

# Young people

Politicians and the media claim that young people are apathetic towards politics, and the turnout among young voters appears to confirm this. But are young people really not interested in politics — or are they simply disenchanted with aspects of the political process?

In recent years, young people's relationship with politics in Britain has been viewed as increasingly problematic. On the one hand, this generation is often characterised as apathetic or even as antipolitical (Stoker 2011), with no interest in, or support for, the democratic process. On the other

hand, when young people do take part in mass social and 'political' actions (whether this be the sporadic episodes of civil unrest across Britain's cities in the summer of 2011, student protests or involvement in the Occupy movement), they are often criticised for being irresponsible and antisocial.

## Youth and voting

A major concern of national politicians is that young people seem to be reluctant to vote, and this lies at the heart of the political apathy thesis. They are less likely to vote than their older contemporaries — or indeed than previous youth generations.

- Only 39% of registered 18- to 24-year-olds voted at the UK general election in 2001, falling further to 37% in 2005.

- Although youth turnout increased to 44% at the most recent election in 2010, it remains well below the national adult average (65%).

- Youth turnout in 2010 was significantly lower than that recorded in elections during

**POLLING STATION**



## Signposts



The research described in this article takes as its starting point the widely-held view that many young people are apathetic when it comes to politics, as evidenced by the relatively low turnout by young voters in elections.

The findings of this research, however, paint a different picture, showing that around two-thirds of respondents were interested in political matters. The research also revealed that while young people support the democratic process, they don't believe that elections actually change anything. Henn and Foard show that many of their respondents were deeply critical of politicians, and felt that they could do more to connect with young people and listen to their concerns.

Read this article carefully, and study the tables illustrating the responses. It is of obvious relevance to students taking the 'Power and politics' topic, but will also be useful for 'Sociological methods', providing another example of an increasingly popular method, namely the online survey.



# and politics in Britain

the 1980s and 1990s (Henn and Foard 2012).

However, a number of recent studies have challenged the political apathy thesis, arguing instead that although they do not vote in large numbers, young people *do* take part in political action (Norris 2011). Furthermore, Phelps (2012) has observed an emerging alternative 'anti-apathy' paradigm, in which young people are considered to have an interest in politics, but feel alienated from the democratic process.

Despite this evidence, the focus on young people's falling election turnout rates persists. Indeed, a recent debate considered the merits of lowering the voting age

(Franklin 2004, Wattenberg 2008). Although the Electoral Commission found evidence against such a change in 2004, momentum does seem to be building towards it. In 2008, the government set up the Youth Citizenship Commission with a key brief to consider this matter, and 16- and 17-year-olds have now been invited, for the first time ever, to vote at a major election on mainland Britain — at the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014.

In this article we present the findings from a recent research project funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It examines young people's attitudes towards politics in Britain (Box 1).

## Interested but powerless?

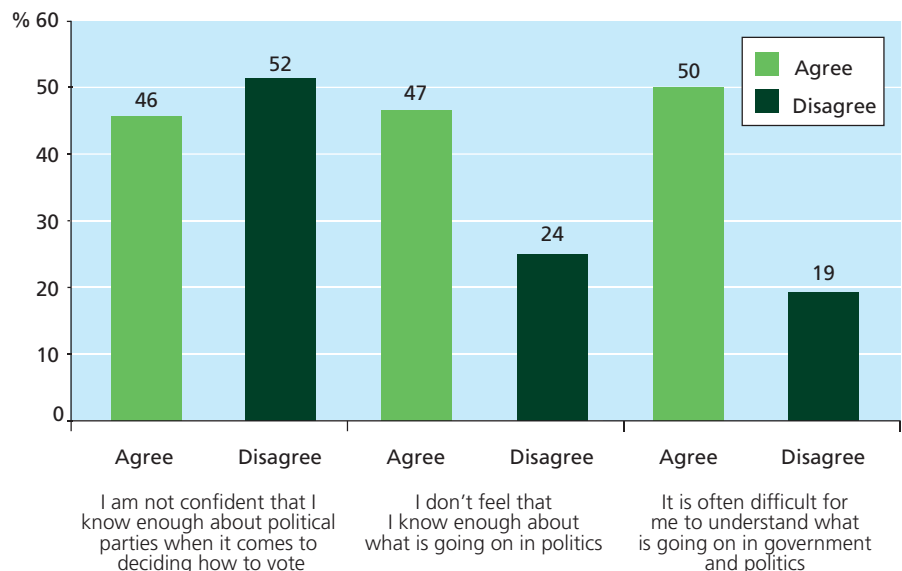
Our research reveals evidence that, contrary to popular stereotypes that they are politically apathetic, nearly two-thirds of young people (63%) expressed an interest in political matters. However, young people feel that they don't know as much about politics as they would like.

