



Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics in
West of England

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Phoenix is a Social Enterprise providing opportunities for young people. We offer training, education, employment and work placement opportunities in the UK and mainland Europe. We empower the young, engaged through the Phoenix Youth Consortium to voice their opinion, strengthen representation and help them prosper and grow.

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FOREWORD



One of the frustrations of young people, regardless of their cultural background, is that they don't believe society is listening and responding to their needs. This survey of 'Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics' clearly reflects this problem.

Some of the outcome is positive. For example, many young people are already involved in their local community and more would welcome the opportunity to participate in the democratic process if the conditions are right and favourable to their needs.

The team at Phoenix Social Enterprise is in the business of working with young people to empower, strengthen their representation and through this survey has uncovered a wealth of information on what young people think of and want from our politicians, what issues especially concern them, how they intend to vote, their thoughts on the voting process and the voting age.

It is also important to recognise that most of the young people participating in this survey frequently conceptualized politics in a limited and narrow way, and perceived the subject as boring and irrelevant to their current lives. It is also fair to say that our survey targeted young people from the age of 14-24. Those at the younger end of this age scale are still forming their opinions on lots of different levels and issues however; it is nevertheless interesting that they don't consider politics as important. Due to this perception of politics, many young people have little or no understanding or knowledge of the political process. Subsequently, they do not actively seek information relating to political matters. More interestingly, the researchers concluded that because of young people's narrow conception of what politics is, those that were engaging in political actions in Bristol and South Gloucestershire and further afield did not always perceive themselves as actively engaging in a political process.

Meanwhile, I hope that you will find 'Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics in Bristol and South Gloucestershire' as fascinating and instructive as I do.

Shiv Singh MBE
Acting Chairman
Phoenix Social Enterprise Limited



Many who worry about the health of democracy in Britain are much exercised about low electoral turnouts and the alienation from the political system this may represent. Young people however view political alienation and ignorance as systemic. But neither feature is new however stark they seem. They have gone hand-in-hand with representative government although their form, and capacity to do anything to overcome them, has changed over the decades. In key respects, young patient has deteriorated. Voter engagement has been far lower post-1994 than it was pre-1994.

This study of young people's attitudes towards politics is timely. In the 14 UK general elections between 1945 and 1992, the

average turnout was 77 per cent. In 2001, turnout dropped below 60 per cent for the first time and in 2010 was still below two-thirds of the electorate, and in the 4 general elections between 1997 and 2010, turnout averaged 64 per cent. The 13-point drop in turnout between 1992 and 2010 has not been uniformly distributed across the electorate. What is most striking are the huge increases in the turnout gaps between different demographic groups. For example, the gap between managers and professionals (e.g., AB turnout) and unskilled and manual workers (e.g., DE turnout) has increased from 6 points in 1992 to 19 points in 2010.

As for age, whilst the turnout among over 65s has dropped from 83 per cent to 76 per cent, among 18-24 year olds it has fallen from 63 per cent to just 44 per cent. The 'age gap' of 20 points has become a 32-point chasm and there seems no prospect of recovery in the near future unless real efforts are taken to reignite and strengthen young people's interest in politics. The Hansard Society reports¹ highlighted that 'just 12 per cent of 18-24 year olds now say they are certain to vote.

This study comes just as the Government announced a campaign to increase the number of eligible people on the electoral register in an attempt to effect real change in the culture or the level of knowledge of young people. The findings of this study will act both as a benchmark from which future progress can be judged and an indication of the scale of the task that we face locally and nationally. Among the many fascinating findings we have discovered that 2 out of 3 young people asked about voting did not vote, a large majority of the sample. Furthermore, a larger percentage of young people believe voting holds little importance with over 50% believing that voting is not important to some degree. Making the link between their life and the importance of politics should be done on their terms.

It is obviously essential to deploy new social and communications media to the cause of politics and government where young people are concerned. The proliferation of social media and – crucially – user-generated content has revolutionised traditional media industries and (to a lesser extent) the ways in which the electorate participate in democratic debate. The key imperative for democratic reformers should therefore be to reinvigorate young people in mass to stimulate greater turnout in national and local elections. Without this representative democracy could start to lose its legitimacy. It is vital that voting starts young, both to represent the young and also to instil the 'voting habit' into young people from a much younger age.

Babs Williams, Executive Director

¹ [Audit of Political Engagement](#) 2013

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector are increasingly working under great pressure at a time of huge changes in the way it operates, its capacity and the drive to become self sustainable. Organisations and groups within the sector also receive numerous requests to participate in surveys such as this. Consequently, we wish to record our gratitude to the many partner organisations that responded to our request for access to their databases of users, their groups and their help to facilitate group sessions with the many young people who took part in the survey. We are indebted to all; the young people themselves, the organisations and their staff who made this survey possible.

A very special thank you to Marcus Smith who provided comment on the questionnaire, Rinku Khan for facilitating the workshop with the young people from South Gloucestershire (over 2 days), and to Sinead McLarty for her assistance in the design and analysis of the questionnaire. Kizzy Morell also deserve our special thanks for mobilizing so many young people into taking part.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2013 the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, Chloe Smith MP, announced a Government campaign to increase the number of eligible people on the electoral register. As part of this initiative; organisations, neighbourhoods and communities across the country was asked to put forward ideas that would reignite people's interest in the democratic process locally and nationally with the best ideas being awarded funding through the Cabinet Office Democratic Engagement Innovation Fund.

