms were generally received favourably, none of the participants appeared to believe that they were crucial

for enhancing the democratic process - accessible information about the parties, the candidates, and the issues was seen to be the key to improving election turnout.

Table 8 here

Conclusion

As a number of previous studies have concluded, in terms of their behaviour and attitudes, young people are certainly less positively disposed towards the political process than their older contemporaries. But are they therefore a generation apart? In some respects, there is evidence of a 'cohort effect' taking place, but not necessarily as this is conventionally understood in much political science. If young people vote less, if they participate less in terms of memberships of ostensibly 'political' organisations, and if they have less favourable views towards the political system, then this may be as a result of two processes at work that are not necessarily fully accounted for in many studies of political participation.

The first of these is a 'period effect', and suggests that young people are living in a world that is markedly different from those lived by previous youth cohorts. Young people's lives today are characterised by levels of risk and insecurity that are of a far greater magnitude and order than they are and were previously for other age cohorts. This implies that they have less time for politics than previous youth generations as well as their older contemporaries. Furthermore, the nature of politics is also changing, with a transformation of political activity away from participation, and towards a more consumerist model of politics. With this process, political parties in particular are becoming more distant, and are no longer connecting or interacting directly with people as they did in the past. This may account in part for the relatively negative perception of formal politics held by young people, and for their interest in a different style of politics.

A second explanation for young people's apparent disengagement from formal politics is that they have a different conception of what constitutes politics. We cannot be certain if there is evidence of cohort differences, because we have not conducted any direct comparative analysis with older age groups in this paper. This was not the purpose of our research, which was designed instead to contribute towards an emerging body of knowledge that seeks to use qualitative techniques to explore youth political behaviour and attitudes, to build up an understanding of why young people appear to be somewhat disengaged from formal politics, and to address such issues from their own perspectives. However, current research elsewhere suggests that there is a legitimacy crisis as far as the British political system is concerned that is deeper for young people than it is for older age groups, indicating a possible cohort effect. Our research findings reported in this paper suggest that although uninspired by, or even sceptical of, political parties and professional politicians, young people are sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that they are apathetic and politically lazy. But they are also interested in a new style of politics. While they may eschew much of what could be characterised as 'formal' or conventional politics, they are interested in a different type of politics that is more participative, and which focuses on localised, immediate (and some post-material) issues. But they are also still committed to the idea of elections and the democratic process. This is a particularly important finding, given that having had the opportunity to vote for the first time, they are left somewhat frustrated by the process outcomes - the words and deeds of those who have ultimately been elected to positions of political power through the elections. What is even more surprising, is that the young people who participated in our study indicated that they could be persuaded to turn out to vote in larger numbers in the future.

By all accounts, these findings would suggest that young people may, to some extent, be a 'generation apart'. But that is not to say that they are apolitical or apathetic. More, it is that they have a different conception of what politics is, and they are interested in a different type and style of politics. They are, therefore, politically engaged. However, when we are examining their orientations to 'formal' politics as it is conventionally defined and understood, our conclusion is that young people today

are ‘engaged sceptics’ – they are interested in political affairs, but distrustful of those who are elected to positions of power and charged with running the political system.

Tables and diagrams

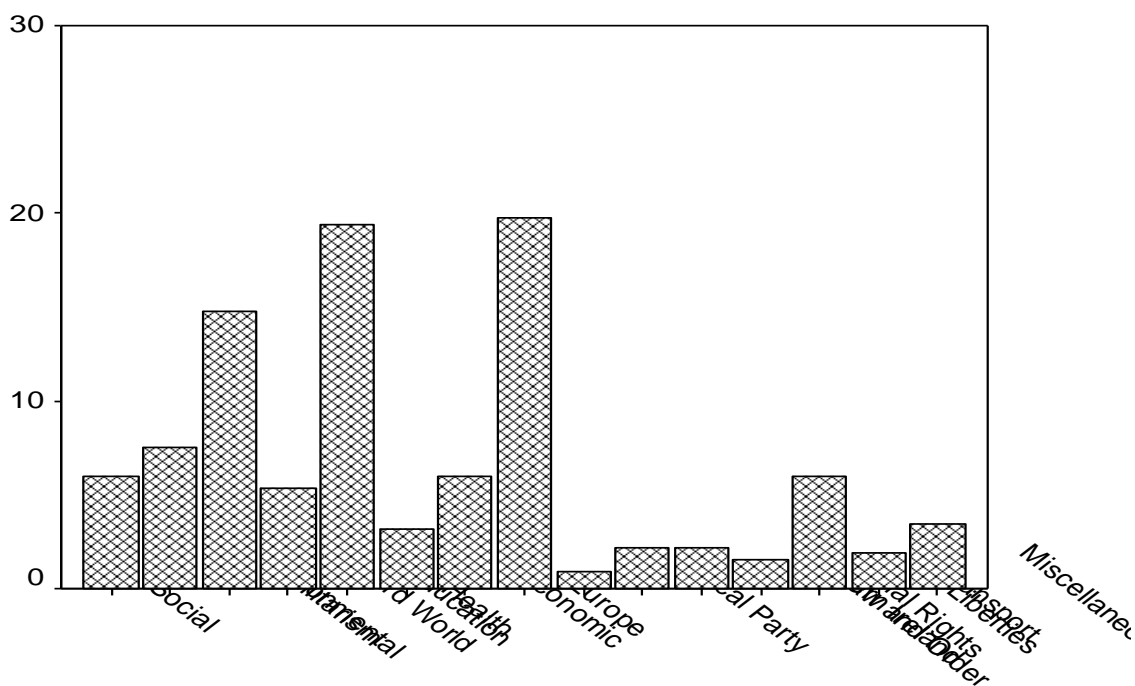
Table 1: Young people's political engagement (%)

