Political engagement among young people: an update

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of some of the main findings from research conducted by The Electoral Commission and others since the publication of the Commission’s *Voter engagement and young people* report in July 2002.¹

This research has added to our evidence-base on the extent and nature of political engagement among young people and has provided useful insights into the attitudes of young people to politics, elections and voting. It also provides a valuable indication of the factors the political community needs to consider if it is to motivate young people to engage with, and participate in, politics.²

The first section of this paper provides a brief summary of the Commission’s 2002 report. Section two discusses the findings from academic and social research projects conducted by the Commission and others since 2002, including the recent Electoral Commission/Hansard Society *An audit of political engagement*. We look at nine main themes:

- turnout among young people here and abroad since 2002;
- ‘apathy’ isn’t the problem;
- how young people perceive politics;
- rebuilding the relevance of politics;
- the impact of ignorance;
- improving the way we communicate politics;
- diversity in disengagement;
- what role for electoral modernisation?
- votes at 16 or 18?

In our concluding section we draw these themes together and consider some of the key challenges facing the political community. We also identify the Commission’s current thinking about future research projects among young people.

1. A reminder: the Commission’s 2002 report

Prompted by MORI’s estimate of a turnout of 39% among 18-24 year olds at the 2001 general election,³ and following a tendering exercise, The Electoral Commission retained a team based at the University of Manchester to

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² Also, see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/mediacentre/newsreleasereviews.cfm/news/60
³ This paper does not review existing or good practice in seeking to build engagement with, and participation in, politics. For a review of some of the practical initiatives taken by agencies to engage with young people, see IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) (1999) *Youth Voter Participation*, The Employer’s Organisation (2004) *Engaging with young people*. The Commission has recently published individual evaluations of the first tranche of its New Initiatives Fund (NIF) projects, available at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/newinitiativesfund.cfm
investigate political engagement among young people, with a particular focus on electoral participation. This research incorporated a literature review and secondary statistical analysis of survey data and led to the publication of *Voter engagement and young people* by the Commission in July 2002.

The research by the team at Manchester, as well as a similar project to better understand the reasons for lower turnout among black and minority ethnic communities⁴ (and our more recent *Gender and political participation* research⁵), reflects the Commission’s recognition that there is merit in being sensitive to differences among the electorate and that democratic participation is, at least in part, a product of identity and background. As Karamjit Singh, Electoral Commissioner, observed in 2002:

‘... it would be wrong to seek universal solutions to the problem of voter disengagement. In today’s diverse society, it is vitally important that research and policy responses in this area are sensitive to the different experiences and perceptions of different communities [and sub-groups].’⁶

**What the research told us**

The research team at the University of Manchester looked at turnout across a range of different elections in the UK over several years and found that certain types of people are more likely to vote than others. Turnout varies by area, age, gender, ethnicity, social class and education, but also according to whether the election is ‘first’ or ‘second’ order⁷ and how competitive it is. Young people are some of the least likely to vote and MORI’s estimated 39% turnout among 18-24 year olds at the 2001 general election compares to an estimated 70% among those aged 65+. This represents a 12-percentage point drop since the 1997 general election (although it is worth noting that the turnout drop was even sharper still among 25-34 year olds at 18 percentage points).

*Voter engagement among young people* identified non-registration – possibly as high as 15% in some constituencies and higher still among some age groups and communities – as one of several key obstacles to political participation. Others include:

- alienation – the view that politics is ‘not for young people’;

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⁷ Reif and Schmitt distinguish between ‘first order’ and ‘second order’ elections. The most important distinction between the two is that parties and the public consider there to be ‘less at stake’ in the case of ‘second order’ elections. See K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980) ‘Nine National Second-Order Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 8: pp.3-44.
• apathy – the lack of interest in politics;
• knowledge – not knowing enough about politics;
• inconvenience – e.g. voting is too time consuming.

While these factors are not unique to young people, they seem to be more pronounced among younger age groups. Low turnout among the young in 2001 was, in part, a product of the nature of that particular election but it also reflected a growing negative attitude among the young to the process of elections and politics. This has been growing over the past decade or so – with a possible cohort effect at work – and compounded by a greater sense among the young that electoral participation is not a ‘duty’, more a ‘right’.