Young people's engagement in democracy is a subject of considerable importance, and one, which is rarely researched. As part of this initiative Phoenix Social Enterprise working in partnership with the Phoenix Youth Consortium was commissioned to research to find out how young people age 14-25 years from Bristol and South Gloucester view politics, their engagement in the processes and what, if anything, would get them to sign-up to voice their opinions in the electoral process. The study was design to discover how young people in Bristol and South Gloucestershire feel about politics and politicians; how and why they form these views; and what it would take for them to become more involved. The findings will act both as a benchmark from which future progress can be judged and an indication of the scale of the task that is faced.

ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The survey was conducted over four weeks - between July and August 2013. 123 young people age 14 – 25 participated from Bristol and South Gloucestershire. The findings are recorded below.

METHODOLOGY

A random sample of 250 young people was provided by youth organisations in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. The sample comprised of young people from diverse backgrounds. The age groups included in the survey were 14-25 year olds. In addition, all youth organisations that participated in the survey were asked to indicate how many young people were on their database in order to help calculate the number to be selected. An email and text message was sent to the 250 potential participants inviting them to participate. All non-responses to the communication were followed-up by telephone calls by the research team in order to maximise response.

Once youth organisations had agreed to participate, the Phoenix team selected the lists of young people to take part – stratifying the sample by geographic area, age, gender and race to ensure a representative sample was included. The Phoenix team then calculated the total number of young people aged 14-25 years old in all selected area, and proportionately calculated the number of young people to be interviewed in each area, their age, ethnicity and gender was also considered at the lower and higher end of the age band.

This process was then repeated, so as to achieve a booster sample of 17 year olds and those 18-24 in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. Given that the survey included questions on voting and politics, the views of those eligible to vote in the next General Election were especially important.

The survey was administered by means of self-completion sessions conducted in the participating organisations premises and summer camp for 14-15 year olds. Having selected young people from partners database, and with the help of a member of the organisations staff, the Phoenix interviewer arranged a convenient time and date for the self-completion session. The interviewer was as flexible as possible given the limitation of time. The Phoenix interviewer was present during

the self-completion session to explain the survey to young people selected to the sample, to reassure them about the confidentiality of the survey, to assist them in completing the questionnaire by clarifying question wording and routing instructions, and to collect completed questionnaires. Of the 250 questionnaires produced and issued 49.2% (n123) was completed and returned.

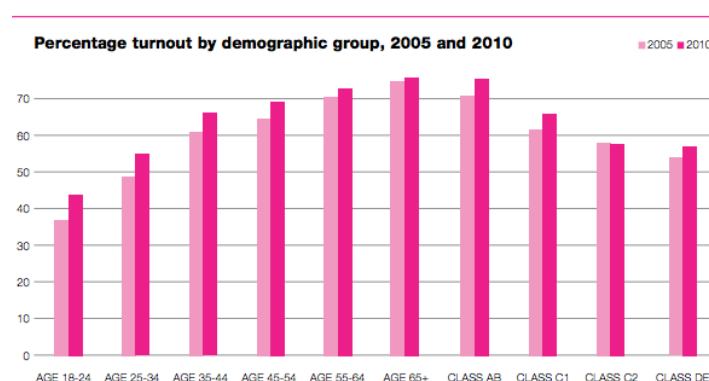
ABOUT THIS REPORT

The research reported on here took place in July and August 2013 with 123 young people from the West of England area but focus mainly on Bristol and South Gloucestershire due to limited time and resources. Following the foreword, introduction and methodology this report takes a simple structure. It begins with a look at the national and local picture in terms of background and the voting behaviour of the 14-25 age groups, with closer observation on the mid-range group 16-24 year olds. Section three is dedicated to analysis at the findings with recommendations in the final section.

The National Picture

Britain has one of the largest differences in voter turnout between age groups in Europe, currently. Only 44% of 18-24 year olds voted in the 2010 general election, compared to 76% of those aged 65 and over.

Chart 1: Percentage turnout by demographic group, 2005 and 2010



Source: IPSOS-MORI How Britain Voted in 2010

Turnout inequality between age groups had grown at an 'alarming' rate in recent years and shows little sign of being reversed. In this year's local elections, the disparity grew with only 32% of 18-24 year olds voting, compared with 72% of those aged over 65. An 18-point turnout gap between 18-24 year olds and those aged over 65 in 1970 grew to 32 points by 2010.

A MORI survey² conducted among Black and Minority Ethnic residents on behalf of The Electoral Commission (EC) reveals that whilst Black and minority ethnic voters were considerably less likely to have voted than White groups at general elections, there was also a real difference between the different ethnic communities. Indians (67%), Pakistani (70%) and Bangladeshi (76%) were all more likely to have claimed to vote than White voters (62%). Black Africans (54%) or Caribbean's (61%)

² Full report can be downloaded here: www.electoralcommission.org.uk/templates/search/document.cfm/13883

were less likely to claim to vote, and only 40% of mixed race voters claimed to have voted, whilst other minority groups averaged 46%. The ethnic minority vote could be decisive in the next general election, according to new research highlighting the enhanced power of black and Asian voters in 2015.

A recent study by Operation Black Vote suggests there are more ethnic minority voters than the majority of the incumbent MP in 168 constituencies - up from 99 in 2010. The 70% increase suggests the battle to win over the black and Asian vote will play a critical role in the coming campaign in 2015.

