

## Chapter 10

### Alienation and Youth in Britain

*Matt Henn, Mark Weinstein and Dominic Wring*

Conventional wisdom suggests that young people are becoming increasingly disengaged from politics and the democratic system (see Wring, Henn and Weinstein, 1999). Current thinking is that this development calls into question the legitimacy of the political system itself, and that this is leading to the rise of a disenchanted and irresponsible youth generation. This is characterised by their apparent 'unwillingness to obey the law, to play by the rules, or to pay for the needs of others' (Mulgan and Wilkinson, 1997: 218). A number of predominantly quantitative-based studies have measured this apparent youth disillusionment using such indicators as (declining) party membership, political attitudes, and voting behaviour. In particular, only 39 per cent of 18-24 year olds turned out to vote at the 2001 General Election, compared with 59 per cent of registered voters (MORI, 2001).

Like their older contemporaries, young people in Britain appear to be sceptical of the way the British political system is organised and led. This is not a new revelation. Public discontent with politics can be traced back to the 1940s. Data from early Gallup and Mass Observation studies demonstrate the concerns of the British electorate throughout the 1940s and 1950s (Mass Observation, 1948; Cantril, 1951). Discontent with the British political system became a visible phenomenon from the 1970s onwards with the publication of a series of key studies that uncovered a general sense of dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Britain, one that was more pronounced amongst young people (Royal Commission, 1973a; Marsh, 1977). This picture of the general population was supplemented by two studies specifically addressing young people's attitudes towards politics and government. In comparing young Britons with their American, German and Italian counterparts, Dennis, Lindberg and McCrone (1971) paint a negative picture of young Britons' support for government and political institutions, demonstrating a generally unfavourable sense of national identity and a critical disposition towards Britain's role in the world. In a similar vein, Hart (1978: 46) uncovered a 'lack of basic trust or faith amongst British teenagers' in the functioning of British democracy.

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

Evidence from a number of recent studies suggest that at present there appears to be widespread disillusion with politics and political institutions, with a series of recent indicators suggesting that young people are less engaged than older age cohorts.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on conventional political science indicators, and relying on predominantly quantitative approaches, such studies tend toward a characterisation in which young

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter by Weinstein in this collection for an analysis of youth political participation rates.

people appear to be set apart from the rest of the population (Parry, Moyser and Day 1992; Park, 1995; Gaskin, Vlaeminke and Fenton, 1996; Heath and Park 1997; Jowell and Park 1998; Industrial Society, 1997; White, Bruce and Ritchie, 2000). This perceived gap might be explained by either a generational or life cycle effect.<sup>2</sup> Parry, Moyser and Day offer tentative support to the life cycle interpretation in relation to conventional (electoral) political participation (1992: 170), whilst also identifying signs of a 'generational imprint' (1992: 160) in relation to unconventional (protest) politics. Heath and Park (1997), whilst cautiously prefacing their comments with the caveat that generational and life cycle effects can never be definitively disentangled, lend guarded support to life cycle factors. Jowell and Park (1998: 14) are slightly less hesitant in concluding that the 'trend towards less engagement in politics among the young... appears to signal a generational change rather than just an effect of the life cycle at work'.

However, the evidence from the key studies of the 1990s fails to offer conclusive support for either of the two theoretical conceptualisations, and the only area in which there appears to be unanimous agreement is in relation to the difficulty of disentangling the complex mixture of life cycle and generation effects. Rather, research throughout the 1990s has tended to lend support to Parry, Moyser and Day's (1992: 155) contention that 'all in all... it seems impossible to rule out either process'. Indeed, even major proponents of the generational argument agree that there is no definitive way of rejecting either life cycle or generational interpretation (Abramson and Inglehart, 1992: 201).<sup>3</sup>

## Research design

In this chapter, we aim to examine whether young people are alienated from politics in Britain – by exploring their attitudes to political processes, institutions and players. However, we are also interested in gaining insights into what informs their views on these matters. Inevitably, this involves us in a search for *meaning*, in which we propose not only to develop an understanding of their orientation to 'formal' politics, but also to reveal their subjective experiences of politics, as well as their perspectives on what politics actually means to them. In addition, we will examine whether they are concerned about matters that are essentially 'political' in nature, but that lie beyond the boundaries of how politics is conventionally understood (and studied).