The team at Manchester found evidence to suggest that young people’s cynicism about politics is directed at established political parties, rather than political issues. Indeed, this disconnection between an interest in political issues and an interest in party and electoral politics is further evidenced by young people being the most likely of all groups to talk to family and friends about politics during the 2001 election campaign, but the least likely to have voted.8

Voter engagement among young people identified a number of possible policy innovations to increase political engagement and participation among the young:

• recognise and understand young people’s concerns;
• tackle the related issues of social and political exclusion among young people;
• make electoral registration easier;
• make voting easier;
• work to increase political awareness and knowledge;
• review the electoral system and the choices available to voters (e.g. by including ‘none of the above’ on the ballot paper and consider allowing 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote);
• consolidate and add to the existing research evidence-base.

How the research has been used by the Commission

The central objective of the Voter engagement and young people research was to identify key research priorities and make recommendations to inform the ongoing research and voter education programmes of The Electoral Commission and other organisations. It was designed to inform the Commission’s corporate aim to encourage greater participation in, and understanding of, the democratic process, and has been used for the following purposes:

• To support the Commission’s public awareness campaigns such as this year’s ‘If you don’t do politics, there’s not much you do do’ campaign.

To inform public awareness campaigns focussed specifically at young people such as our 2002–03 ‘Votes are power’ campaign.

To inform the Commission’s Outreach Programme and initiatives.9

To inform the Commission’s policy reviews, most notably our review of the age of electoral majority which considered voting and candidacy ages.10

To help shape the Commission’s strategic direction.

As context for subsequent Commission research projects.

As context for our involvement in the Youth Voting Network.11

As input into our New Initiatives Fund12 which is being used to identify possible solutions to awareness, engagement and participation (14 of the 30 projects to date have had young people as the specific target).

To help others – including politicians, the media, academics and researchers – better understand the nature of political engagement among young people and to develop strategies and policies in response.

The research by the University of Manchester also informed the ‘Yvote?/Ynot?’ project run by the Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) in 2002, which also sought to understand why young people appear to be disengaged by our democratic institutions and processes. The project used findings from consultation and research among young people, including a British Market Research Bureau (BMRB) survey, to better understand their perceptions of politics and what they wanted to see change. This informed the report – Young people and politics (referred to in this paper) – and the development of a Young Person’s Agenda for Democracy, the progress of which is reviewed periodically by the Youth Voting Network.13

2. Research since 2002

Since 2002, the Commission and others have conducted a number of research projects covering issues and themes covered by Voter engagement and young people including interest in politics, political participation and electoral modernisation. In addition, since publication of the report in 2002, there have been a number of elections in the UK, which have provided further evidence relating to young people’s participation. This section of the paper starts by looking at turnout among young people at these elections and draws

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9 The Commission’s Outreach Programme aims to raise people’s awareness of democratic processes in the UK and encourage them to get involved. Its initial focus is 16-24 year olds and, more specifically, those shown by research to have lower levels of political engagement and a lower propensity to participate. See: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/outreach.cfm

10 The main findings of this review are summarised later in this paper and more details can be found in The Electoral Commission (2004) The age of electoral majority.

11 The Youth Voting Network was established to review progress in delivery of the Young Person’s Agenda for Democracy as identified in the 2002 Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) report – Young people and politics.

12 For more information, see: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/newinitiativesfund.cfm

on data and academic studies from abroad. It then goes on to look at eight other themes relating to political engagement among young people.

Turnout among young people here and abroad since 2002

Turnout at the local council elections in England in 2002 was 32.8% and a slightly higher 34.9% in 2003.¹⁴ An NOP research survey for the Commission in 2002 found an estimated 11% turnout¹⁵ among 18-24 year olds in areas where local elections were held (the research also found that the public sees local elections as less important, less interesting and less likely to affect real change than general elections).¹⁶

As Table 1 below shows, the turnout at elections in Northern Ireland was significantly higher than for other elections in 2002–03 and in all cases there were some significant turnout differentials by age. In an ICM survey for the Commission, an estimated 42% of 18-24 year olds reported having voted at the Scottish Parliament elections in May last year, lower than the overall turnout of 49%, itself down from 59% four years earlier. In Wales, overall turnout was 38% but NOP estimated that as few as one in six (16%) 18-24 year olds voted,¹⁷ down from 31% at the 1999 elections.¹⁸ According to a Millward Brown Ulster (MBU) poll, 49% of 18-24 year olds reported having voted at the Northern Ireland Assembly elections in November 2003, compared to 80% of those aged 50+ and an overall, official turnout of 63%.¹⁹

Table 1: Turnout by age for elections 2002-2003²⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election</th>
<th>All (actual)</th>
<th>18-24 (estimate)</th>
<th>55+ (estimate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English local elections – 2002 (NOP)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Parliament – 2003 (ICM)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Assembly for Wales – 2003 (NOP)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Assembly – 2003 (MBU)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>80*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: 50+ year olds.