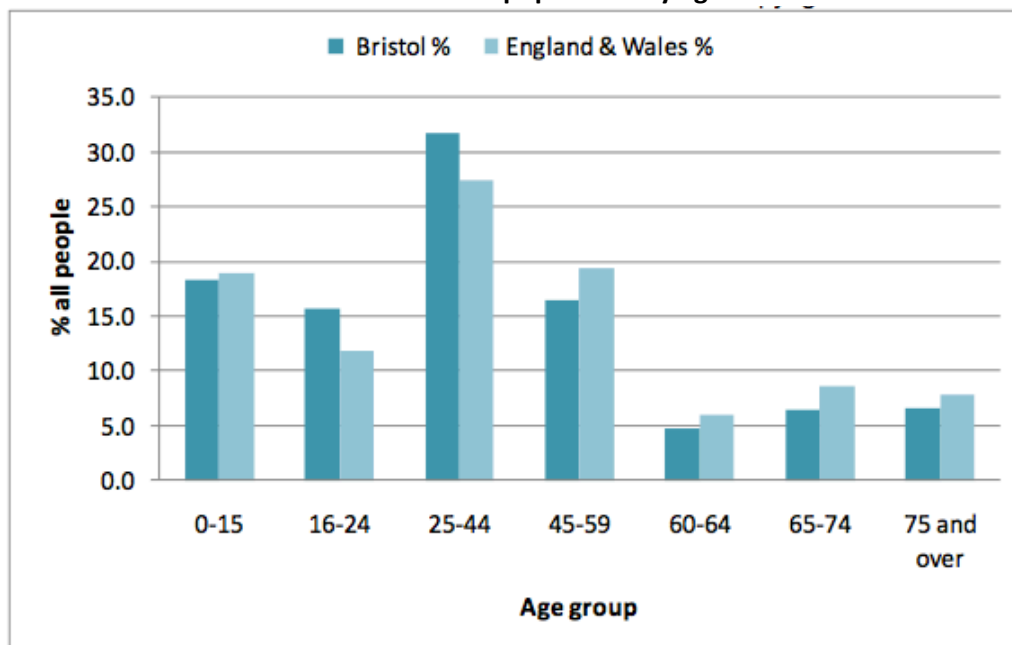
Locally

Bristol

Bristol is the largest city in South West England. It has been an important port and trading centre for 900 years and today it is the cultural and business heart of the West of England with a population of just over 428,000. It has a relatively young age profile compared to the national average with higher proportions of people aged 16-24 years and lower proportions of people aged 45 and over (Table 1 below). Approximately 15% of the population (n66,000) are age 16-24.

Bristol North West is a diverse community containing wealthy suburbs like Westbury on Trym but also areas where Council House provision predominates such as Lockleaze and Southmead tend to see a higher-than-average voter turnout at general elections. The UK average in 2010, for instance, was 65.1% of the electorate, whereas Bristol North West saw a 68.5 % turnout. With participation in elections very uneven across age bands, the higher turnout locally might reflect the age demographic of Bristol North West older age group dominance.

Chart 2: Bristol population by age



Source: 2011 Census (ONS)

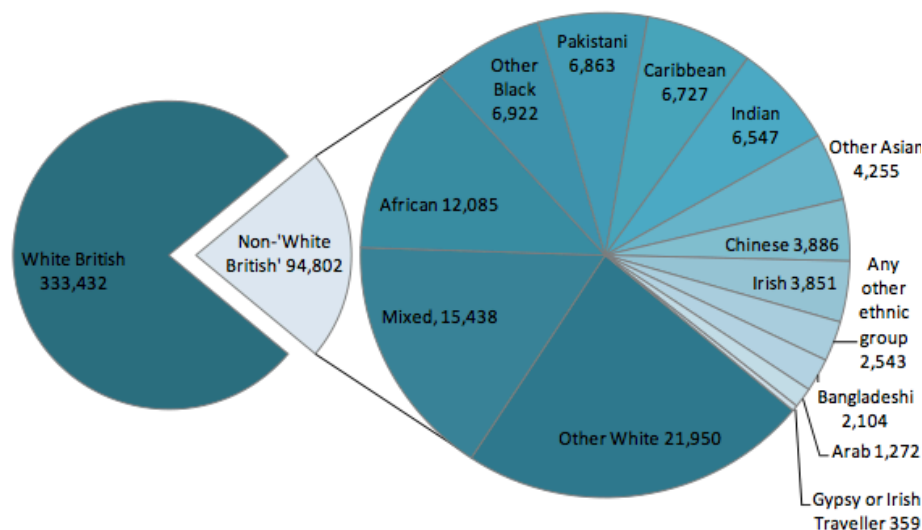
Black Minority Ethnic (BME) population

Ethnicity is also another factor that can determine voting behaviour. In the past members of ethnic minorities were more likely to vote Labour than Conservative as they traditionally have less strict policies on immigration and a heavier focus on social justice. This is evident in most Afro- Caribbean communities. For example, in 1997 89% of black people opted for Labour and 81% of Asians did the same. This is because many saw the Labour Party as committed to social justice. However, the Labour Party has lost many Asian and Muslim voters in recent years because of the Iraq War.

