
Young people and political participation in Northern Ireland

In 2004 we commissioned research to explore and measure the attitudes and behaviour of young people aged 16–24 towards participation in democratic process, including electoral registration and voting. This paper presents the main findings of the research.

While young people in Northern Ireland care about issues such as health and education, many are disengaged from mainstream politics and are frustrated at what they perceive to be an unwillingness on the part of politicians to listen and respond to their views.

Background

The 2001 UK Parliamentary election was notable for the lowest turnout across the UK in decades, particularly among young people. Following this, a participatory research project, YVote/YNot?, was established by the Government and culminated in the *Young People and Politics* report. The report made a number of recommendations to key stakeholders about what could be done to re-engage young people with politics. The report was based on research conducted entirely in England, and the Commission and others felt that the context in Northern Ireland was sufficiently different to warrant a separate piece of Northern Ireland-specific research. Accordingly, the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) were retained by the Commission to undertake Northern Ireland-wide research.

Methodology

The research had two components – participatory research comprising consultative workshops with focus groups and a public opinion survey. ICR conducted the qualitative component while

PwC administered the public opinion survey, the content and structure of which was informed by the findings from the workshops. Thirty young people took part in the workshops which involved two main groups; 16–17 year olds and 18–24 year olds. The focus groups involved 80 participants across the age range who were drawn from youth groups, schools, training courses, universities and political parties. The public opinion survey involved 1,113 face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 16–24 year olds across Northern Ireland's 18 Parliamentary constituencies.

Key findings

Interest in politics

The findings from the workshops suggest that many young people feel negatively about politics and politicians, with 16–17 year olds more likely to express such views. There was a perception that politicians did not listen to the views of young people and regarded their opinions as unimportant. Many participants felt that politics was 'boring and complicated', which led to young people 'switching off'

whenever the subject was discussed. However, other participants expressed an interest in political issues and expressed frustration at the assumption that all young people were apathetic:

Young people are not apathetic about issues and indeed can even be angry about issues. However, it is the linkage between politics and the issues which causes the problem, as young people do not think it will make any difference.

Comment from workshop participant

The general feeling of negativity towards politics was reinforced in the focus group discussions, with representatives from the political parties accepting that many young people were not interested in political issues. Other young people commented that although they were interested in politics, they didn't discuss the subject outside their home environment because they did not feel comfortable disclosing their political views.

Responses to the survey revealed a greater level of interest in politics, with 50% of 16–24 year olds expressing at least some interest. Older respondents (20–24 years old) were more likely to say that they had an interest in politics. Many young people expressed frustration that politicians did not listen to their opinions, with 41% of survey respondents feeling that politicians did not make an effort to listen. Over two-thirds (67%) of respondents claimed that they

Table 1: Interest in Northern Ireland politics according to age

| Level of interest | 16–17 (%) | 18–19 (%) | 20–24 (%) |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Not at all interested | 17 | 11 | 10 |
| Not very interested | 22 | 13 | 12 |
| Neither/nor | 26 | 19 | 21 |
| Quite interested | 25 | 43 | 36 |
| Very interested | 9 | 14 | 19 |

Source: PwC
Base: 1,113

would 'vote for a politician who listens and responds to my concerns'.

Politics in Northern Ireland

Feedback received from the workshops and focus groups revealed that young people felt that politics in Northern Ireland focused on religion and political division to the detriment of other issues such as university fees, water charges and transport. There was recognition that the legacy of the 'Troubles' had to be addressed, but there was also a clear desire to move on from the past. Similarly, the survey highlighted the perception that politics in Northern Ireland focuses on constitutional rather than socio-economic issues. Half of those questioned associated politics with the 'peace process', while a third (32%) felt that local politics was mainly about 'sectarianism'. Nevertheless, almost half (47%) believed that politics was relevant to their life and 36% felt they had something to contribute to politics in Northern Ireland.

The focus groups found that most young people had a negative perception of

politicians and felt frustrated by what they saw as an unwillingness to listen and respond to the views of young people. There was a feeling that politicians were guilty of 'hearing but not listening' to the views of young people and were more interested in scoring points off each other than about responding to the needs of their constituents.

