

Politically alienated or apathetic? Young people's attitudes towards party politics in Britain

MATT HENN and MARK WEINSTEIN

Nottingham Trent University

Abstract

Following the outcome of the 2001 General Election, when the numbers of abstainers outweighed the numbers of Labour voters, much attention has been focussed upon the state of British democracy, and how to enthuse the electorate - and in particular young people, of whom 61 percent chose to stay away from the polling stations. While the government is exploring ways to make the whole process of voting easier (with ideas such as voting over the telephone and the Internet) it may be failing to tackle the real problem. The main challenge is that many young people appear to find the business of politics uninviting and irrelevant to their everyday lives. This paper examines data derived from a nationwide survey of 705 attainers – young people who are eligible to vote for the first-time and who have only limited experience of formal politics. The findings from the study reveal that these young people are not as apathetic when it comes to “Politics” as conventional wisdom would have us believe. Instead a picture is emerging of a British youth keen to play a more active role in the political process, but who appear to be sceptical of the way the British political system is organised and led, and are turned off by politicians and the political parties.

INTRODUCTION

The study of young peoples' engagement with the political process - and in particular of their attitudes towards party politics - is an under-researched topic. The significant work completed in this area is either relatively old (e.g., Jennings 1960; Layton-Henry 1973), or else limited to a small number of case studies (e.g., Bhavnani 1991; White, Bruce and Ritchie 2000), or is based upon the analysis of small sub-samples of young people taken from samples of the general voting-age population (e.g., Heath and Park 1997; Park 2000). Furthermore, such research tends to focus on the more general field of young people and *politics*, although typically, this does not give specific or detailed attention to *party* politics. Our research study reported here aims to fill this gap by providing a detailed investigation into the attitudes of young people towards political parties, and examining more general questions about the degree of support that exists for democratic institutions and processes across the country. This is important, given that policy makers are becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of engagement that young people appear to have with politics in Britain. The main purpose of this study is therefore to examine whether there is a crisis of democratic legitimacy in Britain, in terms of the attitudes of young people toward political structures, institutions, and players (especially the political parties).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data is derived from a nationwide study of the political attitudes of attainers - young people eligible to vote in an election for the first time. We conducted a postal questionnaire survey of 705 young people that included a mix of both closed and open-ended questions. In

order to generate our responses, we used a random sampling method, with respondents drawn from the electoral register.¹

RESULTS

Our results are organised under headings which allow us to examine the extent of young people's understanding of and engagement with *politics*, the degree to which they feel that there are opportunities open to participate meaningfully in political affairs, their views on the democratic process and the key political players (political parties and professional politicians), and what they consider might be done to make politics more inviting to young people.

Political engagement

Our research reveals evidence that far from being apolitical and apathetic, young people *are* interested in political issues. When asked about politics in general, 56% of respondents replied that they had *some or more* interest in the topic (which compares with 13% who had *none at all*), and nearly half (48%) said that they were interested in the General Election held in June 2001 (only 17% had *no interest at all*). Furthermore, we found that a majority (54%) considered that they would discuss politics with friends and family in the future.

By combining the data from a number of questions we were able to derive a 'political interest' variable, which we then tested against a number of key socio-demographics in the study.² Staying on in full-time education clearly has a significant impact on young people's interest levels, with 47% of those still in full-time education saying that they are 'very' or 'somewhat interested', compared to just 34% of those who left education at the statutory school leaving age. Those with either educational or work-related qualifications are far more likely to be interested in politics (44% very or somewhat interested) compared to those who lack any such qualifications (12%). Gender and ethnicity are also important factors, with young men displaying more interest in politics than young women, and those respondents who classified themselves as white, demonstrating lower levels of interest in politics than their ethnic minority counterparts. The data reveal that young people from manual, unskilled or working class backgrounds are considerably less likely to express an interest in politics than their contemporaries who come from middle or higher social class backgrounds. And where people live appears to have an impact on their interest in political matters. In particular, young Londoners would appear to be the most engaged group with 51% being classified as interested as opposed to just 32% of Welsh and 33% of Scottish people respectively.