¹⁴ Both figures sourced from the Local Government Chronicle Local Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth. N.B. The variation in local electoral cycles means that only some parts of England held local elections in 2002 and 2003 and, indeed, there was often variation of electoral cycles within local authority areas.
¹⁶ ibid.
²⁰ Given our secret ballot, turnout figures for different socio-demographic groups are estimates based on surveys of the public. It is common that there is an ‘over-claim’ in such surveys with higher proportions of survey respondents reporting having voted than the proportion of the electorate who actually did vote. Reported turnout in the two NOP surveys has been weighted to actual turnout. For the other surveys, it has not.
Just as non-voting is by no means a ‘British disease’ – it has become commonplace to argue that levels of turnout have declined across established democracies in recent years\(^{21}\) – differences in electoral participation by age are by no means unique to this country. Last year, a newspaper article reported that Ireland is to set up a Commission to ‘tackle voter apathy’ and decreasing turnout (just 40% of first-time voters turn out at Irish elections)\(^{22}\) and in covering the presidential elections earlier this year, the South African media reported significant ‘voter apathy’ among the young. The country’s *Mail and Guardian* newspaper observed that ‘One of the most highly politicised generations of youth has given way to one in which apathy is unprecedented and disenchantment with politics is acute’\(^{23}\).

In his extensive review of international trends in turnout and electoral behaviour, the American academic Mark Franklin has found age to be a strong predictor of turnout: ‘Turnout has much less to do with the character of society [except for its age structure] [our emphasis]…and much more to do with the character of elections’ and is ‘not something about the way people approach elections but something about how elections appear to people’. He also observed the potential for long-term fall-out from younger voters not learning the habit of voting at ‘less important’ elections\(^{24}\).

This suggests that the pattern of young people voting less than older citizens prevalent in the UK is a common one across the democratic world. However, as shown in Table 2 below, Martin Wattenberg’s international comparative study on turnout and political engagement among young people has shown that the ‘new generation gap’ in turnout is greater in the UK than among several other industrialised democracies.

**Table 2: The generation turnout gap in advanced industrialised democracies (up to 2001)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All figures are turnout percentages</th>
<th>18-29</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>Gap (+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>-32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>-31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Wattenberg’s international analysis led him to conclude that lower turnout among the young is, in part, caused by a lack of representation with ‘young people’s opinions on the issues…not being faithfully represented through the political process.’ He refuted the theory that young people are satisfied with the way democracy is working and don’t therefore participate – but in fact, young people report significantly higher rates of satisfaction with how democracy is working compared with senior citizens in just two countries, New Zealand and the Netherlands.25

Back in the UK, research suggests that lower turnout among the young is part the product of dissatisfaction with the electoral and political process but may also be related to different attitudes towards voting. In 2001, the Hansard Society found a preference on the part of some younger non-voters to vote for concrete reasons and in an informed way rather than simply for the sake of it26 and, in Scotland last year (as Table 3 shows), ICM found a quarter of the electorate and, crucially 40% of 18-24 year olds, taking a similar view. Just over half of 18-24 year olds in Scotland thought it was their duty to vote and the MORI/Nestlé Family Monitor study similarly found that only 46% of 11-18 year olds agreed that ‘I feel it will be my duty to vote when I’m old enough’.27

Table 3: Attitudes towards voting in Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. Which one of these statements comes closest to your views about elections?</th>
<th>% All adults</th>
<th>% 18-24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s not really worth voting</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People should only vote if they care who wins</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s everyone’s duty to vote</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ICM/The Electoral Commission.  
Base: 1,100 adults in Scotland aged 18+, 2-5 May 2003.