Bristol Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups account for 16% of the total population. The BME population is also younger than the local average and has doubled in ten years from 8.2% in 2001 to 16% of the total population in 2011. The largest growth since 2001 has been in White Other (includes Eastern Europeans) (+11,826), Black African (+9,775), Black Other (+5,986) and mixed ethnic groups (+7,504). If the White groups with the exception of 'White British' are also included, then the non-'White British' population has increased from 12% of all people in 2001 to 22% in 2011.

There are also substantial differences between the age structures of individual minority ethnic groups. The Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups are very youthful. The Black-Other population is even more youthful, but the most youthful and most rapidly growing population is people of mixed parentage and those from Somali backgrounds. The Indian and Black-Caribbean populations display fewer people in the younger age ranges than in the middle age range, reflecting an ageing population, following the period of migration and high fertility. The Chinese, Asian Other and Other populations are heavily biased towards the working age population, reflecting migration of economically active adults. The Black-African population displays similar features, but also a large number of children, indicating that the initial migrant generation (over three-fifths of Black-Africans have come to the UK since 1990) is currently experiencing high fertility rates.

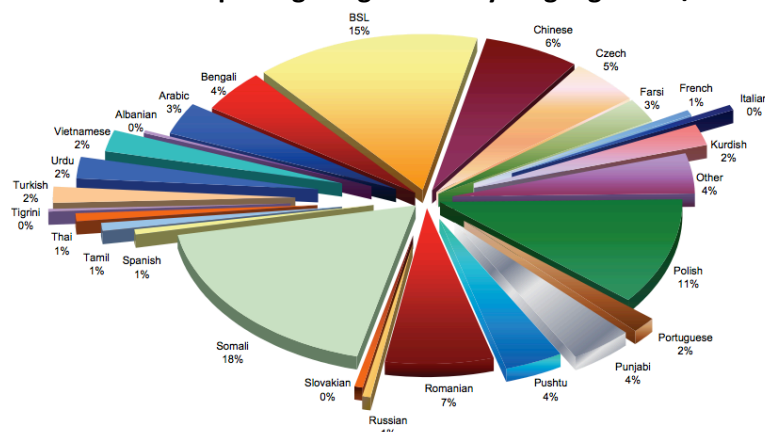
Chart 3: Population by ethnic groups



Source: ONS 2013

The diversity in the population is also reflective of the number of languages spoken in Bristol.

Chart 4: Interpreting assignments by language 2011/12

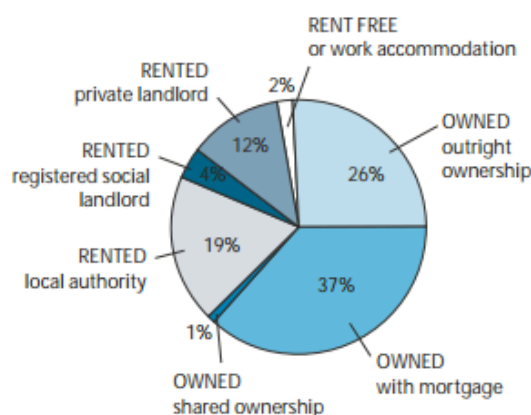


Source: Bristol City Council Translation and Interpreting Services

Housing tenure

Back in the 1960s social class was the main determinant of voting behaviour because social class was much more apparent and easy to define. Broadly speaking, people were 'categorised' as Upper, Middle and Working Class. Although today social class is not seen as the main determinant of voting behaviour, it is still evident in election results. An example of this was in the 2005 General Election when 73% of those in class A/B and class C1 voted for the Conservative Party whereas 88% of people in class C2 and D/E voted for the Labour Party. So, where people live and the types of housing can also influence voting.

Chart 5: Housing Tenure



Source: Strategic & Citywide Policy, based on OS Address Layer 2

Within the West of England areas tend to be characterised by the type of tenure that predominates. In Bristol, for example, social rented housing tends to be concentrated in the inner city areas and on the outlying housing estates such as Hartcliffe, Withywood, Knowle West, Southmead, Lockleaze, Lawrence Weston and Henbury. In 2001, the highest levels of local authority rented housing were in Lawrence Hill ward at 48.8% of all households. Over 30% of residents in this are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. Similar situation exists in South Gloucestershire (e.g, Kingswood) and Snow Hill in Bath. In Bristol however approximately 56% of young people live in what can be classed as social rented accommodation.

Chart 6: 16-24 Tenure in Bristol

	Young People aged 16 to 24		All People
Owned	22,126	44.09%	65.06%
Rented from council	6,526	13.00%	16.67%
Other social rented	1,110	2.21%	3.33%
Private rented or living rent free	20,422	40.69%	14.94%

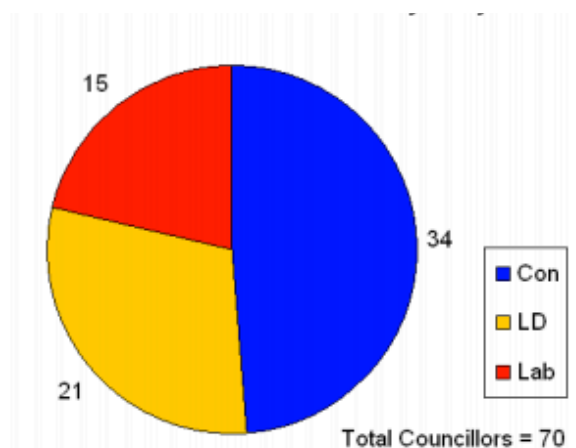
Source: *Census, 2001*

Whilst social class certainly still influenced voting behaviour, other issues such as the scandals of the Iraq War can plague General Elections, as was the case in 2005. Therefore, saying that social class alone determined voting behaviour is wrong because there are other factors such as age, gender and ethnicity playing significant roles.