As a further indicator of their level of political engagement, we asked an open question – "In your opinion, what is the single most important issue at the moment?". Figure 1 is based upon a re-working of this data. We coded respondents' written answers to this question into themes that seemed to capture the essence of young people's main issue priorities. It suggests that their agenda is a broad one that embraces a wide spectrum of concerns. Contrary to perceived wisdom that young people have a distinctive 'New Politics' agenda that sets them apart from older adults, the data indicate that their outlook, at least on the surface, is remarkably similar. Nearly half of our sample prioritised concerns over the public services, the largest group

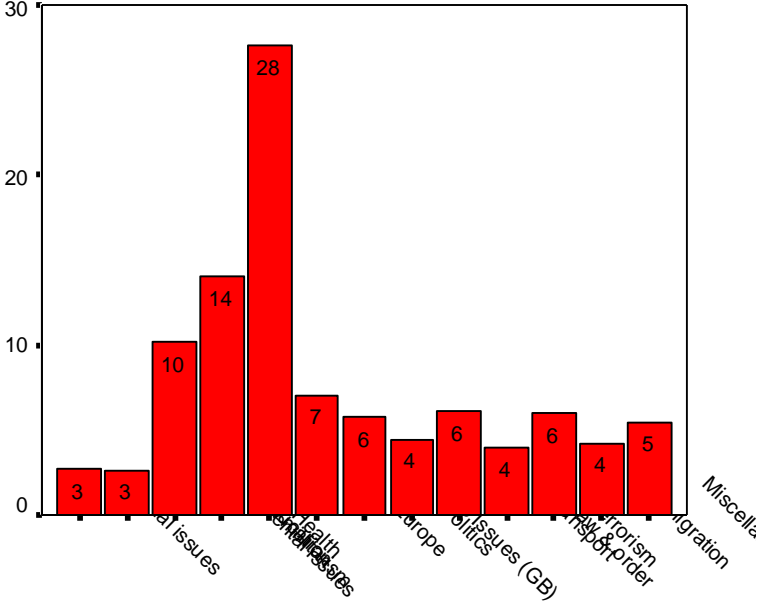
¹ Of course, not every attainer may be captured by this method - indeed, approximately 15% of attainees are not registered to vote (Russell et al. 2002, p.20). Nonetheless, the vast majority of our target group were eligible for inclusion.

² The analysis in this report was conducted using variables for ethnicity, gender, social class, region, qualifications, and whether the respondent had remained in or had left full-time education.

mentioning health as the issue of single most importance to them (28%), with others giving precedence to education (14%) and transport (4%). A fifth (19%) of respondents mentioned traditional “materialist” issues (economic matters, Europe, crime and law and order) as their first choice, indicating a preoccupation with mainstream concerns.

However, an examination of the actual data suggests that in important ways, the perspective that young people bring to some of these issues is at times quite specific – certainly when contrasted with the Westminster discourse. Thus, on the issue of education, young people are less inclined to engage with matters concerning quality, standards and league tables, than they are to express anxieties about the financial implications of taking a university course and with possible student hardship.

Figure 1: Issues of Most Concern



Overall, these results seem to run counter to popular thinking that young people are dismissive of ‘Politics’. British youth do profess an interest in the world of political issues and current affairs, and in particular demonstrate an engagement with a variety of political issues. This perhaps belies the characterisation of young people as politically apathetic.

Political knowledge, power and influence

Crucially, although young people express an interest in matters political, they do not feel that they are sufficiently knowledgeable or intellectually equipped to understand ‘Politics’.³ A majority of respondents (53%) stated that that they didn’t know enough about what is going on in Politics, and a similar number (53%) lacked confidence that they were adequately well-informed about political parties when it comes to deciding how to vote in election. Over half

³ This is evident further in the large numbers of people who report “don’t know” to many of the questions posed in the survey.

(55%) concluded that they found it difficult to understand what goes on in government and politics. These data suggest that for whatever reason, the message about British political life and political affairs is not being effectively communicated to young people. As a consequence, young people are not particularly well resourced, intellectually, to make informed decisions about politics - this may well help to account for their apparently low rates of participation in formal politics.