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27 Nestlé Family Monitor (2003) Young People’s Attitudes towards Politics, Nestlé. The study was based on a sample of 11-18 year olds in 238 schools and colleges in England and Wales.
'Apathy' isn't the problem

The 2001 general election became known as the ‘apathetic landslide’ on account of Labour’s huge victory and a 59% turnout and 2003 saw the term ‘apathy’ become even more entrenched in political discourse. However, the Commission and many others have argued that ‘…if we take [‘apathy’] to mean laziness or an absence of interest, then [it] only goes so far in explaining why people do not vote’ and that ‘the issue…is about disaffection, not simply apathy’. Similarly, in qualitative public opinion research for the Commission in 2003, MORI identified ‘disaffected youth’ as one of five ‘personalities’ present in their focus group discussions and described them as follows:

‘Though they have well-formed opinions on, and are well able to discuss, issues such as mobile phones, sex, crime or their local neighbourhood, they have little patience with political debate, which seems to them to occupy a parallel universe to the one they inhabit. **It should not be assumed that this group are ‘apathetic’** [our emphasis]. They have strong opinions, and often feel passionately about public service delivery issues that impact on their life and work. However, they do not make the connection between their personal dissatisfaction with a particular aspect of public life, and participating in the traditional political processes as a way of expressing that dissatisfaction, or seeking a solution to these problems.**

According to a Taylor Nelson Sofres poll for the Commission in 2002, 83% of 18-24 year olds say they are very/fairly interested in social issues where they live. More recently, an NOP survey found 68% of 18-24 year olds are interested in local issues and an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study by a team at the University of Cambridge and Birkbeck College, London found that the majority of young people are ‘keen to play their part in their local communities’. Our *An audit of political engagement* also found a strong aspiration on the part of young people to have a say in how the country is run (see Table 4).

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31 NOP/The Electoral Commission: NOP interviewed 958 British adults aged 18+ between 14-16 May 2004. N.B. there is a bigger gap between 18-24 year olds and those aged 35-54 in interest in politics (19 percentage points) than in interest in local issues (nine percentage points).
32 ESRC research – *Social capital, participation and the causal role of socialisation* (2004) – conducted by Dr David Halpern, Prof David Hargreaves, Dr Zoe Morris (University of Cambridge) and Peter John (Birkbeck College, London).
Table 4: Attitudes towards having a say

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Strongly tend to agree</th>
<th>% Strongly tend to disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16-24)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-54</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(65+)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: MORI for The Electoral Commission/the Hansard Society.

But the story is different when it comes to ‘politics’ (and voting). In a telling extract from its report for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) on young people’s participation in local government, the National Centre for Social Research observed that: ‘Young people were often more bothered about the area than about politics’.33

In March 2004, The Electoral Commission, in partnership with the Hansard Society, published *An audit of political engagement* which reported on the extent and nature of political engagement in the UK. It found that only half the public say they are either very or fairly interested in politics – the lowest level recorded by MORI since the question was first asked in the 1970s although comparable to the level of interest recorded in 2002 (the figures were 52% and 48% in 2002, from where there was a recovery to 58% to 43% in May 2003 before this year’s fall). As Table 5 below shows, the downturn in interest among 18-24 year olds has been more significant than that among adults as a whole.

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33 ODPM (October 2002) *Youth Participation in Local Government.*
Table 5: Interest in politics, by age, 2001-2004

Q. How interested would you say you are in politics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Very/fairly interested</th>
<th>Not particularly/not at all interested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All adults 18+</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change</strong></td>
<td>-9</td>
<td>+10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adults aged 18-24</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Change</strong></td>
<td>-18</td>
<td>+17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Both MORI for The Electoral Commission/the Hansard Society.

‘I’m just not interested in politics’ was also the reason given by around half (47%) of the nine in 10 11-18 year olds in the MORI/Nestlé survey who said they would not be certain to vote if there was a general election (and if they were old enough to vote).34 Certainly, the disconnection between interest in issues and interest in ‘politics’ suggests ‘a need for politicians and others to make better ‘cause and effect’ connections between elections and policy issues’35 for all age groups, but especially among the young who are perhaps most demanding of concrete reasons to participate. At the same time, there is also a clear need to better understand how people perceive ‘politics’, because to some extent, current and previous levels of interest in ‘politics’ is linked to how young people perceive ‘politics’.

How do young people perceive ‘politics’?

