

UK Political Parties' Youth Factions: A Glance at the Future of Political Parties

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After a long decline in membership in political parties across Western democracies, parties in the UK have seen an upsurge, especially in young members. Surprisingly, few studies have explored young members of political parties. This article addresses this gap and examines the following: Who are the young party activists? What do they think about politics? What are their motivations for political participation? This article draws on a unique dataset of activists in the three main parties youth factions in the UK. It finds that the youth faction activists have very similar socioeconomic backgrounds, perceive themselves to be politically effective and hold quite positive views about politicians. The analysis also shows that these young people do not consider their youth faction to be the only way for them to influence politics and are not self-interestedly motivated—that is, joining to begin or advance a political career. Finally, the article proposes improvements as to how political parties, and their youth factions, engage with young people in order to secure their future viability.

Keywords: Membership Survey, Political Alienation, Political Attitudes, Political Participation, Political Parties, Youth Factions, Young People

British political parties have seen a decline in their membership, and the British public is increasingly disengaged with the mainstream political parties as evidenced by declining trust in politicians and the political system (Stoker, 2006, Hay, 2007, Van Biezen *et al.*, 2012). Recently the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP) seem to have been bucking the trend with increases in their membership after the 2015 General Election, but there are concerns about the reliability of the data (Keen and Apostolova, 2017). It remains to be seen if the upsurge in membership can be sustained (Kölln, 2016) but party membership is in decline across most European countries (Van Biezen *et al.*, 2012). The trend of disengagement in formal politics has been most acute among young people, and

many scholars have explored the reasons for this (Lister *et al.*, 2003, Marsh *et al.*, 2007, Sloam, 2013). Some argue that young people are actually politically engaged, but in alternative/non-traditional forms (Henn and Foard, 2012, Sloam, 2012). Others are concerned with declines in the overall levels of political engagement among contemporary young people compared with previous generations (Grasso, 2014).

As a consequence of the focus on *disengagement* with formal politics, we actually know very little about what ‘motivates actors to engage politically and what animates and drives their political behaviour’ (Hay, 2007, p. 163). We know even less about why young people engage in formal politics, such as political parties and their youth factions. This article addresses this gap by asking why (some) young people participate in political parties’ youth factions. Whether their membership in parties is increasing or not, it is important to understand who these young members are, and what motivates them to participate in politics.

Youth factions of political parties are interesting cases to study for several reasons. Firstly, membership is limited to people of a certain age, and a member can ‘grow out of’ the organisation in contrast to, for example, the women’s or minority factions of political parties. Secondly, they have a complicated relationship with the mother party. However, they have some independence to organise their own events and have their own executive. They are also closely associated with the main party by sharing their name and sometimes have seats on the executive. Thirdly, the youth faction has limited autonomy, where their existence is conditional on main party authorisation. For example, Conservative Future (CF), the *de facto* youth faction of the Conservative Party, was suspended following an inquiry into sexual abuse, bullying and blackmail in 2016 (Usborne, 2015). Fourthly, political parties’ youth factions are often seen as an important recruitment base, and research has shown that most elected politicians have some previous involvement in youth factions (Hooghe *et al.*, 2004).

Political parties’ youth factions are not just an opportunity for politically interested young people to engage in formal politics, but they also socialise their members into future political engagement. Understanding who engages in political parties’ youth factions, what their attitudes and motivations are, is important not only to gain knowledge about an under-researched group, but also because it will potentially provide some insight into the composition of political parties in the future. By providing a better understanding of who these young activists are, this article contributes to the youth political engagement and political parties’ literature.

The central research questions for this article are as follows: Who are the activists in political parties’ youth factions in the UK? What are the similarities and differences between the activists in three main parties in the UK? These questions are addressed through an exploratory analysis of a unique data set collected using

a contextualised survey method at events organised by the political parties' youth factions. The analysis presents a nuanced image of the youth faction activists. On the one hand, the analysis finds that the youth faction activists are very similar (e.g. socioeconomic background), see themselves as effective political agents and have positive attitudes towards politicians. On the other hand, the analysis also shows some surprising findings: the youth faction activists do not consider their youth faction to be effective in achieving its goals and they are not motivated by a political career. These findings present some challenges to the youth factions and the political parties that they will need to address to retain their members and secure their future viability.

1. What do we know about youth factions?

Despite youth scholars claiming there has been too much focus on formal political participation (Marsh *et al.*, 2007), surprisingly little research has been done on political parties' youth factions. Lamb (2002), Cross and Young (2008) and Bruter and Harrison (2009) are among the few exceptions focusing on young people who engage in political parties. Others, such as Mycock and Tonge (2012), Berry (2008) and Russell (2005) have examined these organisations and their relationship to the main party. This section will focus on the latter aspect and the next part discusses the state of the art about youth faction members.