Furthermore, the data from our survey indicate that young people do not feel that there exist meaningful opportunities open to them to influence the political scene – indeed, an overwhelmingly large majority of respondents considered that they had little or no influence on politics and political affairs (82%, compared to only 3% who felt they had any influence at all). Comparing the percentages of those who agreed with those who disagreed on a number of statements concerning this matter, the data reported in Table 1 reveal that attainers felt relatively powerless, politically. They consider that government does not treat them fairly, and is deaf to their concerns and unresponsive; consequently, trying to actively engage with and influence government is perceived to be a waste of time.

Table 1: Perception of political influence

	Agree %	Disagree %
The government generally treats young people fairly.	23	42
There is a big gap between what young people expect out of life and what we actually get.	64	12
Young people like me have no say in what the government does.	62	21
There aren't enough opportunities for young people like me to influence political parties.	71	7
Being active in politics is a good way to get help for me and my family.	15	41
It takes too much time and effort to be active in politics and public affairs.	36	30

Confidence in the democratic process

Despite feelings of general political powerlessness, young people *do* appear to have faith in the democratic process itself, and are generally supportive of the notion of elections. As Table 2 indicates, when questioned about elections, young people claim a general attachment to and confidence in the democratic process.

The data reveal that gender, ethnicity, and qualifications held showed no discernible relation to one's attitudes to elections. However, social class exerted considerable influence - those from manual, unskilled or working class backgrounds are significantly less likely to believe in the electoral process than their counterparts from middle class and higher class backgrounds. Staying on in full-time education clearly has a positive impact on young people's attitudes towards the electoral process, with 59% of 'stayers' exhibiting a strong belief in elections, compared with only 41% of those who are no longer in full-time education. There are also some

noticeable regional differences, with those young people living in the London area much more likely to express belief in the electoral process (65%) than their counterparts in Wales (42%) or Scotland (48%). This is perhaps surprising, given that both Wales and Scotland were provided with their own additional tier of regional government in 1999.

Table 2: Support for the Democratic Process

	Agree %	Disagree %
All things considered, most elections are just a big waste of time and money.	24	49
Having regular elections forces politicians to listen carefully to public opinion.	51	27
I feel/would feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote.	44	22
I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote.	43	32
I would only vote in an election if I cared who won.	47	30

Whilst young people broadly consider that elections do matter, they also recognise that elections as a method of democratic participation are limited, and they are sceptical that the *outcomes* from elections are positive. For instance, a large majority (60%) claimed that elections don't really change anything, and almost twice as many (44%) disagreed than agreed (28%) that by voting they could really help to change the way that Britain is governed. Young people were just as likely to agree (42%) as disagree (36%) that elections help to keep politicians accountable for the promises they make. However, that this suggests that almost 4 out of 10 young people *disagreed* that this key principle of representative government actually works in practice, is a stark indictment of the ability of the political system to win the confidence of young citizens.

Perception of political parties and professional politicians

This guarded position that young people take in relation to the outcomes of elections, appears to be driven by a deep-seated scepticism towards those political parties and politicians who vie for their votes and for political office. Our results show an apparent disconnection from party politics.

Attainers have a relatively low level of party identification (28%, compared to those 59% who report that they do not identify with a political party). Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, nearly all (89%) stated that they would not be prepared to give money to a political party, nor would they be prepared to work for a political party in an election campaign (84%). Only 2% reported membership of any of the political parties.

As Table 3 demonstrates, young people appear to hold deeply sceptical views of political parties and of elected politicians, and of the way that they conduct their activities.

Furthermore, the majority of survey respondents perceive political parties to be remote and incapable of effectively connecting with young people. Respondents were almost twice as

likely to agree (44%) than disagree (26%) with the statement that it's embarrassing when the parties try to appeal to young people during election campaigns. Only a small fraction (7%) felt that political parties are good at listening to young people's concerns and then responding to them positively (while 63% disagreed). In addition, the largest group (39%) stated that they considered that Governments do not really care what young people like me think (26% are in disagreement).

Table 3: Perception of political parties and professional politicians

	Agree %	Disagree %
There is often a big difference between what a party promises it will do and what it actually does when it wins an election	87	3
Political parties are more interested in winning elections than in governing afterwards	69	13
The main political parties in Britain don't offer voters real choices in elections because their policies are pretty much all the same	48	22
Political parties do more to divide the country than unite it	41	24
Political parties spend too much time bickering with each other	76	9
In elections, political parties don't tell people about the really important problems facing the country	50	21
Political parties aren't interested in the same issues that concern young people	59	10
Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions	65	14
Those elected to parliament soon lose touch with people	59	12

The data indicate that all but one of the groups in the study had a uniformly negative view of the political parties – people did not discriminate on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, social class, region of the country in which they lived, or educational qualifications held. The only differences noted were that those remaining in full-time education demonstrated less aversion to the political parties than those no longer in education.