	A great Deal	Quite a lot	Some	Not very much	None/ not at all
Generally speaking, how often would you say that you talk about politics with your friends or family?	4.7 (5.4)	14.4 (16.5)	31.8 (32.1)	37.4 (33.0)	11.8 (13.0)
How much interest do you normally have in national politics?	5.6 (9.4)	27.8 (25.2)	37.9 (37.0)	22.1 (21.2)	6.6 (7.1)
How much interest do you normally have in local politics?	1.9 (4.3)	10.7 (9.9)	32.2 (37.6)	44.1 (34.0)	11.1 (14.2)

(1998 results in brackets for this and all subsequent tables).

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2 (1998 panel survey wave 1 data reported in brackets)

Figure 1: Agenda of youth concerns (%)



Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2

Table 2: Youth perception of formal politics (%)

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?	Agree	Neither / Nor	Disagree
Politicians care about young people like myself	19.9 (16.9)	41.9 (42.5)	38.1 (40.5)
Politicians are all the same	25.7 (23.1)	25.0 (20.5)	49.3 (56.5)
Once elected, politicians lose touch with people pretty quickly	54.4 (49.6)	32.0 (32.6)	13.7 (17.7)
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	57.5 (55.0)	26.4 (26.8)	16.0 (18.1)
It doesn't matter which party is in power, in the end things go on much the same	46.5 (50.4)	17.2 (17.6)	36.3 (32.0)

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2 (1998 panel survey wave 1 data reported in brackets)

Table 3: Reported voting (%)

	Yes	No
Did you vote in the recent local election on May 6 th 1999?	42.7	57.3
Did you vote in the recent European parliamentary election?	38.9	61.1

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2

Table 4: Intention to vote, and party identification (%)

	Yes	No	Don't Know ¹
Do you intend to vote in the next parliamentary general election?	83.7 (77.0)	16.3 (5.7)	0.0 (17.3)
If you do intend to vote (in the next parliamentary general election), do you know which party you will vote for?	44.1 (46.8)	55.9 (53.2)	

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2 (1998 panel survey wave 1 data reported in brackets)

¹ In the 1999 survey, the question was asked without a "Don't Know" option.

Table 5: Perception of importance of voting (%)

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither / nor	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Important to vote in national elections	36.7 (44.1)	36.7 (37.5)	23.8 (16.7)	2.1 (0.9)	0.7 (0.7)
Important to vote in local elections	17.4 (26.4)	44.2 (46.0)	32.2 (25.7)	5.6 (1.7)	0.5 (0.2)
Voting is a waste of time	1.9 (0.5)	4.5 (1.9)	20.0 (16.3)	42.6 (42.9)	31.1 (38.4)

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2 (1998 panel survey wave 1 data reported in brackets)

Table 6: ‘Now that I have had an opportunity to vote, I feel...’
(focus group sentence completion exercise)

	Number	Percent
1. No different than from before I had voted	8	13.6
2. I will (continue to) abstain from voting in the future	2	3.4
3. Insufficiently informed about elections and politics to make my vote count	10	16.9
4. Disappointed that my vote had not made a positive change to my life/ that my views will not be listened to	17	28.8
5. Contented that my vote had made a positive change to my life / that my views will be listened to	3	5.1
6. Disappointed generally with the process of voting	3	5.1
7. Contented generally with the process of voting	8	13.6
8. That there was no party that generally reflected my interests and concerns	7	11.9
9. There are no issues that I feel strongly about	1	1.7