Political parties' youth factions have a complicated relationship with the main party. At first glance the existence of a youth faction may give the impression that the party is particularly keen on recruiting young people (Heidar, 2006). However, we see clear signs of segregation and marginalisation of young people both in terms of criteria for membership and their role in developing policy. There is no symmetry between political parties regarding the lower and upper ages that defines and determines 'youth' membership. This also reflects wider uncertainties related to the distinctions between youth and adulthood. Youth membership for most parties typically falls between an age range of 15 and 30 years old, excluding younger citizens and extending to the youth well beyond most legal definitions of the age of responsibility. If someone within the age threshold defined for youth membership seeks to join the main party, they automatically become members of the youth faction. At first glance, this might suggest a close relationship between the two parts of the party in terms of common recruitment and membership. However, it is clear that young members of political parties are treated differently than their older counterparts whose membership is not codified or defined in age-specific terms.

While many parties have made concerted efforts to include young people in the formation of policy (Bennie and Russell, 2012), their marginalisation is still evident. Political parties seem reluctant to give young members too great a voice,

due to concerns that potentially radical policy proposals could alienate older voters. Young members are mainly consulted on youth issues rather than mainstream 'adult' policy that might also affect the young (Mycock and Tonge, 2012). While youth factions have some independence from the main party to develop their own positions on policy and organise events such as annual conferences (Mycock and Tonge, 2012), they are often at the margins of the party who see the primary function of youth faction as recruiting, training and socialising new members and future leaders (Henn *et al.*, 2002). Their funding, representation and influence on policy is determined by the main party, and this leads to differences in influence. While some youth factions have seats on the mother party executive, others do not (Russell, 2005). It is thus clear that the youth faction's role in politics is conditional, contested and not consolidated (Lamb, 2002). We have seen this particularly recently with the suspension of the CF executive after an exposure of bullying, sexual crime and blackmail in the organisation (Usborne, 2015). As such, the Conservative Party does not currently have a youth wing.¹

This discussion has highlighted that youth factions are unique political organisations, as they are not fully integrated into the political party nor fully independent. These characteristics make them interesting political organisations to study and the next section will discuss whether theories of party activism can be applied to them.

2. What do we know about youth faction activists?

Some scholars have explored how youth faction members compare to other young non-members (Cross and Young, 2008). Their results show, not unexpectedly, attitudinal differences among the members and non-members, with the latter being very suspicious of parties. Others have focused more on the youth faction members themselves, and it is this literature that is of interest here.

Lamb (2002) draws on the general incentives model presented by Whiteley *et al.* (1993, 1994) to complement it with a youth-specific element and make it a model of both participation and non-participation. The general incentives model stipulates that members in political parties are active to different degrees depending on general, selective and expressive incentives, and as such the model is a form of the rational choice model. *General incentives* derive from the goals of the party concerning collective goods and thus by definition everyone can benefit from. *Selective incentives* are available only to those taking part, such as being nominated for elected office, but also the access that members get to party leaders leads to higher political efficacy among members. *Expressive motivations* relate to

¹The data collection for this research took place in 2011–13, well before the CF scandals.

the emotional attachment the member has to the party, such as support for the leader or party. Activists in political parties have a stronger party identification than other people, and therefore the progression of the aims of the party is an extra incentive for them to participate. [Whiteley et al. \(1993, 1994\)](#). argue that a mix of these incentives is what drives participation in political parties. They argue that the selective and expressive incentives are especially important to party members because based on only the general incentives the model would get into a collective action problem. The problem would arise because even those who are not involved would benefit from the outcomes of other people's involvement, and therefore there is no rational incentive to spend time on being involved. [Whiteley et al. \(1993, 1994\)](#). argue that their model overcomes this problem by giving weight to the other types of incentives as well.

In principle, the logic of the general incentives model can be applied to the Youth Factions (YFs), but it is not a perfect fit because of the organisational nature of the YFs. The general and selective incentives are quite straightforward, as these could apply to any organisation. It is important to point out, however, that the incentives would be different from the main party and specific to the youth faction as they have their own goals, elected posts and organisation. Owing to the marginalisation of the youth faction in the political party, the goals are also (see [Table 4](#) below) narrower in scope and ambition focusing primarily on young people's involvement and representation in the party rather than youth issues, representation and involvement in wider society. Expressive motivations are the most problematic to apply. With regard to party identification, the question for the YFs then arise whether it is identification with the main party, the YF or both. On the one hand, the youth factions are part of the political party so party identification could be extrapolated to the youth faction, suggesting it could be identification with both. On the other hand, the youth factions have their own objectives and activities and therefore it is not straightforward to apply party identification to them, suggesting identification only with the YF. At the same time, due to common recruitment, where someone who joins the party under a certain age automatically becomes a member of the YF, it could suggest identification with the main party. Similarly, the sense of political efficacy may trickle down to the youth faction, or certain members of the youth faction, but it will also be limited or tainted by the fact that the youth faction is a separate organisation. Indeed, [Berry \(2008\)](#) illustrates that the peripheralisation of young labour members in the Labour Party seen in lack of financial support and access to influential positions, as well as lack of organisational structure, has led to a widespread sense of powerlessness.