As Figure 1 indicates, although the majority of young people seem secure in their knowledge of political parties when it comes to deciding how to vote at election times (52%), a sizeable minority (46%) claim that they do not. Furthermore, young people do not feel confident about their knowledge of politics in general or



Less than half of registered 18- to 24-year-olds voted at the UK general election in 2010

REX/David Hartley



Note: Percentages reported here do not total 100%, since they exclude 'don't know' responses.

Source: ESRC

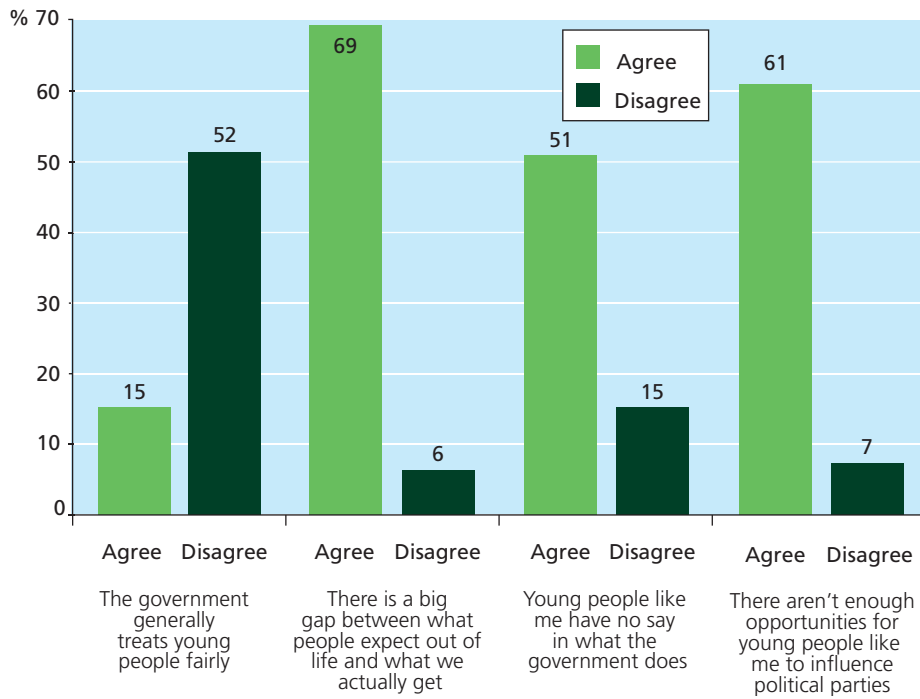
Figure 1 Understanding and knowledge of politics

## Box | Key issues

The research reported in this article is based on a nationwide online survey of 1,025 British 18-year-olds eligible to vote for the first time at the 2010 general election, and who therefore have only limited experience of 'formal politics'. Our survey was conducted in May 2011, one year after the last general election.

