Young People and Politics in Britain

How do young people participate in politics and what can be done to strengthen their political connection?

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THE RESEARCH
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SUMMARY
This Briefing Report presents the findings from a new research project that examines young people’s attitudes towards politics in Britain, and considers the widely-held view that today’s generation of youth is increasingly reluctant to play a role in political life, and is dismissive of the formal political process and democratic institutions. This viewpoint is not new, and the issue of youth disengagement has vexed politicians and policy-makers over the course of the past decade. Indeed, there has been growing anxiety within government circles that, despite attempts to reform the political system and make it easier to access by citizens, the British public—and young people in particular—remain broadly disaffected from politics. In large part, this concern has been shaped by a recent decline in voter participation rates, with young people being particularly absent from the polls at successive general election contests in 2001, 2005 and 2010.

Our current study is based on a nationwide online survey of 1,025 British attainers—18 year olds who were eligible to vote for the first-time at the 2010 General Election, and who therefore have only limited experience of “formal politics”. This survey was conducted in May 2011, one year after that election contest, and follows on from a similar project completed by one of the researchers in 2002. Our intention is to compare the results from these two studies in order to assess whether and to what extent the views and political orientations of today’s youth differ to or mirror those expressed by the young people that we researched a decade previously.

Specifically, this Briefing Report presents an overview of:
- Young people’s levels of interest in, and understanding of, politics and elections;
- Youth attitudes towards democracy in Britain;
- The degree of faith that young people have in political parties and politicians;
- The likelihood that young people will take part in differing political activities in the future, including voting at elections;
- What the political parties need to do if they are to engage young people in the future.

Our findings reveal that, when it comes to “Politics”, today’s generation of young people are not as apathetic as conventional wisdom would have us believe. Instead a picture is emerging of a British youth keen to play a more active role in the political process, but who are turned-off by politicians and the political parties.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been growing anxiety within government circles that people in Britain are becoming increasingly disengaged from the formal political process and from democratic institutions (Ministry of Justice 2007). This concern has come to the fore largely as a consequence of the recent decline in voter participation rates. For instance, election turnout has taken a steep turn downwards, most notably at the landmark General Election of 2001 when only 59% of the eligible electorate voted. Although voter turnout at subsequent general elections has increased marginally to 61% in 2005, and then to 65% in 2010, these figures should be put into context by comparing them with previous general election outcomes where electoral participation was 75% in 1987, 78% in 1992, and 71% in 1997 (Electoral Commission 2005).

Young people in Britain are even less likely to participate in elections than are their older contemporaries. Only 39 per cent of registered 18 to 24 year olds voted at the General Election in 2001, falling further to 37 per cent in 2005 (Electoral Commission 2005). Turnout within this group increased to 44% in 2010 (Ipsos MORI 2010), yet this remains well below the national average, and suggests that a large majority of those young people who registered to vote opted not to do so.¹ It is also a significantly lower youth turnout rate than recorded in earlier elections, when it was reported as 66% in 1987 (Swaddle and Heath 1992), 61% in 1992 (Butler and Kavanagh 1997), and 68% in 1997 (Jowell and Park 1998).

Young people are not only differentiated from older contemporaries in terms of election turnout. The principal theme to emerge out of the existing research into the general field of young people and politics is that this generation has been characterised as dissatisfied with, and alienated from, the political process (for a full overview of this contention, see Henn and Weinstein, 2006).

The responses of recent UK governments have been to legislate political reforms designed to reconnect the electorate—and young people in particular—to the political system. Such legislation has included the introduction of statutory citizenship classes at schools in England in 2002, to educate young people in the nature and practices of democratic participation. Elsewhere, constitutional programmes of change have been introduced that were designed to give citizens greater access to the centres of political power and increased influence over the political process. Finally, governments have sought to modernise the electoral system and processes with the ambition to make the act of voting easier, and to stimulate turnout at elections.

Despite the considerable faith that recent governments have placed in these measures, the downward trend in democratic engagement has not been arrested over the course of the last decade or so.