South Gloucestershire

Adjoining Bristol, South Gloucestershire total resident population is 262,767, a 7% increase since 2001. The average population size for parishes in South Gloucestershire is 4,844 people, although the number of residents varies considerably between parishes; at 21,603 usual residents in Yate has the largest population and at 113 Little Sodbury has the smallest. 11% (n29,518) of South Gloucestershire population are aged 16-24 group. Within this group 'White British' was the largest sub-group (accounting for 91.9% of the total population). The 'White Other' sub-group (which includes people of eastern European origin) accounts for 2.5% of the total population. 5% (n13,193) of the population are from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups – more than twice the number recorded in 2001 (5,796 residents / 2.4% of the total population).

Chart 7: South Gloucestershire Councillors by party



The South Gloucestershire UA area includes 3 Parliamentary Constituencies. Filton & Bradley Stoke and Kingswood both have Conservative MPs. Thornbury & Yate has a Liberal Democrat MP. South Gloucestershire Council currently has no party with an overall majority of seats, although the Conservatives have the most councillors. Within greater Bristol (this includes South Gloucestershire), the highest turnout in the 2010 General Election was in the Kingswood constituency (South Gloucestershire), where Chris Skidmore (Conservative) was elected in place of Labour's Roger Berry. Turnout was 72.19%. The lowest turnout locally was in Bristol South at 61.56%. This is mainly a

working class area with many residents living in social housing. Very little information exists that shows how young people voted in 2010 general election locally.

FINDINGS

A wise man once said 'a democracy in which the public does not participate is in trouble'. Falling turnout at elections is a worry for all of us, because we know that voting is the most basic act of democratic participation; people who do not vote tend not to participate in other civic activities.

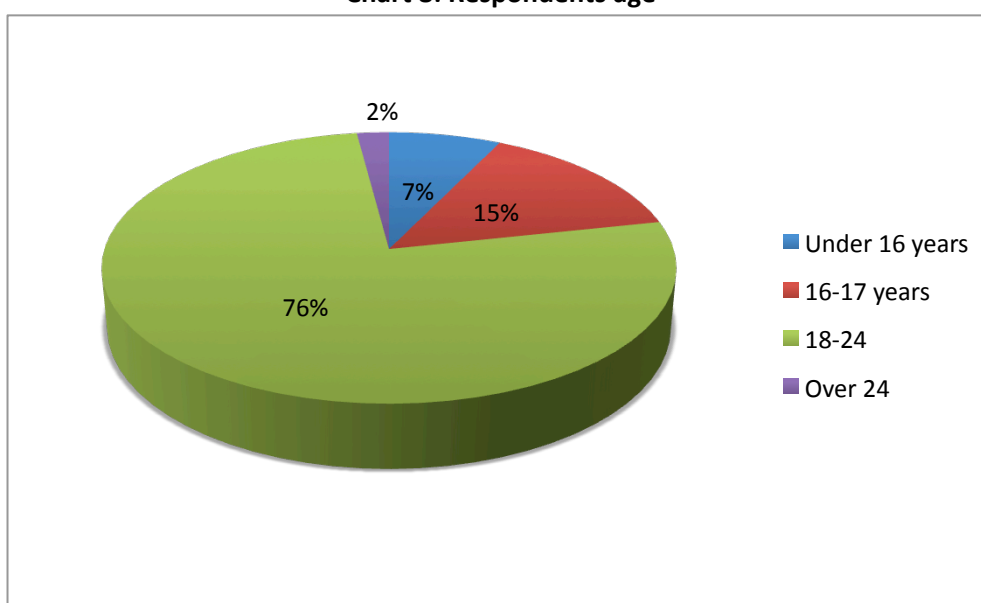
In 2001 voter turnout fell by a staggering 12 percent, leaving no doubt that the democratic process in the UK was indeed in trouble. Three out of four 18-24 year-olds did not cast a vote in 2001. Historically, voting is associated with higher levels of affluence and education; so, it is particularly disturbing to observe that, as the population as a whole has become progressively more affluent and educated in recent years, voting levels have declined. It would be simplistic and naive to imagine that new methods of voting could redress this drift, unless they were part of a much broader revitalisation of democratic life.

We set out to find out what young people think about politics and their aspiration for future involvement in the democratic process. The finding from this piece of research is set out below. Recommendations made in this report must be considered in the context of an agenda for making democracy more accessible and it is not very convenient; where they fail to do this, people will not vote, even if the easiest voting technologies are available to them. Voting is a political act, not merely a procedural one. That does not mean that voting methods need not be considered; as long as a single person who is motivated to participate in an election is prevented from doing so because the method on offer is inconvenient. There is a need to address the questions raised in this report about the method, means of expression and communication of voting involvement and young people's participation.