This article specifically addresses the following issues:

- young people's levels of interest in, and understanding of, politics and elections
- youth attitudes towards democracy in Britain
- the likelihood that young people will take part in differing political activities in the future, including voting at elections
- the degree of faith that young people have in political parties and politicians
- what the political parties need to do if they are to engage young people in the future



Note: Percentages reported here do not total 100%, since they exclude 'don't know' responses.

Source: ESRC

**Figure 2** Political power and influence

**Table 1** Support for the democratic process

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
I feel/would feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote/if I voted.	52	14
I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn't vote.	45	22
Having regular elections forces politicians to listen carefully to public opinion.	50	20
Elections give voters an opportunity to tell politicians what they think is really important.	53	18
Elections help to keep politicians accountable for the promises they make.	43	31
By voting/if I voted, I feel as if I can/could really help to change the way that Britain is governed.	36	29
Elections allow voters to express their opinions but don't really change anything.	57	15
I would only vote in an election if I cared who won.	40	27
All things considered, most elections are just a big waste of time and money.	32	33

**Table 2** Future voting intentions

	Likely (%)	Unlikely (%)
Vote in the next UK general election	64	16
Vote in the next local council election	53	21
Vote in the next European Parliament election	42	28
Vote in the next Scottish Parliament election	66	14
Vote in the next Welsh Assembly election	56	13
Vote in the next London mayoral election	56	24

their understanding of what is going on in government and politics.

Results from our survey indicate that currently young people in the UK do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process. Figure 2 reveals that they feel politically powerless — indeed, there is a significant degree of pessimism among today's 18-year-olds about their abilities to gain access to, and influence over, the political process.

### Confidence in the democratic process

Interestingly, as the figures in Table 1 indicate, young people *do* have a general attachment to and confidence in the democratic process. They appear to feel a sense of satisfaction once they have gained the right to vote. The data also indicate that this youth generation considers that elections *do* matter in terms of forcing politicians to listen to and engage in talk with voters, and that this keeps politicians broadly accountable. However, only a third (36%) of today's young people agree that by voting they could really help to change the way that Britain is governed, and the gap when measured against the dissenters (29%) is only 7%. This perhaps suggests only tentative support for the idea that voting at elections can have a real and meaningful impact on government.

Furthermore, our survey respondents argue that elections are somewhat limited as a means of democratic participation, and they are broadly sceptical that election outcomes are positive. A majority (57% compared with only 15% who disagree) claim that although elections allow voters to express their opinions, they don't really *change* anything. Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, there is a noticeable gap between those who would only vote in an election if they cared who won (40%) and those who disagreed with that particular view (27%).

Particularly revealing is that when asked to comment on the statement that '*All things considered, most elections are just a big waste of time and money*', there are almost as many election doubters (32%) as there

**WHILE YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY ARE BROADLY SUPPORTIVE OF ELECTIONS, THEY LACK CONFIDENCE IN THE ACTUAL ELECTION OUTCOMES**

are election believers (33%). This finding adds weight to the conclusion that while young people today are broadly supportive of elections, they lack confidence in the actual election outcomes. They are therefore a generation of young democrats, but they don't view the political process through rose-tinted glasses.

### Participation and faith

Our young survey respondents were also asked how likely it was that they might take part in various types of political activity over the next few years. As the figures in Table 2 indicate, large numbers declared that they would consider voting in the future, although they are more likely to vote at the next national general election than at future local contests or for elections to the next European Parliament.

As Table 3 indicates, today's youth generation is deeply critical of political parties and professional politicians. They are considered to be not very effective, to break their promises, to be not particularly interested in voters (or in the issues that matter to them), and they don't really offer voters choices in elections.