¹ Given that data suggest that many young people do not register to vote in the first place (Russell et al. 2002), this figure probably over-estimates the actual turnout rate for young people.
In this briefing paper, we consider the notion that young people in Britain are disengaged from the formal political process and from democratic institutions. We do this by comparing data from the current study with data from a separate cohort of 18 year olds collected by one of the researchers in 2002 (Henn and Weinstein, 2003). Specifically we address the following issues to track any changes in political outlook between these two separate youth cohorts over this time period:

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

**METHODOLOGY**

We conducted a national online survey of 1,025 attainers (18 year olds eligible to vote for the first-time). The survey was designed to yield a representative national sample of young people from across England, Scotland and Wales, with respondents drawn from an existing and on-going online access panel. The questionnaire used in the survey was designed to enable close comparison to the 2002 study, and the majority of questions from the previous questionnaire have been repeated. Following consultation with representatives from political parties and interested youth-oriented user groups, a small number of additional questions were included to allow for the exploration of specific issues which have come to the fore since the previous study. Data collection took place from 20th April to 4th May 2011, thereby ensuring that respondents had not yet had the opportunity to vote in the AV referendum of 5th May 2011. Data have been weighted to accurately reflect population estimates of gender, ethnicity and region.

**RESULTS**

**Political Engagement**

Our research reveals evidence that young people are interested in political matters:

- When asked about politics in general, 63% of respondents replied that they had some or more interest in the topic, which compares with 56% expressing such an interest in 2002. Only 12% of our survey participants reported that they had no interest at all (13% in 2002).
- Nearly two thirds (64%) of the young people who took part in our survey said that they were interested in the General Election held in May 2010 (only 14% had no interest at all). This represents a significant positive shift in engagement since the 2002 study when only 48% signalled such interest.
- We found that a small majority (54%) considered that they would discuss politics with friends and family in the future, the same proportion as had reported as such in 2002.

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2 This online access panel is co-ordinated by the international market research agency, Ipsos-MORI (http://www.ipsos-mori.com).
These results seem to run counter to popular thinking that young people are apathetic and dismissive of political matters. Indeed, they seem to have more interest in politics and in elections than the cohort of 18 year olds who took part in our 2002 study.

As a further indicator of young people’s level of political engagement, we asked an open question designed to identify the single most important issue to them at the moment. A surprisingly high 90% of young people in the survey answered this question. The responses were generally detailed and quite sophisticated, demonstrating a particular engagement with political and current affairs. Figure 1 indicates that they have a very clear youth-oriented agenda, expressing anxiety about their immediate educational and employment prospects. Nearly a third of our sample (31%) prioritised concerns over the future of higher education and of how young people might survive their university careers (higher education tuition fees, student debt, and cuts in education). An equivalent number of young people (31%) were concerned about employment- and finance-related issues (job prospects for young people, the economy / recession, unemployment and factory closures, and finances).

Figure 1: issues of most concern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In your opinion, what is the single most important issue to you at the moment?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education tuition fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job prospects for young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy / recession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student fees / debt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuts in education funding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment / Factory Closures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance / money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race relations / immigration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The way the country is governed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government spending cuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence / foreign affairs / terrorism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The remaining group of young people prioritised a considerably broader agenda, which included race relations and immigration, the way that the country is governed, government spending,
taxation, health care, and defence, foreign affairs and terrorism. A further 10% mentioned other issues.

**Understanding and Knowledge of Politics**

Despite young people’s continuing interest in politics, the data from the 2011 cohort study broadly reflect the messages from the 2002 cohort that young people continue to lack confidence that they know as much about politics as they would like.

As Figure 2 indicates, the larger group of young people seemed secure in their knowledge of political parties when it comes to deciding how to vote at election times (52%), although a sizeable minority (46%) claimed that they do not. However, young people feel considerably less at ease in terms of their knowledge of politics *in general*, or of their understanding of what is going on in government and politics.