About respondents

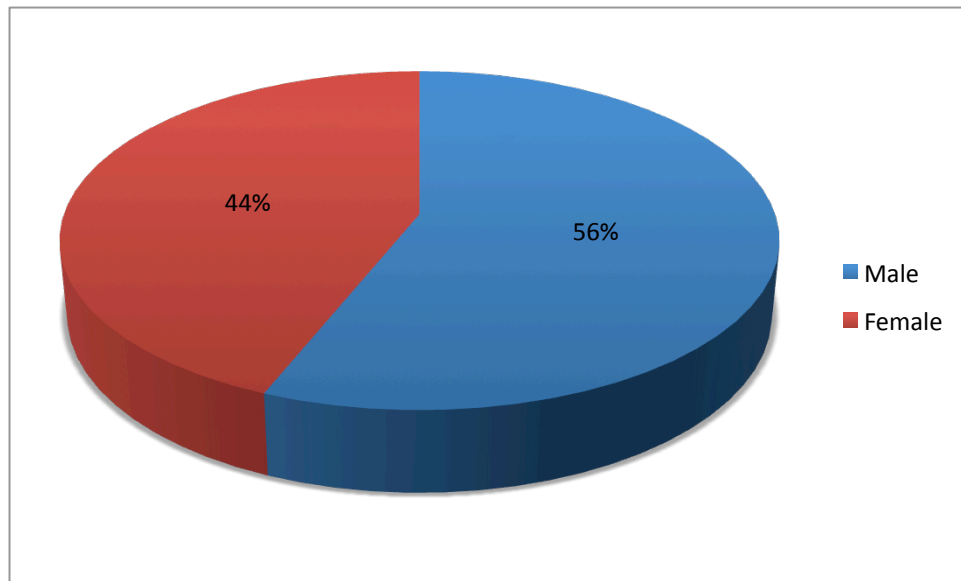
123 young people ages 14-25 participated in the survey. 76% of the sample was age 18-24, 15% were 16-17, 7% under 16 and 2% over 24 years old.

Chart 8: Respondents age



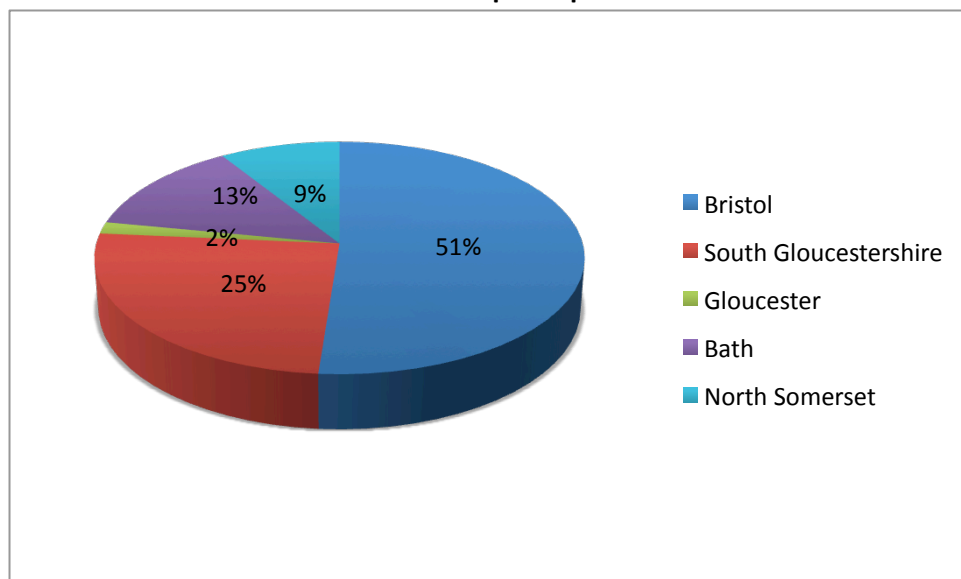
12% more males, than females participated.

Chart 9: Respondents gender



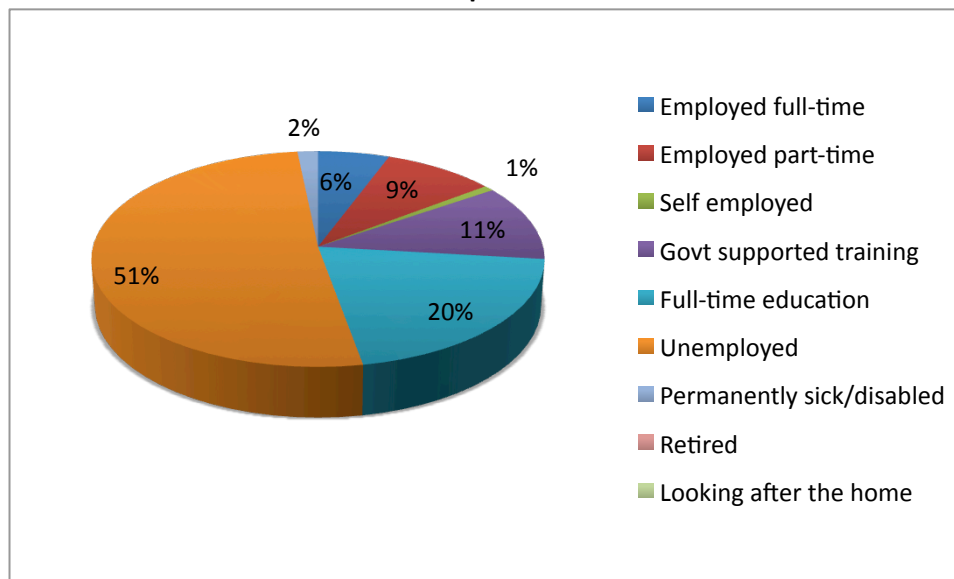
The majority lives in Bristol (51%), with 25% coming from South Gloucestershire and 13% and 9% from Bath and North Somerset, respectively.