[Lamb \(2002\)](#) further argues that the general incentives model does not precisely apply to young people. He argues that the balance of incentives may be different for young people as they are in a transitional period where their identities and opinions are still developing. He illustrates that social norms and selective

incentives such as having fun and meeting other people are the main motivations for young party activists. Following the theory of party members established by Panebianco (1988) arguing that active members behave differently depending on their motivations, Bruter and Harrison (2009) found that this also applies to young people. They identify three distinct groups of members who are motivated in different ways. The first type is the moral minded who are motivated by what Whiteley *et al.* (1993) and Lamb (2002) would call altruistic motives or ideological motives, and they behave more radically than other members. The second type is the social minded, those who do it for the fun and social aspects and limit their participation to social events. The last group is the professional minded; this group is motivated by selective outcome incentives in the Whiteley *et al.* (1993, 1994) model, and these young people engage in more practical and skills building activities. Similarly to Panebianco (1988), Bruter and Harrison (2009) argue that this last group of young people, motivated by careers, is of particular interest as they are the ones who are likely to then move on to work in the party or become future contenders for the leadership of the party. This suggestion is supported by the Hooghe *et al.* (2004) research that showed that 41% of councillors in Belgium started their career in a political party's youth faction. Furthermore, this finding makes those who are *active* in political parties' youth factions an especially interesting group to study as it gives an indication of the likely recruitment base for the political parties. It can therefore be expected that those who are active in the youth factions, and attend meetings organised by it, are instrumentally motivated.

As illustrated by this brief literature review, there are few studies on young party members and the ones that exist are several years old. This article therefore makes a timely contribution by updating and further developing youth party activism literature. Additionally, previous research has mainly focused on explaining participation in political parties in comparison with non-participants. Although important and valuable, these studies have some limitations. Firstly, they fall into the fallacy of presuming that the non-participants in political parties do not participate politically—non-party members are not an appropriate 'control' group for non-participation. Instead of asking why some young people participate or not in formal politics, it might be worth asking why young people participate in different ways Rainsford (2017). Secondly, they presume that all party members are the same by analysing them as one group. In contrast, the research into the organisation of the youth factions discussed above suggest that there are significant differences in the purpose, influence, structure and finance of the UK youth factions that may have effects on who gets involved and why. This article addresses these issues by comparing members of different YFs who are active in the same way, namely attending an event or a meeting organised by the youth faction. As such, the key question that this article aims to answer is what are the

similarities and differences between young activists in different political parties' youth factions?

The central research question is mainly exploratory and the analytical starting point is Whiteley *et al.*'s (1993) general incentives model. While this model was designed to predict different levels of activism, here we are more interested in the composition of the whole group of youth faction activists as well as the similarities and differences between them. As such, the sociodemographic characteristics, political efficacy and motivations will be the basis for comparison of activists in different youth factions. The analysis will contribute to developing our knowledge about an under-researched group and give us an idea of what the future of political parties may look like.

3. Data and methodology

Studying young people in political parties presents three methodological challenges. Firstly, as much of the political disengagement literature has shown, membership in political parties is in decline (Pattie *et al.*, 2003), and this makes it difficult to capture a large enough sample in a general population survey. Additionally, youth factions are not included as a response option in most general population surveys and are therefore invisible in the data. Secondly, other scholars have overcome this challenge by doing membership surveys of each of the political parties (Whiteley *et al.*, 1993, Lamb, 2002). However, this kind of sampling method relies on contacts in the parties to get access and ensure distribution and is based on unreliable sampling frames that limit the quality of the data. Thirdly, the members are a diverse group and their behaviour is shaped by their motivations (Bruter and Harrison, 2009), but many non-bespoke membership surveys contain limited information about when, how often and how the member has been active.² This section discusses how this research project overcame these issues through an innovative data collection method adapted from the *Caught in the Act: Contextualising Contestation* project (Klandermans *et al.*, 2009).