An audit of political engagement found that the term ‘politics’ is closely identified with politicians, whom almost one in five 16-24 year olds (19%) would not trust at all, and almost one in two (47%) ‘not very much’. People see politics as something that other people do, or as a system with which they are neither particularly engaged nor enamoured. In short, politics has become

something of a ‘dirty word’. This chimes with research for the Commission last year (Public opinion and the 2004 elections), which found that:

‘[Many people]…understand ‘politics’ as being the soap opera that provides much of the media coverage of politics: ‘slanging matches’ between party leaders, the exposed lies of ministers, the scandal…They don’t perceive their interest and concern in the delivery levels of key public services as inherently ‘political’…‘Politics’ is an activity that ‘other people’ take part in; it is not a phrase or an activity that they associate with themselves’.

And yet, young people are politically active in many ways. The ‘Citizen Audit’ published in 2003 found evidence that ‘the British public is politically engaged, if politics is viewed as extending beyond Westminster’ and that the young (18-25) were no less engaged in these forms of activities than older people. A recent report by Save the Children – On the right track – investigated the issues that matter to young people aged 11-18 in the UK and made use of a survey uniquely designed and administered by young people. According to the authors, the research findings ‘challenge the idea, often recorded in the press, that the UK’s young people are uninvolved, uncaring and uninterested in society.’

Similarly, qualitative research by a team at the University of Birmingham led by Dr Therese O’Toole found young people to be interested in, and articulate about, politics rather than being ‘apathetic’. Their conception of ‘politics’ was as something that was done to them, something they could not influence. The focus groups found both a weak sense of political inclusion among young people (they did not feel they were being listened to) and of political efficacy (they were not confident that they could make a material difference to political decision-making). The research also found that different groups of young people had different perceptions of politics – while for some it was all about ‘authority’ top-down relationships with the likes of government, police and teachers – others were more likely to view politics as a means of effecting change.

Given people’s association between ‘politics’ and ‘politicians’, the low standing of the latter may now be damaging the former. Certainly, trust in politicians is evidently low among younger age groups (although not dissimilar to other age groups) with only a quarter (26%) of 16-24 year olds saying that they

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would trust politicians ‘a great deal’ or a ‘fair amount’. Qualitative research by NOP in Wales in 2002 found negative perceptions of politicians among young people – politicians were thought to be very much older, sharing nothing of the cultural values of younger people and particularly deficient in their ability to see things from a younger perspective. Their efforts to connect with young people were seen as ‘contemptible’, with particular criticism reserved for attempts to communicate ‘coolness’.

Rebuilding the relevance of politics

The findings from the Commission’s *An audit of political engagement*, allied to the research described above, suggest a serious and urgent need to re-build the relevance of ‘politics’, both as a concept and as an activity worth taking part in. Our audit found young people less likely to be politically active than older age groups and a recent ESRC study found four in 10 15-17 year olds saying that they ‘never’ discuss politics with their friends, down from 30% in 1976 (although this may of course reflect the fairly narrow definition of ‘politics’ discussed earlier). At the same time, more than 75% had taken part in some form of civic activity outside of school hours. This, and the ‘Citizen Audit’ mentioned earlier, demonstrates a willingness on the part of young people to be involved, despite ‘The decline in traditional forms of political participation contrasting with the willingness of the public [and young people] to participate by different means’.

As we argued in our *Audit of political engagement*, this is not to say that new and different forms of political organisation are unwelcome or unwanted, or do not contribute to the health of our democracy. However, the formal political process is important: a ‘political and policy-making process which fails to properly engage [and involve] the public will fundamentally weaken democracy’, or as Stephen Coleman puts it, ‘democracy is ultimately unsustainable when the *demos* is estranged from it’. The challenge then is to ‘reclaim’ politics by addressing young people’s distaste for formal party politics and leveraging their interest in issues, public service delivery and what is happening in local communities.