Chart 10: Where participants live



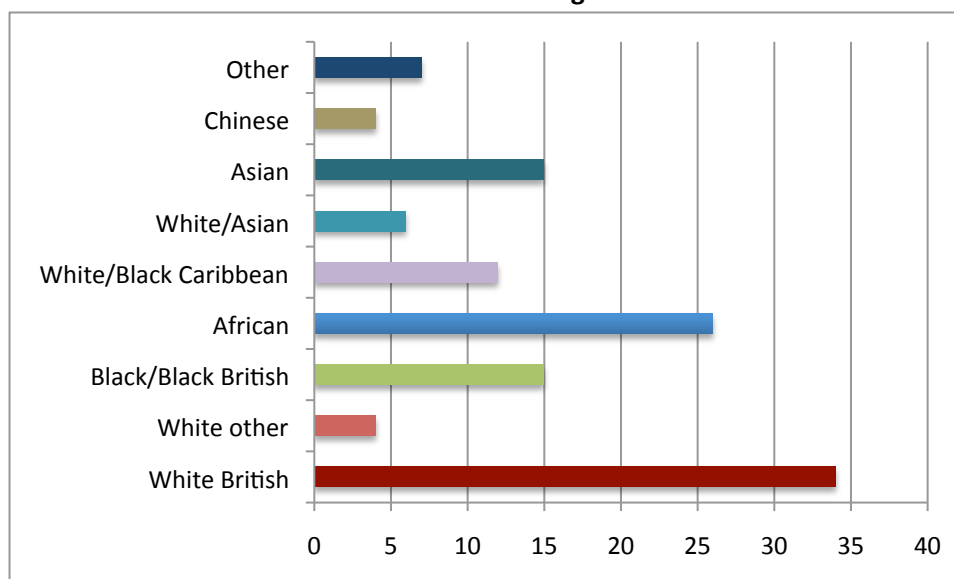
51% were unemployed, 20% in full-time education 6% employed full-time and 9% in part-time employment.

Chart 11: Respondents status



Participants were from eight different ethnic backgrounds with white British being the largest group, followed by African, Black British and Asian.

Chart 12: Ethnic background



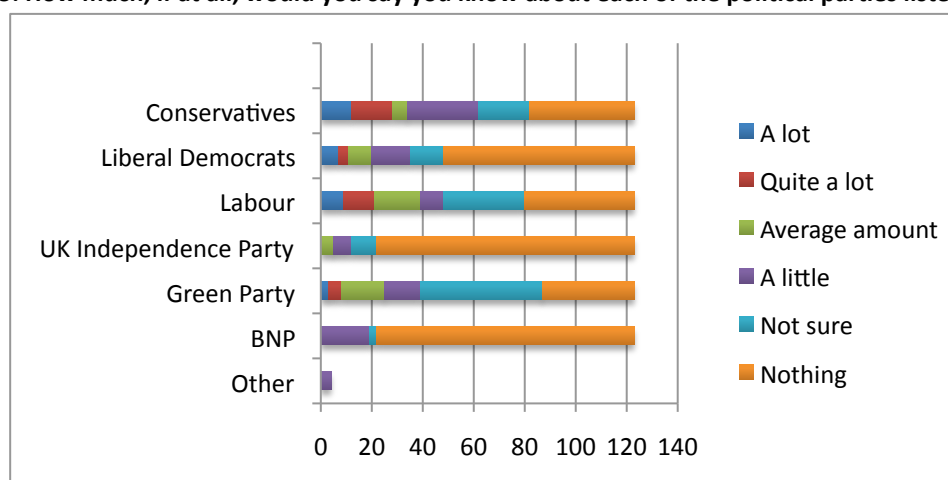
General views on politics and politicians

Many of the views expressed by the young people concerning politics in general are negative. There is an attitude that politicians do not listen to them or regard the issues they are concerned with as being important. This feeling of being ignored frustrates some of the young people who felt that they did have something to contribute to politics.

However, the overriding view among the vast majority of young people is that politics is boring and complicated. The fact that many young people viewed politics as too complicated meant that they

were not encouraged to become involved or to seek more information. When they were asked about political parties the large majority said they knew nothing.

Chart 13: How much, if at all, would you say you know about each of the political parties listed below?



Very few respondents knew ‘a lot’ about the political parties on the list but those who did indicate that they knew ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ did gave some excellent answer to the question. The extract below is taken from a 20-year old respondent who said she knew “quite a lot”. She had never voted before despite the fact that she turned 18 just before the last General Election. These are her words:

“Conservatives: They were the leaders in the last election and therefore are running the country as part of the coalition government as they did not command a large enough majority to rule outright. They are lead by David Cameron and the last time they were in power the leader was Margaret Thatcher, who died recently. They have enforced a great deal of cuts since coming into power. They are also responsible for the recent reform of the benefits system, proposed changes to the education system and the introduction of increased fees for students.

Liberal democrats: Came third in the last general election and their popularity was growing due to the great skills in leadership Nick Clegg showed in public speaking. However his popularity decreased slightly when they decided to form a coalition government with the conservative party and decreased even further when having said they would not allow an increase in university fees they allowed the rise in fees to go ahead. The liberal democrat appointed to my constituency is called Steven Williams.