In order to explore these issues, we have adopted a longitudinal research design, combining quantitative (panel survey) and qualitative (focus groups) methods. The first stage of this research was conducted in June 1998. This was a regional panel survey of 1,597 'attainers'<sup>4</sup> drawn randomly from across Nottinghamshire using the electoral

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<sup>2</sup> For an explanation of the life cycle theory of political behaviour, see Verba and Nie (1972) and Nie, Verba and Kim (1974) who suggest that political participation is low in early years, rising at the onset of adulthood, reaching a peak in middle age, before falling off in latter years. For an explication of the generational thesis, see Inglehart (1971; 1977), Barnes and Kasse *et al* (1979) and Dalton (1988). This approach differs from the life cycle view of political behaviour in contesting that generations of people are socialised predominately through shared historical experiences in their formative years. Furthermore, it is proposed that the values held by distinct generations do not disperse with the passage of time but endure over their life span.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing between life cycle, generational and period effects see Franklin (1985: 22-23) and Jowell and Park (1998: 5-8).

<sup>4</sup> Attainers are first-time entrants onto the electoral register, who therefore have only limited experience of 'formal' politics. We recognise that not every young person of attainer age was captured by this method - indeed, approximately 14 per cent of 18-19 year olds are not registered

register as our sampling frame.<sup>5</sup> The second wave of this panel survey (carried out in June 1999) is assessed in this chapter. Participants included all those from the original 1998 sample who had indicated that they were interested in taking part in further research for the project. Of this group of 867, returns were received from 425 young people - an overall response rate of 49.6 per cent.<sup>6</sup> Based in Nottinghamshire, and using the electoral register as our sampling frame, our survey cannot therefore be representative of all young people of this age group in Britain. However, our intention is to present an indicative picture of youth orientation to, and understanding of, politics. Our combined methods approach would seem to provide a reasonable basis upon which to achieve this objective.

Given their relative inexperience politically, this age cohort is unlikely to have formed deep-seated views about politics, parties, politicians and political institutions (especially when compared with their older contemporaries). The panel survey method therefore enables us to monitor changes in the political views and outlook of young people as they accumulate experience of engaging with formal politics (through elections in this case).<sup>7</sup> The panel survey data was augmented by a series of six focus groups<sup>8</sup> held in August 1999 that were designed to uncover some of the deeper perceptions and meanings that the young people in the survey attached to politics and political activity. Through this research, we were able to gain a deeper insight into their views and opinions than was possible through the panel survey alone. For example, where the survey respondents indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement, *It is important to vote in local elections*, the focus group research afforded us the opportunity to delve into the reasons behind such a response. Survey research by itself does not aim to provide this depth of insight, and in this respect the focus groups provided an opportunity to contextualise the data gained from the survey, and supplement that data in very important ways. The focus groups also allowed the participants to express themselves in their own words using their own language – as we shall see in the *Results* section below, this is important, given that the young people in our focus groups were encouraged to communicate to us their meaning of ‘politics’, rather than respond to conventional definitions.

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to vote, which compares with only 2 per cent of those aged 50 or above (Arber, 1993: 81). Nonetheless, the vast majority of our target group was eligible for inclusion through this method.