This aspiration to re-build the relevance of politics was at the heart of The Electoral Commission’s recent public awareness campaign – ‘If you don’t do politics, there’s not much you do do’. The campaign combined high-profile advertising with public relations, leaflet distribution via a variety of outlets, a national outreach tour specifically targeting young people, a call centre and a new consumer-facing website (www.aboutmyvote.co.uk). It aimed to make

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45 Ibid.
politics personal by showing the multitude of areas of everyone’s lives that ‘politics’ affects, as well as challenging the view that ‘I don’t do politics’ and creating the right climate for politicians to ‘get out the vote’. The campaign is the largest, most-integrated campaign since our establishment and we hope that it provides a long-term platform for the Commission’s work in the future.48

Of course, such campaigns can only go so far and for recent trends in engagement and electoral participation among young people to be reversed, they need to be convinced that ‘politics’ does offer benefits and that politicians have something to offer:

‘On the issue of voter turnout and engagement, it is above all the quality and persuasiveness of the policies put forward by the parties and their ability to motivate voters that will determine future trends’.49

‘Much of the responsibility for reinvigorating democracy from the bottom up must, surely, lie with politicians themselves, who need to make a concerted effort to re-engage with their constituents’.50

But what can politicians do? The Children and Young People’s Unit’s (CYPU) 2002 report expressed a desire on the part of young people to see politicians do the following:

- talk to them in a language they can understand – simple, clear, basic, understandable;
- talk to them directly, regularly and in their own environments – not just at election times and face-to-face, not through a leaflet;
- listen and respond to their concerns – ‘don’t lecture us and don’t assume we have no opinions or you know what we think’;
- respect their diversity – and recognise that there is a need to find new ways of reaching out to groups of young people.51

The ‘ignorance factor’

Numerous research reports have highlighted the importance of addressing ‘knowledge deficits’ among the young (and indeed all age groups)52 and Dr Roger Mortimore observed in 2002 that there is much evidence to suggest that ‘the public seems less politically aware than a few years ago’.53 An audit of political engagement found political knowledge among 16-24 year olds was especially low compared to those over 55 years of age. One in four 16-24

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48 For more on the Commission’s campaign, see B. Lloyd ‘If you don’t do politics…’ the register (The Electoral Commission magazine) April 2004, available at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk
year olds could correctly name their Member of Parliament (24% compared with approximately 48% of those over 35 years of age, and just over a quarter could correctly answer four or more out of seven political knowledge questions in the MORI 'quiz' (27% against 47% of those over 35 years of age).\textsuperscript{54}

An ESRC-funded study by a team at the University of Cambridge and Birkbeck College, London found that nearly half of the 1,249 teenagers questioned thought that there were only around 100 Members of Parliament and only around one in ten knew that referendums are allowed in Britain. Although one in four (24%) didn’t know that the UK was a member of the European Union, this compares with just 9% in 1976 who didn’t know about British membership of the EEC.\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, as well as having lower actual knowledge, young people are also more likely to have lower perceived knowledge of politics and local councils, shown in Table 6 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. How much, if anything, do you feel you know about…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your local council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference (+)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Both MORI for The Electoral Commission/the Hansard Society.

In a comparison of the political knowledge of children and young people, MORI Roger Mortimore points out that ‘… it is surely significant that the difference between school children and young adults is not larger. Few of those who have acquired the right to vote seem to have made a successful effort to acquire the knowledge to go with it, if they had not already picked this up at an earlier age …’\textsuperscript{56} Similarly, the importance of the school years in

\textsuperscript{56} MORI Poll digest commentary column: www.mori.com/digest/2002/c020906.shtml
building political awareness and knowledge was further highlighted by last year’s MORI/Nestlé Family Monitor study:

‘Of course, opinions formed in childhood are unlikely to remain unchanged through adult life, but they define the starting point as young adults first gain the franchise. Perhaps more importantly, their attitudes towards the political system, the political parties and the importance of voting will affect their interaction with the political world. If, for example, they reach the age of 18 with the conviction that political parties are worthless and that politicians are out-of-touch with the problems of the real world, they will be less receptive to what politicians and parties have to say, which in turn will make it harder to change their attitudes on other matters’.57

Lower political awareness and knowledge among the young is by no means new and while accepting that ‘life cycle/generational’ effects are indeed a factor, Martin Wattenberg argues that a ‘cohort’ effect exists in America and other advanced democracies, with young people now less exposed to politics than their parents’ generation. He suggests that the political socialisation of young people is now markedly different due, in part, to different ‘consumption’ patterns caused, in part, by the shift in the structure of the American media from ‘broadcasting’ to ‘narrowcasting’.

