

## **Will compulsory voting fix the disconnect between young people and the political process?**

**Matt Henn and Nick Foard (Nottingham Trent University)**

Recent trends across contemporary advanced democracies suggest a deepening disconnect between citizens and democratic politics and institutions (Norris, 2011). Most noticeably, such disaffection is represented by declining electoral participation rates, with people voting in far fewer numbers than was the case in previous decades. In Britain, nowhere is this disconnect more apparent than amongst today's youth generation, and a major concern of our national politicians is that young people seem increasingly reluctant to vote. Only 39 per cent of registered 18 to 24 year olds voted at the General Election in 2001, falling further to 37 per cent in 2005. Their turnout did increase slightly at the most recent contest in 2010 to 44 per cent, but it remained well below youth election turnout rates recorded during the 1980s and 1990s (Henn and Foard, 2014); it was also significantly less than their older contemporaries, with for instance 76 per cent of those aged 65 and over voting in 2010 (Ipsos MORI, 2010).

Although it is recognised that many young people take an active role in alternative forms of participation (such as the 2011 student demonstrations in Britain and the global 'Occupy' movement), their lack of presence at elections often leads commentators and academics to write them off as apathetic and uninterested in democratic politics, or even as anti-political (see Phelps, 2012). Furthermore, the significant generational disparity in electoral participation rates results in the policy concerns of young people being given relatively little priority by the political classes; thus, when elected to office, politicians in government will tend to pursue policies that favour older and other more voting-inclined-groups at the expense of younger and more *non-voting-inclined* groups (Berry, 2012). This generational electoral divide, therefore, has serious implications for contributing to the deepening of existing generational social and economic inequalities.

### **Why don't young people vote?**

In our own research we have been considering why it is that young people do not vote and what might be done to re-engage them with the formal political and democratic processes. In 2011 we conducted an online survey with 1,025 young adults who were aged 18 at the time of the 2010 UK General Election. Perhaps surprisingly given the way that they are often characterised, our survey results indicate that nearly two thirds (63 per cent) of young people claim to have at least some interest in politics. But despite this, more than half (55 per cent) of them feel considerably ill at ease in terms of their own knowledge and understanding of British politics (only 36 per cent claim confidence in such matters). Worryingly, a very large majority (75 per cent) of today's generation of young people do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process.

Interestingly, despite their reservations about how the system operates, young people are still more likely than not to express broad support for the democratic process, and approximately half state that they are committed to the principle of voting (57 per cent) and of the value of elections (48 per cent). Nonetheless, it should be noted that a significant number of young people appear to have lost faith in the democratic process – in either voting (37 per cent) or in the electoral process (28 per cent).

So it's not that young people don't want to vote. Indeed, the majority of our respondents said they were considering voting at the next election (64 per cent). However, their first experience of a general election in 2010 has left many feeling deeply frustrated. The results from our project reveal that they consider professional politicians to be remote and self-serving, with no commitment towards championing young people's concerns. The overwhelming majority (81 per cent) hold a negative view of the political classes, with very few admitting any trust in either the parties (8 per cent) or in politicians (7 per cent).

It is perhaps not surprising that a majority in our survey (57 per cent) claim that although elections allow voters to express their opinions, they don't really change anything (only 15 per cent disagreed with this sceptical statement). Most importantly, young people need to feel that there is a party on offer that shares their own hopes and aspirations – in the absence of any such party, they don't feel encouraged to vote. Thus, there is a noticeable gap between those who would only vote in an election if they cared who won (40 per cent) and those who disagreed with that particular view (27 per cent).

### **Is compulsory voting the solution to the young citizen-state disconnect?**

So what might be done to re-connect today's youth generation to the formal political process and to convert their broad democratic outlooks into attendance at the ballot booth? Is compulsory voting the way forward? Recently, a report published by the *Institute of Public Policy Research* (Birch et al. 2013), has suggested that one way to arrest the decline in youth voter turnout is to introduce a system of compulsory voting for first-time voters. This suggestion is not as radical as it might at first seem. There are several established democracies that have compulsory voting laws, including Belgium, Australia, Greece, Luxembourg – and several more which have all had such systems for at least a period during the modern era (such as Italy, Austria, and the Netherlands).