The Caught in the Act data collection method was developed to capture another hard-to-reach group, people attending demonstrations. The method was developed by Klandermans *et al.* (2009) to survey only those who attend protests by sampling in the field, in effect 'catching' the demonstrators in 'the act of demonstrating'. The benefits of the methodology go beyond demonstrators and to any hard-to-reach group where the context for participation is of interest. Four benefits of this methodology stand out. Firstly, the methodology captures a hard-to-reach group, but is not dependent on unreliable sampling frames. To ensure

²Membership surveys can and do ask questions about frequency and type of activism; however, as the following section will illustrate, the data collection methodology used here provides more nuance.

an even distribution and to avoid interviewer bias, teams move between the front and back of the demonstration and a senior researcher acts as a ‘pointer’ and tells the interviewers which demonstrator to interview. Secondly, the contextualised nature enables specific questions that can provide rich information about how the respondent perceives the event and why they participated. Thirdly, the researcher is in the same place as the respondent. As a result, the researcher has a more detailed understanding of the context in which the data is collected. Response rates can also be improved because the researcher has the opportunity to present the research clearly, answer questions from the respondents and even collect the survey from the respondent immediately—and this happened on multiple occasions (although respondents still had the option to return the questionnaire in the post).³ Lastly, the method ensures that the researchers know exactly how everyone in the sample has participated, and in the case of this study everyone had attended an event organised by the political parties’ youth factions. This improves the quality of the measurement and allows for an in-depth investigation of those who are active in political parties’ youth factions, something that is lacking in the current literature on youth political participation.

There are some important differences between demonstrations and YF events which necessitated some adaptations in the data collection methodology. For example, a demonstration is a public event that is much less structured than YF events. The latter are only open to the members, many requiring pre-registration and in one specific location. As such, it was also difficult to get access to the meetings of the YF. The structured youth faction events however facilitated data collection. The researcher was located at the point of registration or entry and approached every ‘nth’ person who entered the venue, where the frequency depended on the number of attendants at the event. The survey was a self-completion pen and paper questionnaire distributed with a free post envelope but many respondents returned the survey at the event itself.

3.1 Recruitment of youth factions

The youth factions of the three major parties in the UK were approached to participate in the research: Conservative Future (CF), Young Labour/Labour Students (YL) and Liberal Youth (LY). The data was collected between October 2011 and November 2013, and the total number of respondents is N136 with a response rate of 36%. A summary of the events surveyed and response rates are summarised in [Table 1](#) below. We see in [Table 1](#) that there is an uneven distribution of respondents between the youth factions (Conservative Future: N52,

³For a more detailed discussion of the Caught in the Act method, see Klandermans *et al.* (2009).

Table 1 YF sample details

Organisation	Number of attendants	Frequency of surveys distributed	Frequency of responses	Response rate (%)	Percentage of YF sample
Conservative future	164	147	52	35.3	38.2
Young labour/ labour students	260	200	62	23.8	45.5
Liberal youth	30	30	22	73.3	16.2
TOTAL	454	377	136	36	100

Details of events Event	Number of attendants	Frequency of surveys distributed	Frequency of responses	Response rate (%)
Conservative Future Ian Duncan Smith drinks reception, 2011, London	100	91	27	31.8
Conservative Future East Midlands Conference, 2012, Nottingham	34	31	19	61.2
Conservative Future Post Graduate reception, 2012, London	30	25	6	24
Young Labour Conference Event, 2013, Brighton	100	100	16	16
Labour Students Political Weekend, 2013, Manchester	160	100	46	46
Liberal Youth Winter Conference, 2013, Cardiff	30	30	22	60
TOTAL	454	377	136	36

Young Labour/Labour Students: N62, Liberal Youth: N22)⁴. This distribution is a consequence both of the difficulty in getting access to the youth factions as well as the type of events surveyed (and organised by the youth factions).

The frequency and types of events organised and advertised by the national youth factions gives an indication of the resources available to the organisation as well as the incentives they offer members. It also reflects the status the youth faction has within the party, and whether it has the resources to host and organise events. For example, LY only organised two events, one which was surveyed, and it was clear that not only was their membership much smaller but they also had less resources to put into the event. In contrast, most of CF's events were based in London and many had a social, or networking, purpose, such as drinks receptions with senior politicians. Other events had a more professional focus. For example, the East Midlands Conservative Future Conference that was surveyed was sponsored by Emma McClarkin, MEP for

⁴The uneven distribution of the sample also limits the statistical methods available for analysis.

the East Midlands Region. This conference was advertised as a career building event with speeches from senior MPs and a member of the Cabinet, policy forum discussion, as well as training sessions on how to handle the media, becoming a councillor or MP, getting a job in politics and setting up CF branches and events. Meanwhile, YL advertised more political events, such as the conference for minority groups, and the political weekend that was surveyed for this research. As such, CF offered more social and professional incentives to their members than the other two YFs and also seem to have more resources to do so. This pattern does not mean that local branches of the YFs and parties arrange more social or political activities but the events organised by the national YF serve to illustrate and provide a sense of focus of the YFs. Considering the resources that were seemingly put in to CF, it is ironic that they are the YF that is currently not active.