The introduction of citizenship education into classroom lessons in the UK may play a role in plugging some of these information gaps. Previous research has found a strong desire on the part of young people for more political information and education in school.58 Furthermore, Butler and Stokes first showed that people’s voting intentions were inherited from their parents and in 2003 the MORI/Nestlé Family Monitor found some evidence to suggest that a low propensity to vote is now similarly inherited. However, parents, family, friends and the media also have important roles to play – the Monitor found that family and friends come higher than teachers as the primary source of information for 11-18 year olds about important issues facing Britain – and Public opinion and the 2004 elections identified an absence of positive advocates for voting:

‘[There is] deep-rooted and widespread scepticism about the impact of voting per se…This scepticism also seems to be shared by many of those who do actually vote. Most are not advocates for voting…Many had no great faith that their vote made much of a difference, and they were not inclined to encourage others to follow their example’.

Improving the way we communicate politics

Information is not a ‘silver bullet’59 for those seeking to boost political engagement, participation and turnout, but as Stephen Coleman has

asserted, ‘reconnection is a communicative concept’ with good communication being the very essence of good connection between the electorate and politicians, and of high electoral participation and political engagement.\textsuperscript{60} In other words, \textit{information} can only go so far; what is needed is better \textit{communication}. According to Coleman, this means politicians and citizens, including young people, ‘entering each others’ realities’ with politicians talking \textit{to} rather than talking \textit{at} people.\textsuperscript{61}

Related to this, \textit{Voter engagement among young people} identifies a number of challenges common to any political communication directed at young people:

- How to connect with young people without being viewed as patronising and given that cynical young voters easily filter out crude marketing techniques.
- How to connect with young people’s views of citizenship which revolves around social services, education, unemployment and the treatment of others instead of political institutions and norms (a preference for cause-orientated politics, rather than ‘campaign-orientated’ politics).
- Many previous plans to engage young voters ‘…have been poorly conceived, often suffering from a strategic weakness – being tarred with the same brush as the “party politics” that seemingly repel some young voters in the first place’.\textsuperscript{62}

The CYPU’s \textit{Young people and politics}, also looked at communication and reported a number of key messages from young people to politicians including the need to use clear and basic language when addressing the younger voter and the importance of direct and regular communication (not simply at election times or only when young people are old enough to vote). The report also recommended that politicians show respect to the diversity among groups of young people and find new ways of reaching out to, and engaging with, these groups.\textsuperscript{63}

Similarly, the Welsh Affairs Select Committee’s report into young people and participation in Wales, advised that politicians must find new ways of engaging with young people.\textsuperscript{64} The Committee advised politicians to embrace new forms of communication, including email and the internet, with far greater enthusiasm. However, MPs were advised to retain face-to-face meetings at schools, youth clubs and youth forums across the Members’ constituencies.

But what of media coverage of politics? Most of the respondents to the BMRB survey for the CYPU were highly critical of the manner in which the media

\textsuperscript{60} S. Coleman (2003) \textit{A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home}, Hansard Society, London.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{63} CYPU (2002) \textit{Young people and politics}.
\textsuperscript{64} Welsh Affairs Select Committee (2004) \textit{The Empowerment of Children and Young People in Wales}.
covers politics. One suggestion put forward by young people for improving political communication is involving them in the creation and development of TV and radio programmes. Young people also suggested that the media should convey more positive messages about young people, and should show more respect to MPs (as well as MPs themselves doing more to gain respect). In addition, 'local newspapers should make better links between government policies and what is happening locally.'

Diversity in disengagement

Much is made of the difference between young people and other age groups, but significant differences also exist among different groups of young people, such as young men and young women, young people from different social classes and economic situations and those from different black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. In Voter engagement and young people the University of Manchester identified the link between social and political exclusion and a recent NOP study by the mental health charity MIND asserted the need for action to reconnect young people with society at large, and by association, with politics. The study highlighted that, of all groups, young people (over one in three, 35%, 15-24 year olds) were the most likely to feel isolated and disconnected from society.

There are some significant differences in political engagement by gender. The Commission’s recent Gender and political participation research found a significant gap among young men and women in the manner in which they participate in politics. The research also found that turnout among women of all ages was 4% higher than turnout among men in those seats where a woman was elected to Parliament. Similarly, An audit of political engagement found some significant gender differences between young women and young men (aged 16-24). Only a quarter (24%) of young women reported that they were ‘interested’ in politics, compared to four in 10 (43%) young men. One in six young women (16%) feel that they know at least a fair amount about the role of MPs, compared to a third (34%) of young men, and almost three times as few young women feel they know at least a fair amount about the Westminster Parliament than young men (8% against 23%). Younger women are also less trusting of politicians than young men – a fifth (21%) say that they trust politicians at least a fair amount, compared to three in 10 (30%) young men.