There would certainly appear to be some major advantages should voting be made compulsory for first time voters. At present, there is a momentum developing in Britain for the idea of extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds; the Labour party are considering making this part of their platform for office at the next general election, while these younger groups will be granted the right to vote at the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014. It is also argued that compelling these young people to vote will help towards eliminating the generational electoral divide. In doing so, it will force professional politicians, the political parties and future governments to treat young people and their policy concerns more respectfully and on a par with those of their older contemporaries. Furthermore, evidence suggests that voting (and by implication, non-voting) is habit-forming (Franklin, 2004). Consequently, requiring young people to vote will help shape their commitment to voting in the future.

A major drawback of introducing such a compulsory voting scheme for young people is that it singles them out as 'different' from the rest of the adult population, helping to reinforce the stereotype of this current youth generation as apathetic and politically irresponsible. The implication being that it is the behaviour of young people that needs changing - rather than a reform of the political process and of democratic institutions to make the latter more accessible and meaningful for today's youth generation. Furthermore, critics might argue that compelling any young person to vote who has only limited interest in mainstream electoral politics or who feels no affinity with the parties on offer, has serious negative implications for the health of our democratic system; by forcing them to vote, they may develop an attitude of entrenched disdain for the parties, or indeed become particularly

susceptible to parties with antidemocratic tendencies - especially those of the far-right. However, offering the option to vote for 'None of the above' on the ballot paper may help militate against this latter point.

In our research study, we asked young people if the introduction of compulsory voting would make a difference to their turnout in future elections. Perhaps not surprisingly, the largest group (47 per cent) said it would, although a large minority (40 per cent) reported it would make no difference. Of particular note, Table 1 compares the views of those young people claiming to have voted at the 2010 General Election with those reporting that they had not. These 'Voters' and 'non-voters' were similar in stating that they would be more likely to vote in the future if compulsory voting were introduced (46 per cent and 50 per cent respectively). However, 28 per cent of those who didn't vote in 2010 said that compulsory voting would make no difference – and that they would continue not to vote. Furthermore, and perhaps worryingly, twice as many previous non-voters (12 per cent) than voters (6 per cent) stated that they'd actually be less inclined to vote in the future should compulsory voting be introduced.

**Table 1: Compulsory voting by voting behaviour at the 2010 General Election (%)**

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote in the future if voting was compulsory?	Voted at the 2010 General Election	Did not vote at the 2010 General Election
More likely	46	50
Make no difference	44	28
Less likely	6	12
Don't know	4	10

Projecting forward, our results reveal important attitudinal differences between those already planning to vote at the next general election, and those intending to abstain. As Table 2 reveals, 58 per cent of those reporting that they were already very *unlikely* to vote felt that compulsory voting would make either no difference to this decision (38 per cent), or indeed make them even less likely to vote (20 per cent). From this we can infer that the introduction of compulsory voting would merely serve to reinforce existing feelings of resentment.

**Table 2: Compulsory voting by likelihood to vote at the next General Election (%)**

Would you be more likely or less likely to vote in the future if voting was compulsory?	All	Very likely to vote	Very unlikely to vote
More likely	47	50	32
Make no difference	39	42	38
Less likely	8	5	20
Don't know	6	2	10

## **Re-connecting young people: The challenge for political parties**

Evidence suggests that at the root of young people's continuing disengagement from the political process is their deep scepticism of, distrust in, and aversion towards the political class. Our own research (Henn and Foard, 2012) clearly indicates that if this generation is to be re-connected to the formal political process, then the onus is for these same political actors to intervene in ways that might help young people to see the potential value in doing so. For instance, we asked an open question in order to find out what might be done to reverse young people's antipathy towards, the political parties and professional politicians. The responses clearly indicate that young people believe that political parties should do more to directly connect with them, by talking with (7 per cent) and listening to them (16 per cent), by visiting schools, colleges and universities (10 per cent), and by using innovative connection methods such as questionnaires and surveys (10 per cent), holding "Question Time"-style forums, conferences and meetings (7 per cent), and using the Internet, social networking methods (such as Facebook and Twitter) and email (8 per cent). In addition, there is a similarly clear message that political parties and professional politicians should then action young people's concerns. In particular, by adopting a more young person-centred approach and focus in their political work (6 per cent), by involving young people more in doing so (4 per cent), by championing the issues and concerns of young people (10 per cent), and by delivering on their promises (5 per cent).

