

## **Matt Henn (2017) Youth and Political Change**

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Since the turn of the new Millennium, the relationships between young people and their states across many advanced liberal democracies has become increasingly fragile and somewhat problematic. In countries such as the US, Canada, Russia, Japan as well as across many European democracies, many young people are turning their backs on democratic institutions. As a consequence, the current generation of youth is often condemned as apathetic and as lacking interest in participating in the democratic process.

### **Youth Participation In Elections**

Research studies indicate that young citizens in many such countries are significantly less likely than older people to vote in elections, and they are also less likely to vote than were previous generations youth. For instance, in Britain a majority of young people boycotted the 2015 General Election with only 43 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds voting. This electoral turnout rate was considerably lower than was the case for older age groups within the electorate, with nearly twice as many people aged 65 and over (76 per cent) voting at the same election. Just as importantly, the abstention rate of young people in 2015 was significantly higher than it was for previous generations of young people throughout the post-War decades. This recent pattern of young people avoiding elections is typical of many advanced liberal democracies.

However, it is not only their rate of electoral participation that distinguishes young people from other citizens. There is a significant body of evidence suggesting that when compared with older adults, young people in the UK and in similar countries have a distinct lack of interest in

parliamentary and electoral politics and considerably lower levels of political knowledge. They also appear to be less satisfied with democracy, more critical of politicians, less likely to be politically active, have comparatively weaker commitments to political parties, and less likely to be members of political organisations.

### **Alternative Forms of Youth Political Participation**

However, a number of recent studies have suggested that whilst young people may have little interest in 'formal' parliamentary politics, this does not signal a disengagement from all forms of politics. Instead, research indicates that contemporary youth often take part in many differing forms of political action such as demonstrations, boycotts, and direct action. These unconventional forms of youth political action tend to be focused on single issue campaigns such as environmental concerns, women's rights, anti-war, as well as broader anti-capitalist movements such as the global Occupy phenomenon. In many respects, such alternative styles of political action represent a rejection of traditional and 'formal' methods of parliamentary politics, which tend to be overly reliant on political parties which are considered to be too regimented and restrictive, and led by politicians who can't always be trusted to do the right thing. Instead, these newer forms of politics tend to attract youth because they are grass-roots organisations which are more open to influence by individuals, and which have agendas which seem much more relevant and achievable to young people.

### **Explaining Youth Political (Dis-)Engagement**

How do we account for what is behind this apparent youth avoidance of parliamentary politics and elections and their turn toward alternative styles and methods of political action? There are broadly two competing schools of thought which seek to explain this phenomenon. The *life-cycle* model claims that the generational differences in political participation that we have witnessed since the

turn of the Millennium are not particularly new, but have been an issue for young people throughout the post-war period. Drawing on the work of Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie's from the 1960s, this approach claims that various life-cycle factors are critical in shaping and obstructing young people's rates of political participation – and the youth of today continue to face all sorts of similar complex issues that leave them with relatively little time or opportunities to think about or take part in conventional politics. However, as they get older, these same people gradually acquire the knowledge, interest, political skills and space to engage with the formal political process, including voting in elections. In contrast, *generational* or *anti-apathy* explanations offered by writers such as Ronald Inglehart and Russell Dalton claim that a cultural shift has taken place across advanced liberal democracies which has served to weaken the links between young citizens and conventional politics and democratic institutions. As a consequence, young people are rejecting mainstream political parties which they see as elitist, unrepresentative and relatively ineffective, and instead are increasingly adopting new values and priorities and supporting radical social movements. According to this view, it is not that young people are politically apathetic but that they are embracing an alternative style of politics.

### **What Might Be Done to Overcome the Young Citizen-State Divide?**

There are no simple solutions for resolving the developing disconnect between young citizens and democratic politics witnessed in recent years across so many advanced liberal democracies. What is clear however, is that many politicians in such countries have observed these trends with increasing concern. In response, governments have sought to address this diminishing youth political engagement by the introduction of initiatives designed to increase political knowledge and to make the process of voting more accessible. We have seen the introduction of political literacy and citizenship classes in schools in many countries. In some countries such as Scotland and Austria, voting rights have been extended to 16 and 17 year olds to persuade them that they are valued

citizens. Furthermore, some have promoted the introduction of new electronic voting methods designed to make voting easier for young people, while others have advocated compulsory voting for young people to oblige them to vote. Whether such initiatives persuade young people to re-engage with formal democratic politics remains to be seen.

## **FURTHER READINGS**

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