Voting and registration

Over half (60%) of those interviewed in the public opinion survey said they were registered to vote, 12% said they were not, 5% did not know and 1% claimed not to have heard of the electoral register. One in five (20%) respondents said they were too young to be registered. However, this included a proportion of 17-year-olds who were unaware that they could, in fact, be registered at 17.

The majority of workshop and focus group participants were aware of the need to register and were familiar with the process. Representatives from one political party felt that registering to vote was another barrier preventing young people from voting:

Why make it harder for young people to vote if (they) are becoming more and more apathetic...why put another barrier in place?

Comment from workshop participant

The discussions revealed a range of influences and pressures shaping how young people voted or would vote once they reached 18. There was a consensus in the workshops that community and family background exerted a strong influence. Indeed, this influence was so strong that many said they would be unlikely to vote for a political party that their community would not approve of. The majority of young people stated that they would be unlikely to change 'allegiance' to their party even over 'important' issues such as health and education. In the survey, 49% of those who voted said that their family was the greatest influence on how they voted:

I will vote for who my family vote for. I don't know myself who to vote for.

Focus group participant

Half (49%) of the survey respondents stated that they had voted at the combined elections in May 2005, with 27% saying they had not. Just over one in five (23%) had not reached the age of 18. Of those who did not vote, the main reason given was because they were not registered or had not received a poll card, while 27% cited a lack of interest in politics. Almost 40% of those who had not voted said that they would be encouraged to vote if politicians focused on issues of interest to them, while 32% said they would vote if they believed it would make a difference. Practical changes to the voting process were suggested by the young people in an effort to make it more user-friendly, with 24-hour polling stations, text voting and voting at weekends put forward as alternatives to the current model.

Engaging young people

The young people involved in the workshops and focus groups were asked what, if anything, would encourage them to become involved in the democratic process. A common response was that politicians have to 'start to engage with

young people and go where they are' if they wanted to generate more interest and participation. Among the older age groups, it was felt that there was a greater need for more formal education concerning politics, with emphasis placed on the registration and voting process. It was also felt that holding workshops with politicians could prove beneficial, as they would give young people an opportunity to engage politicians on a range of issues. There was also a consensus that more education for young people on politics, elections and voting was required through various outlets such as schools and youth groups.

Most focus group participants felt that increasing engagement could only be achieved with more education and information aimed at young people in a manner that was accessible to them. Similarly, while the majority of respondents (62%) felt they received enough information about political parties and elections, a preference was expressed for information in more accessible and convenient formats, including e-mail and text messaging alerts. There was however, also a sense that young people themselves had to get out and vote in order to make a difference:

You can't sit back and complain if you don't get up and do something to make it better.

Focus group participant

Table 2: Understanding of Northern Ireland politics according to age

| Level of understanding | 16–17 (%) | 18–19 (%) | 20–24 (%) |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Poor | 34 | 17 | 15 |
| Average | 50 | 58 | 51 |
| Good | 14 | 24 | 31 |

Source: PwC
Base: 1,113

Table 3: Factors that would encourage voting in future elections

| Factor | Percentage |
|---|------------|
| Politicians focusing on areas of interest to me | 38 |
| Feeling that my vote could make a difference | 32 |
| Making the voting process easier | 19 |
| If politicians explained their views to me | 17 |
| Voting via the internet | 13 |
| Feeling that the party I support has a good chance of winning | 8 |

Source: PwC
Base: 574

Conclusion

The research has added to our understanding of the political perspectives and views of young people in Northern Ireland. Feedback from the workshops and focus groups indicated that many young people feel passionate about issues that affect their lives but are turned off by the mainstream political process. However, others are not interested in politics and found the subject boring. The public opinion survey revealed a greater level of interest in politics, with 50% of 16–24 year olds expressing at least some degree of interest.

There is a clear perception among young people that politics in Northern Ireland focuses too much on constitutional issues to the detriment of issues such as health and education.

Nevertheless, many young people felt that they had something to contribute to politics in Northern Ireland, and would be willing to become more involved provided that they were persuaded that politicians listened to their opinions and concerns.

Further information

The full report, *Youth participation in the democratic process in Northern Ireland*, is available online from: www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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