**Figure 2: Understanding and Knowledge of Politics**

Combining these three questions, we found overall that only 36% had confidence in their knowledge and understanding of British politics, with more than half (55%) lacking self-assurance about such matters. The corresponding figures from the 2002 youth cohort study were 34% and 60%, indicating persisting low levels of confidence amongst young people.
We asked questions designed to tap into the impact that the 2001 introduction of statutory citizenship classes in schools had on young people’s general understanding of politics. A quarter of our survey participants (25%) reported that they had taken a GCSE in Citizenship Studies. Of these young people, a quarter (25%) reported that studying for this course had had no such impact, and a further 39% reported not very much impact. However, 37% claimed that in taking the GCSE, their knowledge and understanding had increased, suggesting a positive effect of formal citizenship classes for a sizable minority of young people.

**Political Power and Influence**

Results from our survey indicate that young people do not feel that they can influence the decision-making process. Comparing the percentages of those who agreed with those who disagreed on a number of statements concerning this matter, the data in Figure 3 reveal that young people in 2011 feel just as powerless, politically, as did the 2002 youth cohort.

**Figure 3: Political Power and Influence**

By combining the results of several questions, we were able to create an index that demonstrated that only 13% considered there existed meaningful opportunities open to them to influence the political scene, while six times as many young people (75%) claimed to lack such influence. This margin of difference is somewhat less than identified in 2002 (when the...
corresponding figures were 12% and 84% respectively), suggesting some decline in this fatalistic outlook. There is, nonetheless, a significant degree of pessimism amongst today’s generation of 18 year olds—and they remain almost as doubtful about their abilities to gain access to, and influence over, the political process as did their predecessors in 2002.

The 18 year olds included in our survey were asked what they thought of those methods of political activity that are actually open to them. A summary of responses appears in Table 1, below. Interestingly, the data reveal that young people consider that these formal methods of political activity are effective in terms of influencing government. When considered alongside the findings noted in Figure 3, we might conclude that despite feelings of general political powerlessness, this 2011 youth cohort do appear to have faith in the democratic process itself, and are generally supportive of the notion of elections—the key means open for people to formally participate in politics.

**Table 1: Political Activity (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How effective do you think... (is) for influencing government?</th>
<th>Effective</th>
<th>Not effective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting in a general election</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting in a local election</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a member of a political party</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Confidence in the Democratic Process**

The data reveal that more young people said they were satisfied (48%) than were dissatisfied (32%) with the way democracy works (although 20% stated that they were “Not sure”). This represents an increase in the satisfaction levels recorded in the 2002 cohort study, when the corresponding figures for those who were satisfied against those who were dissatisfied were 31% and 26%.

The figures in Table 2 show the extent to which the 18 year olds in our 2011 survey either agree or disagree with a series of questions about elections, alongside findings from the 2002 cohort. Examination of the individual items broadly indicates that young people do have a general attachment to, and confidence in, the democratic process, and they are typically more positive about elections than were the 2002 cohort. They appear to have an appreciation of civic duty, and also to feel a sense of satisfaction now that they have gained the right to vote. The data also indicate that this youth cohort, like their predecessors from 2002, consider that elections do matter in terms of forcing politicians to listen to and engage in talk with voters, and that they keep politicians broadly accountable.
Interestingly, there is a significant reversal of the findings from the 2002 study, when that particular youth cohort were considerably more likely to disagree (44%) than agree (28%) that by voting they could really help to change the way that Britain is governed. In contrast, the current youth cohort is more likely to agree than disagree with this statement. However, only a third (36%) of today’s young people hold such a positive view, and the gap when measured against the dissenters (29%), is only 7%. This perhaps suggests only tentative support for the idea that voting at elections can have a real and meaningful impact on government.