There are two important caveats to address before moving on to the results. Firstly, the sample is not representative, neither of the general youth population nor necessarily the young people involved in political parties. As described in the methods section, great effort was made to ensure an even distribution of the survey at the event, and as a result the sample is a unique and high quality data set of *activists* in the political parties' youth factions. Secondly, the small sample size and uneven distribution across the groups lead to limitations as to what kind of analysis can be conducted on this dataset. As such, this analysis should be considered exploratory and indicative of possible avenues for future research. However, the uniqueness of the data and the illustrated importance of understanding the young party activists compensates for these caveats.

4. Results and discussion

The analysis presented here is frequencies in cross-tabulations and chi-square significance tests. The analysis explores overall trends in the group of youth faction activists as well as similarities and differences between the different parties. The analysis follows the themes found in the literature on members in political parties and youth factions discussed above and explore the demographics, political efficacy attitudes and motivations of the YF activists.

4.1 Demographic characteristics

Table 2 below presents the analysis of the demographic variables, and there are two things to note. First of all, only two variables are significant in the chi-square test: age and social class. The second observation is that the youth faction activists are a homogenous group. They are mostly male, over 19, have university education, from the UK and identify as middle or upper middle class. There are small

Table 2 Demographic characteristics by YF, percentages

Gender	Conservative Future	Young Labour	Liberal Youth	Total for YFs	UK youth population
Male	69.2	67.2	85.7	70.9 (N95)	45.1
Female	30.8	32.8	14.3	29.1 (N39)	54.9
Age categories***					
16–18	5.8	6.5	13.6	7.4 (N10)	20.1
19–21	25	67.7	40.9	47.1 (N64)	9.5
22–25	30.8	22.6	40.9	28.7 (N39)	30.1
26–30	38.5	3.2	4.5	16.9 (N23)	32.4
Education level					
Secondary education	15.7	6.5	13.6	11.1 (N15)	63.2
University degree	66.7	80.6	59.1	71.9 (N97)	26.5
Post graduate degree	17.6	12.9	27.3	17 (N23)	10.3
Country born					
UK	92.3	90.3	100	92.6 (N126)	78.3
Non-UK	7.7	9.7	0	7.4 (N10)	21.7
Parent born					
UK	80.8	79	98.5	82.4 (N124)	62.4
Not UK	19.2	21	4.5	17.6 (N24)	37.58
Social class***					
Upper class/Upper middle class	43.1	12.9	14.3	24.6 (N33)	
Lower middle class	33.3	62.9	32.3	47 (N63)	
Working class/Lower class	15.7	14.5	28.6	17.2 (N23)	
None	7.8	9.7	23.8	11.2 (N12)	
Mobilisation patterns by YF***					
Not asked by anyone	51.9	58.1	77.3	58.8 (N79)	
Asked by someone in the YF	21.1	30.6	18.2	25 (N34)	
Asked by someone else	26.9	11.3	4.5	16.2 (N22)	

*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$.

variations between the youth factions, such as a majority of CF activists identify as upper class or upper middle class, and a majority of YL activists identify as lower middle class whilst LY activists split between none, working class and the lower middle class. In Table 2 we also see how the YF sample compares to the overall youth population. The data is taken from Wave 1 of Understanding Society (University of Essex, 2016) and calculated on a subsample of 16–30 year olds. In comparison to the overall youth population, we can see that the YFs are more male dominated, older and have higher educational attainment levels. Furthermore, the general population of young people are more likely to be born outside of the UK and have parents who are born outside of the UK. This lack of diversity in the youth factions, across the parties, paints a bleak picture for both the

Table 3 Alienation and efficacy by YF, percentages

Measurement	Conservative future	Young labour	Liberal youth	Total for YFs
I have no influence on policies that affect me				
Disagree	61.5	55	76.2	60.9 (N81)
Neither	11.5	11.7	0	9.8 (N13)
Agree	26.9	33.3	23.8	29.3 (N39)
Events like this are the only way for young people like me to make their voices heard*				
Disagree	61.5	68.9	42.9	61.9 (N83)
Neither	23.1	11.5	19	17.2 (N23)
Agree	15.4	19.7	38.1	20.9 (N28)
Events like this are the only way for me to influence the situation of young people				
Disagree	60	73.3	61.9	66.4 (N87)
Neither	28	11.7	0	16 (N21)
Agree	12	15	38.1	17.6 (N23)
My participation can have an impact on public policy in this country				
Disagree	17.3	10.2	4.8	12.1 (N16)
Neither	19.2	32.2	9.5	23.5 (N31)
Agree	63.5	57.6	85.7	64.4 (N85)
Organisation effective in achieving Goal 1 ^a				
Not at all	14.9	11.7	10	12.6 (N16)
Somewhat	34	33.3	50	36.2 (N46)
Very effective	51.1	55	40	51.2 (N65)
Organisation effective in achieving Goal 2				
Not at all	6.4	3.4	5.0	4.8 (N6)
Somewhat	23.4	31	45	30.4 (N38)
Very effective	70.2	65.5	50	64.8 (N81)
Most politicians promise a lot of things but do not actually do much				
Disagree	42	49.2	42.9	45.4 (N59)
Neither	26	20.3	23.8	23.1 (N30)
Agree	32	30.5	33.3	31.5 (N41)

^aSee Table 4 for specific goals of each YF.