(Figures in the ‘Number’ column total more than 45, because some focus group respondents wrote more than one answer)

Table 7: Proposals to increase voter turnout (%)

Would you be more or less likely to vote if:	More	Less	Make no difference	Net turnout increase (+/-)
Vote in a public place (such as a supermarket)	35.8	6.4	57.8	+29.4
Vote over more than one day	55.9	1.9	42.2	+54.0
Polling stations were open for 24 hours	38.6	2.1	59.2	+36.5
Vote by post	45.5	6.6	47.9	+38.9
Vote by phone	40.0	11.6	48.5	+28.4
Vote from home (via the Internet or by digital TV)	40.3	10.8	48.8	+29.5
Voting was compulsory	41.8	10.7	47.5	+31.1
Access to polling stations was improved	19.7	0.5	79.8	+19.2

Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2

Table 8: 'I would be more likely to vote in the future, if...'
(focus group sentence completion exercise)

	Number	Percent
1. More information about the parties and candidates was available	16	26.7
2. There was a party that generally reflected my interests and concerns	7	11.7
3. The parties listened to my opinions/ my vote would make a difference to my life	11	18.3
4. The parties could be distinguished from each other/ greater choice of political parties	4	6.7
5. Voting was made more accessible (more polling stations, extended voting period), and the process was clearer	11	18.3
6. Greater feedback on the outcomes of elections	5	8.3
7. Will always vote regardless	3	5.0
8. Payment incentive	3	5.0

(Figures in the 'Number' column total more than 45, because some focus group respondents wrote more than one answer)

Notes

- ¹ For an overview of this apparent youth ‘disconnection’ from politics, and of counter-positions, see Wring, Henn, and Weinstein (1999).
- ² We take as our definition here, an understanding of politics that is concerned with the formal institutions of government (national, sub-national, and supra-national), conventional political actors (especially the political parties), and traditional forms of political behaviour (such as voting in elections, attending political meetings, membership of overtly political organisations).
- ³ Bennett, Flickinger and Stacci (2000) critique Parry, Moyser and Day’s (1992, 16) definition of political participation as ‘taking part in the process of formulation, passage, and implementation of public policies’; instead, they contest that much ‘political’ activity takes place outside of activities aimed at influencing government decisions. Specifically, their research addresses political conversation, demonstrating that young people are *more* likely to report talking about public affairs (and more frequently) than older age groups.
- ⁴ For example, Roker (1997) provides evidence of high levels of both one-off and regular voluntary and campaigning activities by 14-16 year-olds. Furthermore, Gaskin, Vlaeminke and Fenton (1996) contend that young people see voluntary activity as a possible route to social and political action that is accessible to ordinary people like themselves, and as something that is far preferable to involvement in mainstream ‘political’ activity.
- ⁵ Public discontent with politics can be traced back to the 1940s. Data from early Gallup and Mass Observation studies demonstrate the concerns of the British electorate throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Mass Observation 1948; Cantril 1951).
- ⁶ In addition, Kavanagh (1980) uses a combination of Almond and Verba’s (1963) *Civic Culture* data, 1974 BES data, and Gallup opinion poll data to demonstrate the growth of distrustful sentiments throughout 1970s Britain.
- ⁷ For a methodological and analytical critique of Dennis, Lindberg and McCrone (1971) see Budge (1971), Kavanagh (1972) and Marsh (1972).
- ⁸ For an explanation of the life cycle theory of political behaviour, see Verba and Nie (1972) and Nie, Verba and Kim (1974) who suggest that political participation is low in early years, rising at the onset of adulthood, reaching a peak in middle age, before falling off in latter years. This theory suggests that political socialisation is an ongoing process in which changes in individual values are driven by whatever stage the individual is at in their life, and the resources that are consequently at their disposal, thus allowing for predictable shifts in attitudes and behaviour. For an explication of the generational thesis see Inglehart (1971; 1977), Barnes and Kasse et al (1979) and Dalton (1988). This approach differs from the life cycle view of political behaviour in contesting that generations of people are socialised predominately through shared historical experiences in their formative years. Furthermore, it is proposed that the values held by distinct generations do not disperse with the passage of time but endure over their life span. As well as life cycle and

generational effects, it is important to take into account period effects that may result where societal change impacts upon all members of society.