Table 2: Support for the Democratic Process (%)

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I feel/would feel a sense of satisfaction when I vote/ if I voted.</td>
<td>52 (44)</td>
<td>14 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be seriously neglecting my duty as a citizen if I didn’t vote.</td>
<td>45 (43)</td>
<td>22 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having regular elections forces politicians to listen carefully to public opinion.</td>
<td>50 (51)</td>
<td>20 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections give voters an opportunity to tell politicians what they think is really important.</td>
<td>53 (44)</td>
<td>18 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elections help to keep politicians accountable for the promises they make.</td>
<td>43 (42)</td>
<td>31 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By voting/ if I voted, I feel as if I can/ could really help to change the way that Britain is governed</td>
<td>36 (28)</td>
<td>29 (44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, the 18 year olds from this current cohort also recognise that elections as a method of democratic participation are limited, and they are broadly sceptical that the outcomes from such democratic contests are positive:

- A majority (57%) claimed that although elections allow voters to express their opinions, they don’t really change anything. Only 15% disagreed with this sceptical statement. The corresponding figures in 2002 were 60% and 22% respectively.
- Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, there is a noticeable gap between those who would only vote in an election if they cared who won (40%) and those who disagreed with that particular view (27%). The 2002 cohort figures were 47% and 30% respectively, signalling that there has been a marginal fall in the gap between election sceptics and election-supporters, from 17% to 13% over time. This suggests that young people remain serious and discerning (sceptical) observer-participants of the electoral process, rather than merely uninterested and apathetic onlookers.
- Particularly revealing, is that whereas a significant gap was identified in the 2002 study between those who disagreed (49%) and those who agreed (24%) with the sceptical statement that “All things considered, most elections are just a big waste of time and money”, within the current 2011 cohort, there are almost as many election doubters (32%)
as there are election believers (33%). This represents a significant fall in the election supporter/sceptic gap, from 25% in 2002 to only 1% today. This finding adds weight to the conclusion that while 18 year olds today are broadly in support of the principle and system of elections and of the democratic process, they lack confidence in the actual election outcomes.

In terms of recent voting behaviour, over two thirds (69%) of our sample of young people claimed to have participated at the 2010 General Election, which represented their first occasion to cast a vote. Although we do not know the precise figures for the proportion of 18 year olds who voted, this survey response probably over-estimates the number of those that did, and compares with 44% of the broader 18-24 year old age group.3

Of the “voters”, by far and away the largest group (55%) were motivated to cast their ballot on the basis of party policies. Interestingly, the reasons cited by the remaining group of young voters were split relatively evenly—as many young people voted in line with family tradition (7%) as had cast their vote in support of a local candidate (6%); for a particular party leader (7%); had voted against one of the other parties or candidates (6%); or had really preferred another party but considered that it stood no chance of winning in their constituency (6%). Finally, a small group (3%) claimed that they had followed the advice of their friends.

**Political Activity**
Respondents were then asked how likely it was that they might take part in various types of political activity over the next few years. As the figures in Table 3 indicate, large numbers declared that they would consider voting at future contests. Although marginally less likely to express a positive intention to vote at the next general election than were those questioned as part of the 2002 cohort study, they are more likely to state as such for future local contests and for elections to the next European Parliament. They are also less likely to report that they expect to abstain from voting in any such elections.

We then asked a series of questions concerning respondents’ likelihood of offering formal support to the political parties. The results suggest that, as was the case with 18 year olds from the 2002 study, today’s generation of young people cannot bring themselves to actually support the main political parties in practice. Only 6% reported that they would be likely in the future to give money to any of the political parties, and 76% would not. A similarly small fraction of young people would actually be prepared to work for a political party or a candidate in an election campaign (8%). Finally, only 22% of this particular youth cohort would ever consider trying to convince someone else how to vote (50% would be unlikely to do so). These figures broadly reflect the findings from the 2002 cohort of 18 year olds.

3 The over-estimation of voting recall is not uncommon in surveys of this nature. For instance, the 2010 British Election Study reports that 90% of respondents to the post-election Internet survey claimed to have voted, compared to the actual turnout of 65% (Clarke et al., 2010).
Table 3: Future Voting Intentions (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next UK general election</td>
<td>64 (67)</td>
<td>16 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next local council election</td>
<td>53 (46)</td>
<td>21 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next election for the European Parliament</td>
<td>42 (35)</td>
<td>28 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next Scottish Parliament election</td>
<td>66 (N/A)</td>
<td>14 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next Welsh Assembly election</td>
<td>56 (N/A)</td>
<td>13 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote in the next London Mayoral election</td>
<td>56 (N/A)</td>
<td>24 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Faith in Political Parties and Professional Politicians

Responses to a series of questions about the political parties and professional politicians provided the very clear view that the 2011 cohort continues to hold a deep antipathy to these political players - one that is as deep as was reported by their predecessor cohort from 2002.