*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$.

youth factions and the political parties in terms of their ability to represent a diverse society.

One important factor in contributing to political participation is being mobilised to participate, or in other words being asked to participate (Brady *et al.*, 1995). The mobilisation pattern is also an indication of how well integrated the individual is in social networks. Table 2 above also shows the analysis of the question 'Who asked you to join [the youth faction]?'. The analysis shows somewhat worrying findings. A clear majority of the youth faction activists (58.8%) have not been asked by anyone to join the organisation. This figure is more than double to that of the activists asked by someone in the youth faction itself (25%).

YL seems particularly bad at recruiting where the proportion of people not asked by anyone is almost three times (77.3%) the proportion asked by someone in the youth faction (18.5%). These findings are concerning because they illustrate a very introverted behaviour of the youth factions. The findings also suggest that the decline in membership may not only be due to changing attitudes and a disengagement from formal politics among young people but another contributing factor is simply that the YFs do not actively recruit members. However, the socio-demographic makeup and the limited mobilisation could also be seen in a positive light. Combining these findings gives a picture of a highly motivated, determined and skilled group of activists, the kind of activists, it could be argued, who want to make a political career. It is also important to remember that the activists surveyed here are at the very core of the YF and may rather act as mobilisers rather than being mobilised.

4.2 Political efficacy

The literature review above suggested that those engaging in political parties and their youth factions should have high levels of political efficacy as this was a central attitude in the general incentives model to overcome collective action problems. Table 3 below shows the analysis for the political efficacy variables, including both individual and organisational efficacy for comparison. It is worth noting that only one chi-square test was significant, but we see that there are both some similarities and considerable differences between the activists on certain variables. Just as expected, the youth faction activists have high political efficacy. A clear majority of the youth faction activists overall (60.9%) and within each youth faction (61.5% for CF, 55% for YL, 76.2% for LY) disagree with the statement 'I have no influence on policies that affect me'. We however do see some nuance in the results, where almost a third overall and within each youth faction agree with the statement. This result illustrates that even among those who are actively involved in politics there is some sense of lack of political efficacy.

We see contrasting attitudes between the parties regarding the efficacy of the events. The results that the youth faction is 'the only way for young people like me to make their voices heard' and 'the only way for me to influence the situation of young people' show an overall disagreement with the statements (60%). There are, however, some significant differences between the youth factions on the first statement, which is also the only one with a significant chi-square test. Only 42.9% of LY disagree that the youth faction is the only way to make their voices heard, whilst for CF and YL over 60% disagree. This result suggests that LY activists might see their party as a more powerful tool for young people to have their voices heard than the other youth faction activists. Overall, these results tell us that most YF activists see other ways of influencing politics and policy than their

Table 4 Goals of organisations

Organisation	Goal 1	Goal 2
Conservative Future	Represent younger people across the UK and their views in the Conservative Party.	To hold fun and exciting campaigning, policy, social action and fund-raising events across the UK.
Young Labour	Young labour is there to represent the voice of young people within our party, and campaign for rights and interests of young people both within our party and beyond.	Young labour plays a central role in spreading the values and messages of the Labour Party through campaigning in elections, by-elections and regular leafleting, phone canvassing and door knocking.
Labour Students	Recruit, train and campaign with members of the Labour Party in colleges and universities.	Campaign with students for labour in elections across the country and on issues we care about on our campuses.
Liberal Youth	Liberal youth aims to train their members in skills they need to run effective campaigns.	Liberal youth aims to run strong campaigns on issues members care about.

Note: The goals of the organisations were developed based on the information provided on the organisations' websites and in conversation with the contact at the organisation.

chosen youth faction. As such, they come across as rather politically empowered and are aware of the various avenues for political influence and voice available to them. It is worth noting that just as with the perceived influence over policies question, there is a group of youth faction activists (about 1/5th overall) who do think that the YF is the only way for them to make their voices heard and influence the situation of young people. The LY activists stand out again with almost 40% of them agreeing with this statement.