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66 Ibid.
69 Women currently make up 18% of MPs at Westminster, compared with 28% of local councillors (Source: P. Norris, 2002).
What role for electoral modernisation?

Since 2000 there have been over a hundred pilot schemes trialling new ways of voting including all-postal voting, voting by telephone, via the internet, digital TV and using kiosks.\(^{70}\) All-postal schemes have delivered real and sustained improvements to turnout by making the process of voting more convenient – although the potential impact of this should not be over-estimated.\(^{71}\)

To inform our statutory evaluation of pilot schemes last year we used public opinion surveys to understand the public’s response to new voting arrangements (and will do so again this year). A survey by MORI for us found that 18-24 year olds were as positive about the new voting methods as adults as a whole; 54% said that they improved the voting process, compared with 56% of the population. Young people were also far more likely to claim that the new voting methods had a positive influence on their decision to vote – 42% compared to 30% of the population as a whole. The CYPU report also found young people supportive of having the option to vote in more ways e.g. by phone and via the internet.\(^{72}\)

New technologies may also have an application beyond voting alone. The Welsh Affairs Select Committee advised politicians to embrace new forms of communication including email and the internet and Pippa Norris has commented on the increasing use of the latter among the young:

‘The internet is a key means of enabling…alternative political engagements. The digital divide is very clear. Older people rely on newspapers and mainstream television, while young people are often accessing the internet for environmental movements or anti-trade or anti-globalization movements. They're using the web to network, to provide alternative sources of information, and to organise demonstrations – it is a new channel of activism for youth.’\(^{73}\)

Votes at 16 or 18?

In the last few years several independent bodies have recommended a reduction in the voting age as a means of encouraging interest and participation by young people in local government.\(^{74}\) In 2002 the CYPU’s Young people and politics specifically recommended that the Commission consider the issue and there have since been additional calls for a review from a range of different respected sources (the issue has also been made a component of the Government’s ‘Big conversation’). Partly in response to this, and partly in light of our responsibility for keeping the law and policy on public

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\(^{72}\) CYPU (2002) Young people and politics.

\(^{73}\) See Pippa Norris, interview with the Council of Europe (28.11.03): www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/interviews/20031128_interv_Norris.asp

elections in the UK under review, the Commission conducted a year-long review of the voting and candidacy ages, which we published in April 2004.

The Commission recommended that the voting age should remain at 18 for the present time, but advised that the age of eligibility to stand as a Parliamentary candidate should be reduced from 21 to 18, in line with the voting age. On the issue of the voting age, and based on consultation and research, we concluded that ‘There appears to be insufficient current justification for a change…’ and recommended a further formal review within five to seven years. In terms of the impact of the voting age on wider participation and engagement, we concluded that while lowering the voting age might help persuade younger people that politicians were treating their views more seriously, ‘…the fundamental issue for young people seems to be that their views are regarded as important and are considered properly by public policy-makers…’

3. Conclusion

In this paper we have summarised the main findings from Voter engagement and young people and subsequent research conducted by the Commission and others. This evidence-base will be supplemented by several forthcoming Commission research projects and additional research by the academic and social research communities. In terms of future Electoral Commission projects, we are currently scoping a research project to better understand the extent and nature of non-registration in the UK and we will also use public opinion research by ICM to review young people’s behaviour at, and their perceptions of, the recent elections in June. In addition, future Electoral Commission/Hansard Society audits of political engagement will give us the opportunity to monitor engagement among young people over time.

The research outlined in this paper has been useful in its own right, but it has also proved invaluable to us as we have continued to develop public awareness campaigns and outreach activities specifically targeted at young people. It has provided many different and varied insights, but with some common themes – in particular, that ‘apathy’ is not the problem, that the challenge is to make politics more relevant and responsive to young people and that disengagement must be tackled on many different fronts.

76 Details of The Electoral Commission’s research projects for 2004–05 can be found at: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/Researchplans.cfm