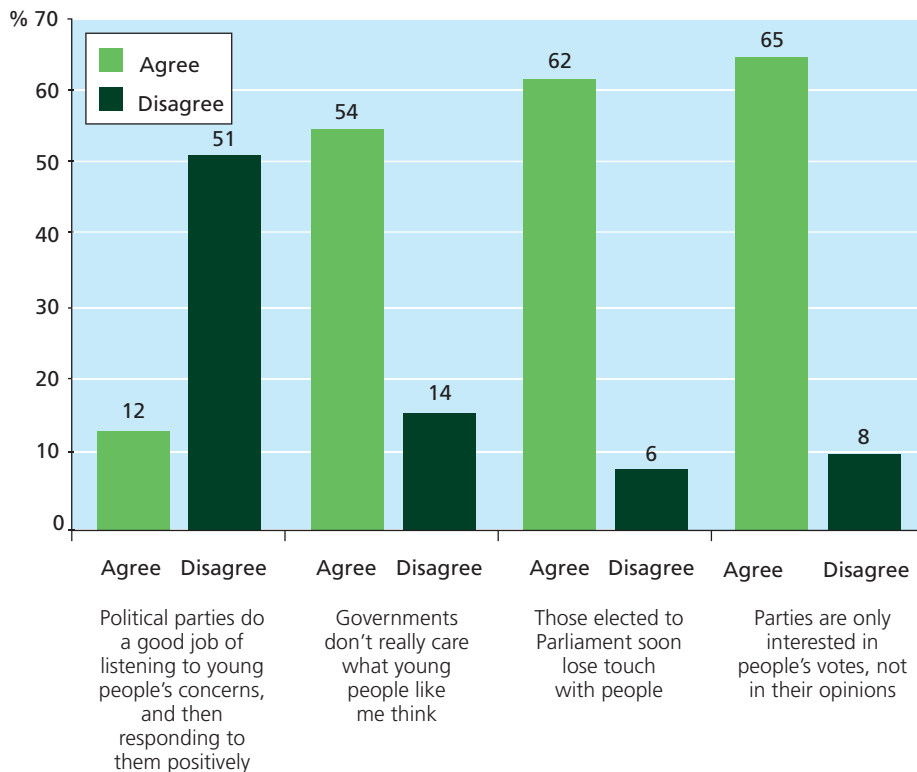
Furthermore, as revealed in Figure 3, the majority of young people consider

**Table 3** Perception of political parties and professional politicians

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Political parties are effective organisations for changing the lives of people for the better.	21	31
There is often a big difference between what a party promises it will do and what it does when it wins an election.	75	3
Political parties are more interested in winning elections than in governing afterwards.	65	9
Political parties do more to divide the country than unite it.	47	12
My member of parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people in my constituency.	24	17
In elections, political parties don't tell people about the really important problems facing the country.	48	16
Political parties aren't interested in the same issues that concern young people.	64	7
The main political parties in Britain don't offer voters real choices in elections because their policies are pretty much all the same.	40	18

that the political parties are remote, and do not seek to positively connect with young people or with their concerns — except when trying to win their votes. Thus, respondents tended to disagree that political parties do a good job of listening to young people's concerns,

and then responding to them positively. These findings suggest considerable lack of trust by young people in these political players. A significant majority of young people also consider that those elected to Parliament don't care what young people think, that they soon lose



Note: Percentages reported here do not total 100%, since they exclude 'don't know' responses.