Moving on more specifically to the individual political efficacy, we see that the activists have a high sense of efficacy. The results for the question 'my participation can have an impact on public policy in this country' in Table 3 shows that overall a majority (64.4%) agree with the statement. There are some clear differences between the parties here though. LY activists display the highest agreement (85.7%) and YL, the lowest (57.5%). CF and YL also have larger proportions disagreeing (17.3% and 10.2% respectively).

The image that emerges here is that all YF activists have a very high sense of personal efficacy and they feel politically empowered. The disagreement with the statements that the event was the only way they could make their voices heard and influence the situation of young people suggests that they see a wider range of political repertoires available to them. However, LY stand out by putting more

weight on the events as their main way of exercising voice and influence. This result suggests that organisational structures may be important. For example, LY activists feel that their participation in the organisation is more effective than their counterparts in CF and YL. There is nothing in the constitutions of the Labour and Liberal Democrats that suggest any major differences in power or influence of the YF, both parties mention the youth faction extensively and have substantial sections dedicated to the workings of the YF. Both parties give the YF the right to have delegates at the national conference, nominate members and set up local branches among other things. In contrast, the Conservative Party only mentions young people in one clause stating the party should support young people's involvement in all aspects of the work of the party, including maintaining a youth faction. The difference between LY and CF therefore seems to be the recognition they get in the party as entities.

4.3 Organisational efficacy

Looking specifically at the organisational efficacy brings another dimension to the political efficacy concept. In the survey, organisational efficacy is measured by asking the respondent how effective they think the youth faction is in achieving its goals. These goals were extrapolated from the YF's websites and verified with the contact in each of the youth factions and can be seen in [Table 4](#) below. Overall, a small majority of the respondents think that their youth faction can be 'very effective' in achieving their goals (51.2% for Goal 1, 64.8% for goal 2 respectively). Looking at the individual youth factions, we can see that substantial proportions of the respondents only think their youth faction can be 'somewhat' effective in achieving their goals, ranging from 23.4% for CF Goal 2 to 50% for LY for Goal 1. We see again that the LY activists stand out by being more sceptical than the other activists of the effectiveness of the organisation as a channel for their engagement. There seems to be something about LY that encourages a sense of personal political efficacy more than the organisational efficacy.

These findings on activists' efficacy present an interesting image of YF participants. On the one hand, they feel empowered to make a difference, even outside of the organisation in the cases of CF and YL, setting them apart from their contemporaries. A sense of empowerment is often taken as a driver for participation, and this seems to be the case here as well. On the other hand, the YF activists do not consider their main chosen outlet for participation to be the only way to make a change and get their voices heard. They are also not overly convinced that the youth faction can achieve their goals. We are therefore left wondering what it is that makes them active in this particular political organisation.

4.4 Attitude to politicians

Table 3 also presents some interesting patterns with respect to young people's attitudes towards politicians. Considering that the youth factions of the political parties are so closely related to political parties and politicians, it is expected that these young people have positive attitudes to politicians. Indeed, a majority of the youth faction activists overall (45.4%), and in the individual youth factions (ranging from 42% to 49.2%) disagree with the statement 'Most politicians promise a lot of things but do not actually do much'. However, we see a greater variation in the attitudes on this question than the other questions, where around a third of the youth faction activists agree with this statement.

These results illustrate a more nuanced image than the stereotypical image of the political party activist as someone with very positive political attitudes and high political efficacy. As such, these results also bring some nuance to the popular argument that young people are not engaging in formal politics because they are alienated (Marsh *et al.*, 2007). These data illustrate that alienation and formal political participation, even activism, are compatible. In other words, alienation does not necessarily inhibit formal political participation. What this might mean for the political parties, and the youth factions, in the future is difficult to predict. On the one hand, one can hope that these young people remain active and bring healthy scepticism to the main party. On the other hand, these young people are least likely to stay engaged, especially in a political party, and the political parties and the youth factions have a challenge keeping young activists active and involved and not further alienate them.

4.5 Motivations

Lastly, the general incentives model and previous research on young people in political parties focused on the motivations for participation. The respondents were presented with a number of propositions and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement corresponding to various participation motivations. Table 5 below shows the results from the analysis. The first thing to note is that only one of the variables is significant, and therefore the differences between the parties should be taken as indicative rather than conclusive. The statements that it was expected that they would be motivated by, standing for election and working in politics gain the least support among the youth faction activists (overall only 41.3% and 48.1%, respectively). In contrast, the motivation 'express my views' gets 92.9% of overall support. Participation in a political party is not often taken to be 'expressive', but these results illustrate that we might have to reconsider this classification. Furthermore, the lack of importance of the 'careerist' motivations contrasts with the assumption that YFs are