⁹For a fuller discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing between life cycle, generational and period effects see Franklin (1985, 22-23) and Jowell and Park (1998, 5-8).

¹⁰See Roberts (1995) and Bynner, Ferri and Sheperd (1997) for an overview of the particular vulnerability of young people to swings in the labour market and the differential impact of unemployment on their lives.

¹¹See footnote ² above for our definition of ‘formal’ politics.

¹²Attainers are first-time entrants onto the electoral register, who therefore have only limited experience of ‘formal’ politics. We recognise that not every young person of attainer age was captured by this method - indeed, approximately 14% of 18-19 year olds are not registered to vote, which compares with only 2 per cent of those aged 50 or above (Arber 1993, 81). Nonetheless, the vast majority of our target group was eligible for inclusion through this method.

¹³Full details about the design of the 1998 panel survey, including who the survey participants are, how they were originally included within the study, and why Nottinghamshire is such an interesting case for analysis of young people’s political views and concerns, can be found in the first Nottinghamshire County Council report (available on request from the authors).

¹⁴One major charge levelled at panel surveys is that they are susceptible to attrition, which may lead to the survey becoming increasingly unrepresentative if those who leave the pool of respondents are different from those who opt to remain. In such cases, it is not possible to make comparisons between different waves of a panel survey, as membership of later waves is different from membership of the initial wave. To mitigate this potential problem, we have compared the views of the 425 respondents who took part in the 1999 survey, with the views of the same people as they were expressed in 1998, and *not* with the full 1,597 members of the earlier study. This is so that we can compare like with like. Where the data have revealed differences over time between the two waves of our panel study, we can therefore conclude that this indicates *actual* differences in the views and attitudes of our respondents.

A further concern that is sometimes raised in respect of panel surveys is that of conditioning – as people become experienced in the survey, they become increasingly sensitised to the issues addressed. As a consequence, they may become less like the original population from which they were drawn in terms of their knowledge about the issue(s), and the views and attitudes that they hold with regard to these matters. We might expect that participation in our panel survey would *increase* respondents’ interest in political affairs, and lead to them becoming more ‘positive’ about politics than their peers. Becoming, in essence, more like older contemporaries who have more experience of politics. However, there is nothing in our results to suggest that such an effect has taken place. See footnote ¹⁶ below for details of the focus group construction and the steps that were taken to mitigate for the possible effects of conditioning.

¹⁵At the time of the 1999 second-wave survey, respondents had had at least one opportunity to vote (the 1999 European Parliamentary election), although the majority were also eligible to vote at the 1999 May local elections (excluding only those living in the Nottingham City local authority boundary).

¹⁶ The focus groups were constructed using the 1999 panel survey data. We varied the composition of the focus groups, and we did this with two aims in mind. Firstly, for methodological reasons, we sought to achieve a balanced complement of focus group participants to compensate for (or at least minimise) any attrition observed within our panel survey. Our second motive for varying the membership of our focus groups was for comparative purposes. The membership of the groups was as follows: those who were generally enthusiastic (group 1) or broadly sceptical (5) about politics; those who had left (3) or remained in the education system (4); those who identified with a variety of contemporary youth concerns and post-materialist issues (environmentalism, animal rights, and so on) (2); and a general mix of young people (6). The findings presented are the results of aggregated data from all six of the focus group meetings. However, where differences in attitude have been expressed, these have been identified for comparative purposes.

¹⁷Of the 425 participants in the panel survey, 173 indicated that they were willing to take part in a focus group. All of these were contacted in July 1999 and 78 took part in the focus groups. Each of the six focus group discussions lasted for approximately two hours.

¹⁸An open question asked ‘Which community, national or international issue are you most concerned about?’. This open question was coded into 16 different categories, with only the first answer volunteered actually recorded.

¹⁹However, given the proximity of our survey to the 1999 European Parliamentary elections (questionnaires were sent out the day after the election), and the intense media coverage given to European matters at the time, this is perhaps not particularly surprising.

²⁰According to Heath and Taylor (1999, 168), the size of deviations between reported turnout (as measured in the British Election Studies series) and the official turnout since 1964 averages 9.9%. We can assume therefore that the expected turnout as reported by the young people in our survey is likely to over-estimate the actual turnout at the next general election.

²¹At present, voting in Britain for local, national and European election contests takes place on Thursdays only.

²²Voting at federal elections has been compulsory in Australia since 1924. The penalty for failing to do so is a \$20 administrative fine.

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