<sup>5</sup> Full details about the design of the 1998 panel survey, including who the survey participants are, how they were originally included within the study, and why Nottinghamshire is such an interesting case for analysis of young people’s political views and concerns, can be found in the first Nottinghamshire County Council report (Wring, Henn and Weinstein, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, we compared the views of the 425 respondents who took part in the 1999 survey, with the views of the same people as they were expressed in 1998, and *not* with the full 1,597 members of the earlier study. This is so that we can compare like with like. Where the data have revealed differences over time between the two waves of our panel study, we can therefore conclude that this indicates *actual* differences in the views and attitudes of our respondents.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of the 1999 second-wave survey, respondents had had at least one opportunity to vote (the 1999 European Parliamentary election), although the majority were also eligible to vote at the 1999 May local elections (excluding only those living in the Nottingham City local authority boundary).

<sup>8</sup> The focus groups were constructed using the 1999 panel survey data. The membership of the groups was as follows: those who were generally enthusiastic (group 1) or broadly sceptical (5) about politics; those who had left (3) or remained in the education system (4); those who identified with a variety of contemporary youth concerns and post-materialist issues (environmentalism, animal rights, and so on) (2); and a general mix of young people (6).

## Results

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

### Political engagement

The results indicate that, far from being apolitical and apathetic, young people do have an interest in political issues (see Table 10.1).

TABLE 10.1 AROUND HERE

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

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

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

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

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

*'Why bother – we're never really going to change things'*

*'I'm not going to change their mind'*

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

## **Political agendas**

As a further indicator of young people's level of engagement with political affairs, we asked our respondents - through the questionnaires - what issues were of central political interest to them.<sup>9</sup> The results suggest that, contrary to the notion that young people today have no interest in political matters, they *are* relatively serious observers of political affairs: the majority (75 per cent) answered this question, and their responses were both serious and typically well thought through. Europe was the issue of most salience to our survey group<sup>10</sup> (see Figure 10.1 below), followed (in rank order) by education, war and militarism, and the environment.

FIGURE 10.1 AROUND HERE

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<sup>9</sup> An open question asked 'Which community, national or international issue are you most concerned about?'. This open question was coded into 16 different categories, with only the first answer volunteered actually recorded.

<sup>10</sup> However, given the proximity of our survey to the 1999 European Parliamentary elections (questionnaires were sent out the day after the election), and the intense media coverage given to European matters at the time, this is perhaps not particularly surprising.

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

Together, these findings indicate that young people *are* interested in politics, and they appear to have their own agenda. This agenda focuses on a particular youth perspective (for instance, nearly all of the responses to the survey question categorised under the heading 'education' as the main issue of concern, cited the abolition of the university maintenance grant system, and the introduction of university tuition fees). It also gives emphasis to broadly post-materialist issues. Militarism, environmental matters, civil liberties, solidarity with the Third World, animal rights, were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> respectively out of the 16 categories used to summarise the data from this open question. The concern with environmental matters was also given special attention in the focus group discussions. Finally, the qualitative responses from the focus groups clearly indicate that young people are both aware of, and interested in topical, immediate and localised issues.

## **Confidence in professional politicians**

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

However, the survey revealed that young people do not agree with the notion that *politicians are all the same*. Perhaps this reflects respondents' abilities to discriminate between individual MPs (some of whom may be recognised by our young panel to perform their duties well), and MPs as a collective body that may appear to be out of touch with voters generally. If this is the case, it suggests that, far from being politically lazy and disinterested, young people are relatively sophisticated (but sceptical) observers of the political scene.

## TABLE 10.2 AROUND HERE

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

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

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

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

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

### **Confidence in the democratic process**

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

Having reached the age of assent more than 12 months previously, all our respondents had now had the opportunity to vote in at least one election. In line with the record levels of abstention reported for both the 1999 local elections and the European election (Henn, Weinstein, Wring 2000:7), a majority of our respondents decided not to vote in these contests. Nonetheless, higher than expected numbers reported that they had exercised their voting prerogative in these elections (see Table 10.3 below).