When asked what they think about the ability of the political parties to find suitable people to run for parliament, only 22% consider that they do a good job in this process; a slightly larger group (29%) feel that this is not the case, while the dominant group (49%) is uncertain. This finding suggests a somewhat less than positive endorsement of the political parties and professional politicians.

What is certain is that young people continue to have a relatively low level of party identification (35%) compared to those who report that they do not connect with any particular political party (57%). These findings compare with a slightly smaller level of party identification (28%) reported by the 2002 cohort (59% without any such identification).

Furthermore, other findings within the study support the view that young people today have little confidence or trust in the political classes. Our results tend to reinforce those from a number of previous studies that show an apparent disconnection from party politics—in many cases this is very noticeable indeed. We created an index based on several questions from the survey which summarises young people’s perceptions of political parties and professional politicians. Only 17% are positively disposed towards these political players, whereas the vast majority (81%) hold a negative view of them. These figures are broadly comparable with those recorded for the 2002 cohort (13% and 85% respectively).

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4 This question was not asked in 2002.
A detailed examination of the specific views that young people have of politicians and the political parties is revealed in Table 4. These data indicate that young people appear to hold deeply sceptical views of these political players, and of the way that they conduct their activities—and that the strength and direction of these views is not appreciably different from those offered by the predecessor youth cohort from 2002. This suggests that youth suspicion and distrust of parties has not appreciably diminished with time.

**Table 4: Perception of Political Parties and Professional Politicians (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political parties are effective organisations for changing the lives of</td>
<td>21 (N/A)</td>
<td>31 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people for the better</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is often a big difference between what a party promises it will do</td>
<td>75 (87)</td>
<td>3 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and what it does when it wins an election.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties are more interested in winning elections than in</td>
<td>65 (69)</td>
<td>9 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>governing afterwards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties do more to divide the country than unite it</td>
<td>47 (41)</td>
<td>12 (24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Member of Parliament tries hard to look after the interests of people</td>
<td>24 (N/A)</td>
<td>17 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in my constituency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In elections, political parties don’t tell people about the really</td>
<td>48 (N/A)</td>
<td>16 (N/A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>important problems facing the country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties aren’t interested in the same issues that concern</td>
<td>64 (59)</td>
<td>7 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main political parties in Britain don’t offer voters real choices in</td>
<td>40 (48)</td>
<td>18 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>elections because their policies are pretty much all the same</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, as revealed in Figure 4, the majority of this 2011 youth cohort considers that the political parties are remote, and do not seek to positively connect with young people or with their concerns—beyond trying to win their votes. Thus, by a considerable margin, respondents tended to disagree that political parties do a good job of listening to young people’s concerns, and then responding to them positively. This compares with a somewhat more sceptical view offered by the 2002 cohort, but nonetheless still suggests a very considerable lack of trust by young people in these political players.

That finding reflects another, with the current youth generation being of the opinion that governments do not really care what young people like themselves think; here there is an increase in young people’s scepticism levels over those recorded by their predecessors in 2002.
Furthermore, a significant majority of young people consider that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with people. Again, they are even more doubtful of politicians’ intentions than were those who took part in the 2002 study.

These findings are aptly summarised in the view offered by the large majority of young people—that parties are only interested in people’s votes, and not in their opinions. The scale of this doubt remains exactly as it was recorded in the 2002 study. However, with fewer disagreeing in the 2011 survey, the scepticism gap has increased over time, from +51% to +57%.

Given these findings, it is perhaps not surprising that large majorities of young people lack trust in democratic institutions, as well as those individuals and agencies that inhabit them. There seems to be a somewhat varied view with respect to democratic institutions. Only 15% said that they considered that, on balance, UK governments (past and present) tend to be honest and trustworthy, while the view of the overwhelming majority (66%) was that they were not. However, nearly half (43%) of 18 year olds living in Scotland consider the Scottish Parliament to be honest and trustworthy (32% not), while a third of young people living in Wales (36%) are positive about the Welsh Assembly (19% not).