Source: ESRC

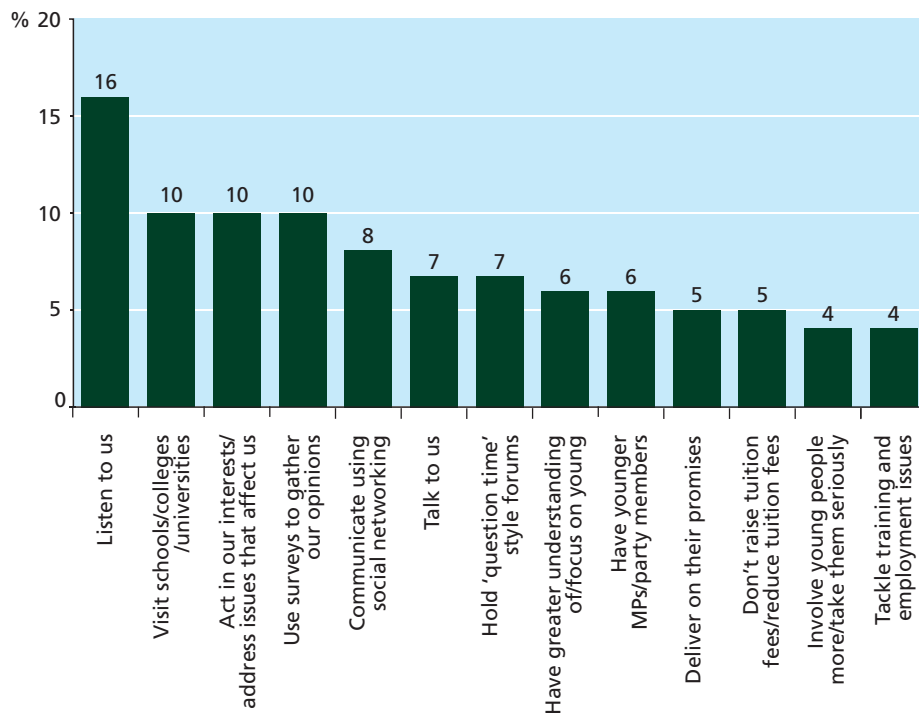
**Figure 3** Faith in political parties and professional politicians

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**TODAY'S YOUTH GENERATION IS DEEPLY CRITICAL OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND PROFESSIONAL POLITICIANS**

Evidence shows that young people are interested in political affairs





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Source: ESRC

**Figure 4** What do you think the political parties could do to better connect with young people?

touch with people, and that parties are only interested in people's votes, and not in their opinions.

### The challenge for the political classes

We asked what might be done to reverse young people's clear hostility to the political classes. As Figure 4 confirms, there is a wide belief that politicians should do more to directly connect with young people. In particular, the parties were urged to invest more energy in talking with and listening to young people, by visiting schools, colleges and universities, and by using innovative connection methods — questionnaires and surveys, the internet, social networking methods (such as Facebook and Twitter) and email.

In addition, there is a 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 and by involving young people more in doing so.

### Conclusion

Contrary to the common stereotype of a politically apathetic generation, all the evidence from our study points towards a group of young people who *are* interested

in political affairs. They are also supporters of the idea of representative democracy. Although they are doubtful that the outcomes from elections can bring about effective change, they certainly hold an attachment to the general democratic process, and they support the broad principle of elections. Indeed, they would like to play a more active role in the democratic process in the future.

However, they also consider that the political system remains relatively closed to young people and believe that there are few opportunities available to them to shape the way that decisions are made. Consequently, today's generation of young people feel relatively powerless, politically.

Furthermore, young people's recent experience of their first general election in 2010 has left them feeling somewhat disheartened and frustrated. Indeed, our study has revealed a very strong alienation from formal politics, and politicians are clearly regarded as a group with self-serving interests, in whom young people have little faith or trust.

The conclusion that we must draw from these findings is that young people feel disenchanted by their recent experiences of formal politics, and remain relatively disengaged from the political process and

## References and further reading



Franklin, M. N. (2004) *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge University Press.

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from democratic institutions and players. If young people are to be reconnected with the formal political process, then professional politicians need to intervene in ways that might help young people to see the potential value in doing so.

Young people would welcome an approach from political parties and individual politicians that was more direct and prompted by a willingness to genuinely articulate and champion the views and interests of young people. There is therefore some serious work needed in order for politicians to demonstrate that their intentions in reaching out to connect with people — and young people in particular — are motivated by a sincere and transparent concern to listen and act accordingly.

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**Matt Henn** is professor of social research at the School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.

**Nick Foard** is a senior lecturer in sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.

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