Table 5 Motivations by Youth Faction, Percentages

Measurement	Conservative Future	Young Labour	Liberal Youth	Total for YFs
Defend my interests				
Disagree	13	20.3	20	17.6 (N22)
Neither	21.7	16.9	10	17.6 (N22)
Agree	65.2	62.7	70	64.8 (N81)
Express my views				
Disagree	2.2	3.3	0	2.4 (N3)
Neither	4.3	6.7	0	4.7 (N6)
Agree	93.5	90	100	92.9 (N118)
Pressure politicians to make things change*				
Disagree	10.9	11.7	14.3	11.8 (N15)
Neither	28.3	6.7	14.3	15.7 (N20)
Agree	60.9	81.7	71.4	72.4 (N92)
Raise public awareness				
Disagree	31.1	13.3	23.8	21.4 (N27)
Neither	15.6	26.7	23.8	22.2 (N28)
Agree	53.3	60	52.4	56.3 (N71)
Stand for election in the future				
Disagree	26.1	39	42.9	34.9 (N44)
Neither	19.6	27.1	23.8	23.8 (N30)
Agree	54.3	33.9	33.3	41.3 (N52)
Work in politics in the future				
Disagree	N/A ^a	23.7	30	25.3 (N20)
Neither	N/A	25.4	30	26.6 (N21)
Agree	N/A	50.8	40	48.1 (N38)

^aThis question was not asked in the survey for CF.

*** $p \leq 0.001$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, * $p \leq 0.05$.

primarily for those who want to have a political career (Hooghe *et al.* 2004, Bruter and Harrison, 2009). Of course, the respondents may have opted for socially acceptable answers and may be less likely to select such self-interested options. The results therefore show that the YF activists are not necessarily a good recruitment base for the main party for elected positions as suggested by Hooghe *et al.* (2004). Their engagement is driven by a wish to defend their interests, express their views and pressure politicians to make things change. This result is no different to what has been found to be important motivations for participation in other types of political organisations (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987, Klandermans, 2004). As such, these young political party activists are no different from any other political activist with respect to what motivates their participation, and they could choose a different path for their participation in the future. If they do, the parties are facing some serious challenges in retaining

members from the YF to the main party. At the same time, the YF activists have chosen to participate in a form that many other young people in their generation have chosen not to participate in and this makes them very different from other young political activists.

5. Conclusions: Who are they, what do they do and what does the future look like?

This article set out to address two important and under-researched questions in the current literature on youth political participation. Firstly, who are the youth faction activists? Most literature asks why young people do not participate in formal politics, and this leads to a gap in our knowledge about members and activists in political parties' youth factions. Secondly, what are the similarities and differences between youth faction activists in different parties? The youth factions are an important part of the political party as they act as the main mobiliser for young people, but the different parties' youth factions have very different membership levels and organisational capacity, and exploring the differences between the parties gives us a more nuanced understanding of political parties' youth factions and their members.

The image that emerges from the analysis of the youth faction activists is perplexing. On the one hand, the analysis has shown some expected findings. The youth faction activists are demographically homogenous, coming from similar backgrounds, and they are not politically alienated but appear politically empowered. On the other hand, there are some more unexpected findings. They have not been asked by anyone to participate, and they do not think that their participation in the youth faction can have influence on public policy nor is there a clear sense of organisational efficacy. They are not motivated by the expected 'careerist' motivations, but rather the 'expressive' motivations that relate to defending interests and expressing views. The image that emerges of the youth faction activists is thus one of very keen and politically engaged young people, but the question remains: why have they engaged in a political party? Their positive political attitudes might go some way to explain why they have engaged in a political party, but it is difficult to assess the causal direction in this case. It seems as if these young people could have engaged in any other political repertoire, and the pathway into the political party needs to be further explored by comparing with other activists and those participating in different ways.

The analysis in this article suggests an uncertain future not only for the youth factions but also for the political parties. On the one hand, if the highly skilled, determined and efficacious YF activists continue their engagement in their main party, they can be a real asset to the parties. On the other hand, the homogeneity of the youth faction activists is a challenge in terms of their ability to represent a

diverse society. YFs need to both widen their participation and the representational base, which is something the Labour Party and Scottish National Party (SNP) seem to have been able to do with their recent increases in membership levels. Perhaps a diversification and widening of the membership can simply come from encouraging the members to actively recruit new members. If the youth factions do not address these issues, their future, and by extension the political parties, is likely to follow the trends of declining membership and disengagement from the general public.

The results in this article also present a potentially deeper challenge to the youth factions and that is to keep the members that they have and fulfil the role of recruiting to the political party. The YF activists do not feel that their participation in the youth faction is effective, and they are not motivated by the selective incentives. This analysis suggests that the youth faction activists do not seem to be particularly 'committed' to only participating in the YF. The biggest challenge to the youth factions therefore seems to be to keep their members and make them feel more effective. What is evident from this analysis is that YF activists are diverse in their political attitudes and the political parties cannot take them for granted.

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Conflict of interest

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