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5 These questions were not asked in 2002.
We then asked respondents to indicate the degree of trust that they invested in the political parties and in politicians. As Table 5 indicates, young people in Britain are deeply distrustful of these political players. Interestingly, they are slightly more sceptical of professional politicians than they are of the political parties, and this may partly reflect the impact of the UK parliamentary expenses scandal which first gained prominence as a political issue in May 2009.

### Table 5: Trust in Parties and Professional Politicians (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using a scale from 1 – 5 where 1 means no trust and 5 means a great deal of trust, how much do you trust... in general?</th>
<th>Some or a great deal of trust</th>
<th>Little or no trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political parties</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Re-connecting Young People: The Challenge for Political Parties**

We asked an open question in order to gain insight into what might be done to reverse young people’s antipathy to the political parties and to professional politicians.

These open responses are categorised in Figure 5, and confirm that there is a widely held belief within this 2011 cohort that the political parties should do more to directly connect with young people. In particular, the parties were urged to invest more energy in talking with and listening to young people, by visiting schools, colleges and universities, and by using innovative connection methods—such as questionnaires and surveys, holding "Question Time"-style forums, conferences and meetings, and using the Internet, social networking methods (such as Facebook and Twitter) and email.

In addition, there is a similarly clear message that political parties and professional politicians should then action young people’s concerns, in particular by adopting a more young person-centred approach and focus in their political work and by involving young people more in doing so. There was also an appeal for the parties to more actively champion the issues and concerns of young people, and to deliver on their promises.6

Clearly, for young people to be brought back into the democratic fold, political parties will need to reflect seriously on how they approach them in the future.

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6 Respondents had the opportunity to mention more than one means of connecting if they wished. Percentages reported represent the proportion of total number of respondents to this question, rather than the total number of responses given.
CONCLUSION
Contrary to the common stereotype of a politically apathetic generation, all the evidence from our study points towards a group of young people who are interested in political affairs. Like their predecessors in 2002, young people today have an interest in a range of political issues, and have a clear youth agenda. They are also supporters of the idea of representative democracy.

Although they are doubtful that the outcomes from elections are positive or can help to bring about effective change in the way that society is governed, they certainly hold an attachment to the general democratic process, and support the broad principle of elections. They do therefore have a civic orientation. Indeed, they would like to play a more active role in the democratic process in the future.

However, they also consider that the political system remains relatively closed to young people like themselves, and believe that there are few opportunities afforded to them to intervene effectively within the political process to help shape the way that decisions are made. Consequently, today’s generation of young people feel relatively powerless, politically—just as did their predecessors a decade previously.
Furthermore, despite their general support for the democratic process, young people’s recent experience of their first general election in 2010 has left them feeling somewhat disheartened and frustrated. Indeed, our study has revealed a considerable aversion to formal, professional politics which is as deep as it was for young people in 2002. Politicians are clearly regarded as a group with self-serving interests, in whom attainers today have as little faith or trust as did their predecessor cohort a decade earlier.

The conclusion that we must draw from these findings, is that young people feel considerably disenchanted by their recent experiences of formal politics, and remain relatively disengaged from the political process and from democratic institutions and players. This is despite the considerable political reforms that governments have introduced over the course of the last decade, designed to provide citizens with greater access to the centres of political power and to increase their influence over the political process.

If young people are to be re-connected to the formal political process, then there is considerable scope for professional politicians to intervene in ways that might help young people to see the potential value in doing so. Certainly, young people would welcome an approach from the political parties and from individual politicians that was direct and clearly prompted by a desire to genuinely articulate and then champion the views and interests of young people. At present, young people feel as if professional politicians are rather cynical in their dealings with ordinary citizens. There is therefore some serious public relations work needed in order for politicians to demonstrate that their intentions in reaching out to connect with people—and young people in particular—are motivated by a sincere and transparent concern to listen to their voices and act upon them accordingly.

In these respects, today’s generation of young people are no different from their youth predecessors of 2002.
REFERENCES