## TABLE 10.3 AROUND HERE

Somewhat paradoxically, although the level of intention to vote at the *next* national parliamentary election was high, the survey respondents were unsure which political party they would support in such a contest. In the previous wave of the survey, 77.6 per cent reported that they proposed to cast their vote at the election, and over eight in ten of the 1999 wave of the panel stated the same (83.7 per cent)<sup>11</sup>. However, they were

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<sup>11</sup> According to Heath and Taylor (1999: 168), the size of deviations between reported turnout (as measured in the British Election Studies series) and the official turnout since 1964 averages 9.9

still left unsure which political party they would support when the time arises, with only 44.1 per cent claiming to have already made this decision (this compares with 46.8 per cent in 1998 – see Table 10.4).

#### TABLE 10.4 AROUND HERE

Their stated interest in the next national election is reflected somewhat in the strong commitment that they claim to have for the democratic process. Table 10.5 illustrates this, suggesting that by large majorities, the survey respondents considered that it is important to vote in both national elections (73.2 per cent) and in local contests (61.6 per cent), with only a fraction expressing support for the negative contention that *voting is a waste of time* (6.4 per cent). However, their support for the idea of voting had fallen somewhat over the twelve months since this same group was last surveyed, with corresponding figures of 81.6 per cent, 72.4 per cent, and 2.4 per cent respectively.

#### TABLE 10.5 AROUND HERE

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

Nor did voting make them really feel like they were involved in the decision making process. A focus group member said: *'I feel no different to when I couldn't vote. I can't move political molehills never mind mountains'*. Even a participant from the 'enthusiast' group 1, commented: *'There was a lot of hype and it was a big let-down'*. Several people related this concern to the commonly endorsed view that the main parties were quite similar in outlook and thus offered them a limited electoral choice. Linked to this, many participants agreed that they didn't feel well informed, and complained that they lacked access to the type of material that could rectify this personal shortcoming. These findings from the focus groups perhaps help to account for the small decrease in levels of support for elections revealed in the survey, and mentioned above (Table 10.5).

To pursue this issue, we asked the focus group participants to take part in a qualitative sentence completion exercise. They were asked to set out their thoughts about voting and elections, as a reaction to the part-sentence, 'Now that I have had an opportunity to vote, I feel...'. The responses from each of the 45 young participants have been coded and reproduced in Table 6 below. Their written responses were unequivocal. Whilst nearly a fifth (18.7 per cent) of respondents were satisfied both with the general process of voting (category 7), and that their voices would be listened to in a serious way by politicians and decision-makers (category 5), over eight in ten (81.3 per cent) held negative views now that the elections were over (categories 1-4, 6, and 8-9). The

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per cent. We can assume therefore that the expected turnout as reported by the young people in our survey is likely to over-estimate the actual turnout at the next general election.



largest group (28.8 per cent) of the young people in our study considered that casting their vote in an election had made, and would continue in the future to make, no difference to their lives or to the world around them. A noticeable minority stated that there was no party that shared their concerns (11.7 per cent), whilst one in six (16.6 per cent) claimed to be disappointed that there was insufficient political information available upon which to make an informed choice about how best to cast their vote. Again, this more qualitative data helps to reveal some of the subjective experiences of politics that the young people in our study have, and provides an insight into what lies behind their apparent disconnection from formal politics.

TABLE 10.6 AROUND HERE

### **Increasing young people's political participation**

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

In the Government's *Representation of the People Act 2000*, certain proposals were suggested that were designed to solve the problem of low election turnout in Britain. In the survey, we asked the young respondents whether they considered that these methods would increase or decrease their likelihood to vote in elections. The results indicate that in all but one case, the largest group of respondents claimed that such scenarios would make no difference to their likelihood to vote (see Table 10.7). The one exception to this rule was that a majority of young people (55.9 per cent) claimed that spreading voting over more than one day would increase their attendance at elections.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the findings clearly indicate that for all cases, those who view the introduction of these procedural changes positively outweigh the numbers of those who view them negatively. This is perhaps not surprising, given that people are unlikely to report that making the voting system more flexible would reduce their propensity to vote. The net turnout differences between those who would be more likely to vote, against those who would actually be *less* likely to do so, is set out in Table 10.7.