## **Conclusion and policy proposals**

Does compulsory voting represent a viable solution to the on-going disconnect between young people and the democratic process? It would seem that more young people would vote if such a system were introduced – not surprising if such a system were mandatory. However, whether or not this would mean that they would feel truly connected to the democratic process remains in question. Indeed, forcing young people to vote when they feel such a deep aversion to the political class may actually serve to reinforce a deepening resentment, rather than to engage them in a positive manner and bolster the democratic process.

What is needed is a thoroughgoing review of the way in which formal politics reaches out to, and prepares young people for, political participation. As Gerry Stoker reports in this volume, young people are open-minded about electoral politics and do not have a hardened disaffection. They are more likely than not to express faith in voting and the democratic process although not with the politicians that inhabit that world. A reduction of the voting age so that 16 and 17 year-olds are eligible to vote in all future elections might well help to convince young people that they are valued by the political class, rather than maligned and excluded. This may well help to convert democratic commitment into democratic participation.

Related to this, a key question to be asked is, '*How do we get more young people thinking about politics in such a way that they actually want to go and vote?*' Extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds should be tied-in with measures to extend and enrich the citizenship curriculum in schools to improve young people's political literacy and help make the idea of democratic participation second nature. Despite their broad support for the democratic process, young people's recent experience of their first general election in 2010 has left them feeling disheartened and somewhat indignant about the political class. The onus is therefore on the political parties and professional politicians to take the lead in reaching out to connect with people – and young people in particular. This would be assisted by developing structures and approaches that enable this generation to see both the

value of engaging with the political process, as well as feeling reassured that there are meaningful opportunities for them to do so. Certainly, young people would welcome an approach from the political parties and from individual politicians that was direct and clearly prompted by a desire to genuinely articulate and then champion the views and interests of young people.

In the run-up to the 2015 General Election, political parties should therefore hold regular youth constituency surgeries which are well publicised in schools, colleges, youth centres and other community centres that are frequented by young people. Parties should also develop policy forums aimed at young people which have the express purpose of listening to and talking with today's youth generation. These policy forums should be both national and community-based to maximise the opportunities for young people to participate. They should be organised as face-to-face meetings that also include 'Question Time' events designed to create stimulating and open discussion of issues that are of significance to young people. They should also use the Internet, mobile technologies and social media to create an e-dialogue with young people that is open, transparent and welcoming - and which signals to young people that their views and active participation are considered of crucial value in shaping policy that captures the imagination, and embraces the interests, of today's youth generation.

**Policy proposal:** The introduction of compulsory annual MP and local councillor constituency surgeries and political party policy forums aimed at young people to be held in local schools, colleges, and community centres.

## References

- Berry, C. (2012) *The Rise of Gerontocracy? Addressing the Intergenerational Democratic Deficit*, London: Intergenerational Foundation.
- Birch, S., Gottfried, G., & Lodge, G. (2013) *Divided Democracy: Political Inequality in The UK and Why it Matters* (London: Institute of Public Policy Research).
- Franklin, M. N. (2004) *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Henn, M., and Foard, N. (2012) Young people, political participation and trust in Britain. *Parliamentary affairs*, 65 (1), 47-67.
- Henn, M., and Foard, N. (2014) Social Differentiation in Young People's Political Participation: The Impact of Social and Educational Factors on Youth Political Engagement in Britain, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17 (3), 360-380.
- Ipsos MORI (2010) *How Britain Voted in 2010*. Available at <<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2613&view=wide>> (accessed 6 January 2014).
- Norris, P. (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Phelps, E. (2012) Understanding Electoral Turnout Among British Young People: A Review of the Literature. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65 (1), 281-299.