Re-connecting young people: the challenge for political parties

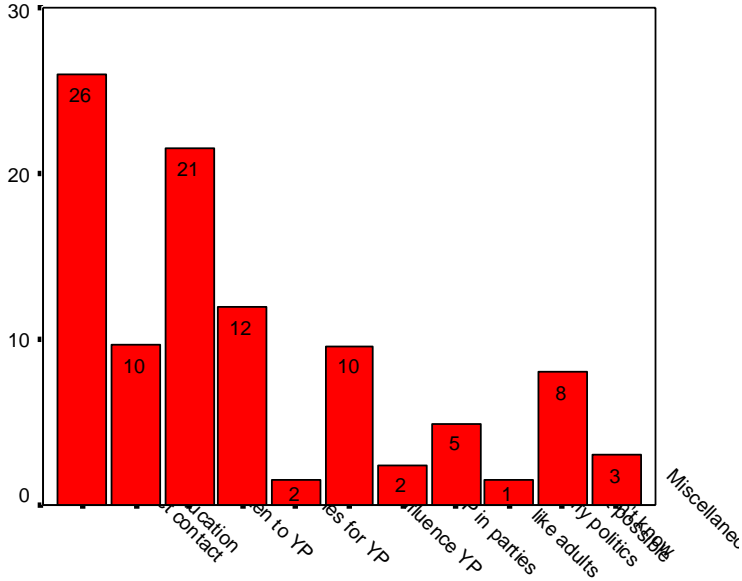
So what might be done to reverse young people's antipathy to the political parties and professional politicians? The responses from an open question provide certain clues. These were typified in the following answers, which signalled very clearly that the main challenge was for the parties to reach out to young people in a direct, meaningful and non-patronising way:

- *I believe they should INFORM young people about what's going on. I think a lot of people like me have absolutely no idea about what's going on. The parties should talk to us and explain what they believe is right. Us teenagers don't bite!*
- *Stop pretending they care about us and genuinely care. Rather than being fake with us, they could genuinely regard our opinions as important as middle class 40 year olds.*

– *I detest cheap stunts – like wearing baseball caps or being an Oasis fan – but simply believe members of political parties should meet young people and listen to and take on board their views and concerns*

By categorising these open responses and conducting a quantitative analysis of the data, Figure 2 indicates that over six in ten attainers consider that the political parties should do more to connect with young people, by making *direct* contact (26%), listening to young people (21%), and providing clearer information about their programmes and policy positions (10%) – and in a less mystifying and more engaging manner (5%). Clearly, for young people to be brought back into the democratic fold, political parties will need to reflect seriously on how they approach them in the future.

Figure 2: The challenge for political parties?



SUMMARY

We have found through this research project that young people in Britain *are* sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that they are apathetic and politically lazy – they have a clear interest in a range of political issues. Furthermore, there *is* a civic orientation amongst the young to the democratic process: representative democracy is generally seen to be a very good thing. Yet, we can find no evidence from our study that young people consider that the democratic process is open to them, or responsive to their needs. And those charged with *conducting* Politics on their behalf – the political parties and professional politicians - are perceived to be self-serving, unrepresentative, and unresponsive to the demands of young people.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the data indicate that there is no uniform youth approach to politics in Britain. Differential effects can be observed in this study in relation to region, gender, ethnicity and social class. However, the strongest impact on young people’s attitudes towards politics can be traced back to young people’s educational experience. Most importantly,

staying on in full-time education appears to engender higher levels of participation in the political system.

The main 'policy' conclusion that we must draw from these findings is that if this generation is to become more politically engaged, then the main political parties must take a more positive and proactive approach in their attempts to connect with young people. This group are much more likely to respond to approaches from the political parties that are more direct, participative and transparent, in which it is possible for young people to gauge the extent to which their voices have been heard, listened to, and acted upon.

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