TABLE 10.7 AROUND HERE

These ideas were further tested through the focus groups. Most groups welcomed the proposals to change the way in which voting was conducted. In particular, there was again popular support for the proposal to extend the voting time period beyond a single day. Participants thought voting in supermarkets, on the telephone or through the Internet would probably encourage turnout amongst young people. Where there had been a good deal of consensus in most of the discussion about the proposed electoral procedural changes, the subject of compulsory voting caused a marked divergence in opinion when it was raised in the focus groups. Some welcomed the proposal because they felt it to be an elementary democratic duty of citizens to go to the polls. One person cited the Australian system as an example of how this can work:<sup>13</sup> *In Australia, I think*

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<sup>12</sup> At present, voting in Britain for local, national and European election contests takes place on Thursdays only.

<sup>13</sup> Voting at federal elections has been compulsory in Australia since 1924. The penalty for failing to do so is a \$20 administrative fine.

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

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

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

However, before we asked about these ideas for increasing electoral turnout among young people, we again invited our young participants to take part in a qualitative written sentence completion exercise. We presented them with the part sentence, 'I would be more likely to vote in the future, if...', and asked them to respond. The findings of this open-ended exercise are reproduced in Table 10.8. Significantly, the data indicate that the young people in the focus groups were more responsive to issues of *political substance* than they were to the procedural, mobilising mechanisms examined above. The results suggest that young people would be more likely to cast their vote in electoral contests if: they had more information about the political parties (26.7 per cent); there were a party that they considered represented their views (11.7 per cent); there was evidence that their views would be seriously listened to by politicians and decision-makers (18.3 per cent); or there was a greater choice of political parties available (6.7 per cent). Combining these four categories, we can observe that issues of political substance have a higher priority amongst young people than do introducing initiatives designed to increase the accessibility of voting, by a margin of 3.5:1. This qualitative data provides an interesting insight into young people's response to the procedural initiatives that have been suggested (and in some cases piloted) that are designed to *mobilise* the electorate and increase voting turnout. While these reforms were generally received favourably, none of the participants appeared to believe that they were crucial for enhancing the democratic process - accessible information about the parties, the candidates, and the issues was seen to be the key to improving election turnout.

TABLE 10.8 AROUND HERE

## **Conclusion**

As a number of previous studies have concluded, in terms of their behaviour and attitudes, young people are certainly less positively disposed towards the political process than their older contemporaries. But are they a politically alienated generation? There is evidence that young people in Britain are becoming increasingly critical of the political set-up, and withdrawing from formal politics. They vote less, they participate less in terms of memberships of ostensibly 'political' organisations, and they have less favourable views towards the political system than older age groups, or previous youth cohorts. Current research elsewhere suggests that there is a legitimacy crisis as far as the British political system is concerned that is deeper for young people than it is for older age groups, indicating a possible cohort effect.

But what accounts for their apparent withdrawal from formal politics? Our research was designed to contribute towards an emerging body of knowledge that seeks to use

qualitative techniques to explore youth political behaviour and attitudes, to build up an understanding of why young people appear to be somewhat disengaged from formal politics, and to address such issues from their own perspectives. Our findings suggest that although uninspired by, or even sceptical of, political parties and professional politicians, young people are sufficiently interested in political affairs to dispel the myth that they are apathetic and politically lazy. But they are also interested in a new style of politics. While they may eschew much of what could be characterised as 'formal' or conventional politics, they are interested in a different type of politics that is more participative, and which focuses on localised, immediate (and some post-material) issues.

Somewhat paradoxically, they are also still committed to the idea of elections and the democratic process. There is a civic orientation amongst the young to the democratic process: representative democracy is generally seen to be a very good thing and the young people who have participated in this study clearly signify their desire to be able to play a more active (and even) role within it. This is a particularly important finding, given that having had the opportunity to vote for the first time, they are left somewhat frustrated by the process outcomes - the words and deeds of those who have ultimately been elected to positions of political power through the elections. What is even more surprising is that the young people who participated in our study indicated that they could be persuaded to turn out to vote in larger numbers in the future.

By all accounts, these findings would suggest that young people might, to some extent, be politically alienated, although that is not to say that they are apolitical or apathetic. More, it is that they feel as if they have no ability to influence the course of political events, because the political system is too remote and inaccessible for them to engage with it meaningfully and effectively. They therefore have a correspondingly low level of political efficacy – they feel relatively powerless and unable to influence the political process. This is particularly frustrating, given that they are interested in political affairs. They are therefore alienated, but engaged, sceptics – they are interested in political affairs, feel powerless to influence the political process, and distrustful of those who are elected to positions of power and charged with running the political system.

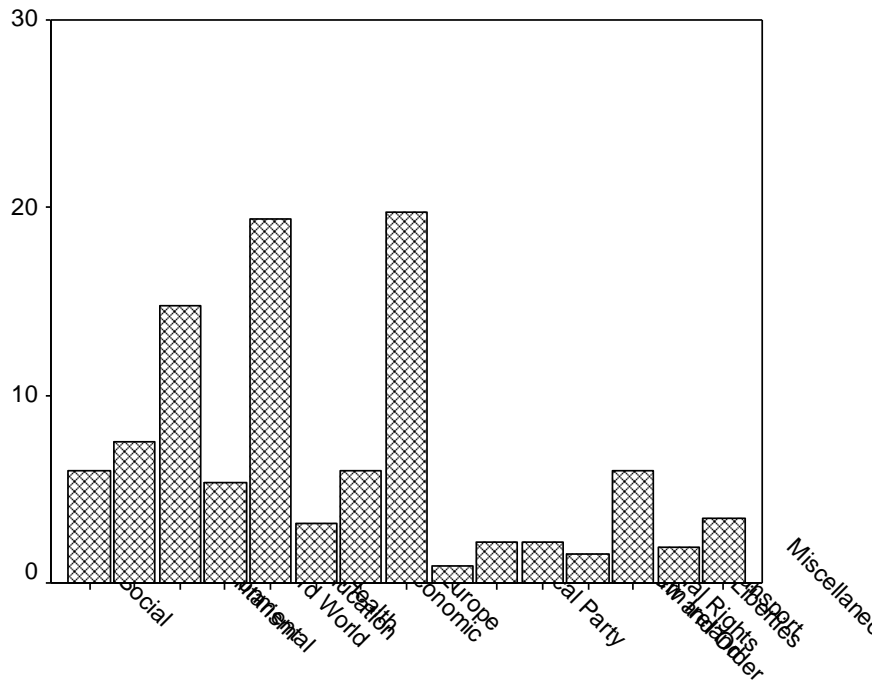
**Table 10.1:** Young people's political engagement (%)

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

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

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

**Figure 10.1:** Agenda of youth concerns (%)



Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2

**Table 10.2:** Youth perception of formal politics (%)

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

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

**Table 10.3:** Reported voting (%)

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

*Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2*

**Table 10.4:** Intention to vote, and party identification (%)

	Yes	No	Don't Know <sup>14</sup>
Do you intend to vote in the next parliamentary general election?	83.7 (77.0)	16.3 (5.7)	0.0 (17.3)
If you do intend to vote (in the next parliamentary general election), do you know which party you will vote for?	44.1 (46.8)	55.9 (53.2)	

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

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<sup>14</sup> In the 1999 survey, the question was asked without a “Don’t Know” option.



**Table 10.5:** Perception of importance of voting (%)

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

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

**Table 10.6:** 'Now that I have had an opportunity to vote, I feel...'  
(focus group sentence completion exercise)

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

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

**Table 10.7:** Proposals to increase voter turnout (%)

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

*Base: 425 respondents, 1999 panel survey wave 2*

**Table 10.8:** 'I would be more likely to vote in the future, if...'  
(focus group sentence completion exercise)

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

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

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