Labour: They were last in power with Gordon Brown (who has actually never been elected prime minister but took over following the retirement of Tony Blair) and had been in power for quite a while before this. Tony Blair, the previous labour leader, is remembered well for his relationship with ex-president of the United States, George Bush (and the whole ordeal over weapons of mass destruction). This may have damaged the party as most voters protested against this and Asian and Black voters were very concerned that leaders of a progressive nation such as the United Kingdom could act in this way without first knowing, for sure, that Iraq was manufacturing such weapons. The current leader of the labour party is Ed Miliband. He beat his brother David Miliband for the leadership. David Miliband is currently working in the US but I know very little about labour policies under Ed Miliband. This maybe that he is not as charismatic as Tony Blair was.

The Green Party: Is an environmentally minded party who’s policies revolve around green issues such as recycling and climate change. They have never been in power but believe a Green government will have the guts to pursue responsible solutions to social, economic

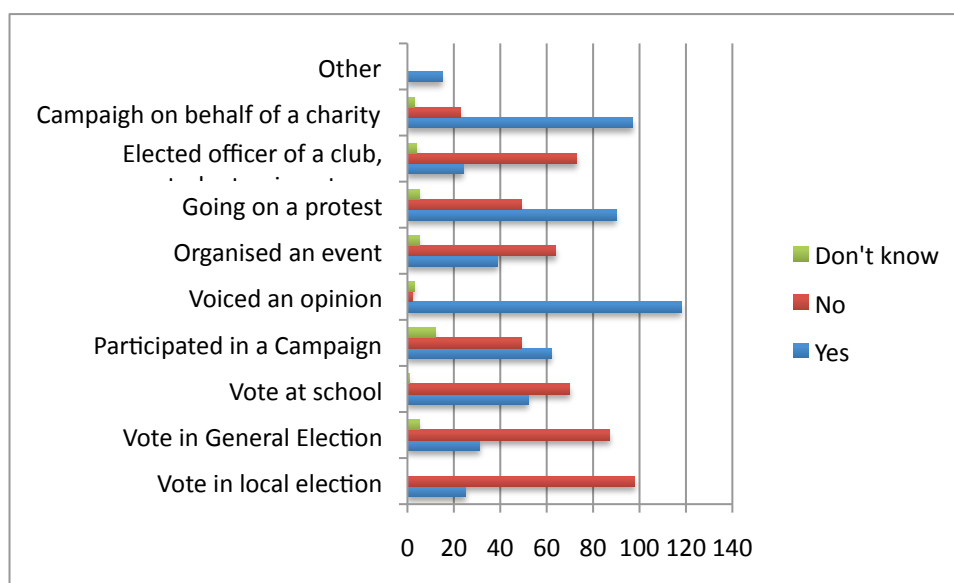
and environmental crises through commitment to fairness, citizen participation, shared responsibility, peace and environmental protection.

The BNP: Party leader is Nick Griffin. They believe that anyone who's family is not completely British, whatever that is, for three (or it might be more than that) generations should not inhabit the country. So basically they are RACISTS! They have 1 Indian member!"

Like this respondent many of the young people who participated in the survey are active in their communities and participate in many activities that can be viewed as political engagement nevertheless these activities are not viewed in anyway as political. The vast majority take part in some form of communal activity: from being elected officer of a club to campaigning on behalf of a charity. A large number of participants had also been on a protest. The high numbers appears to connect with recent student protests about the rise in tuition fees.

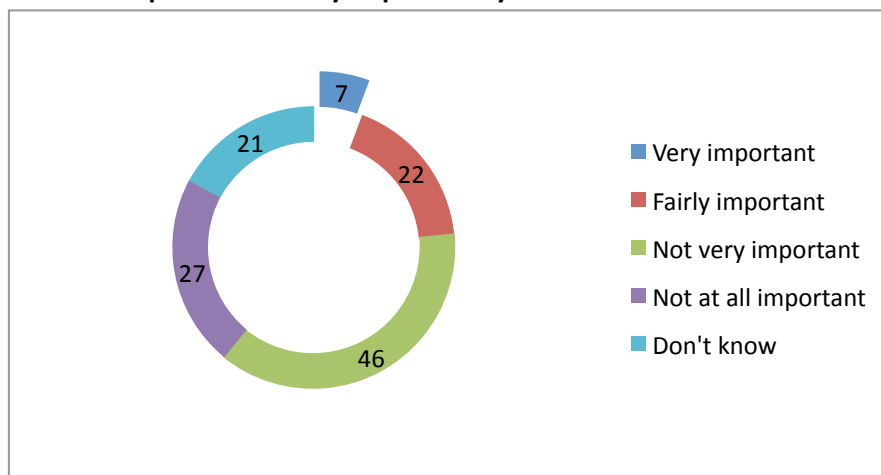
The activity which young people reported participating in most frequently is volunteering for and raising money for a charity, which well over half say they have done in the last 3 years. These types of political involvement, though, are essentially single-issue activities; very few young people – just 2% – say they have helped with a political party; their political concerns have not, in most cases, pointed them towards participation in the political system on a broader basis (see Chart 7 below).

Chart 14: Q. Which, if any, of these things have you done in the past 3-years?



Respondents were also asked about future engagement and the majority said they would like to voice their opinions more. However there was a perception that politics are all about arguments and debates with politicians being stubborn and considering themselves to be always right. Some of the young people did express a keen interest in politics and generally assumed that they are apathetic. But the second opinion is that 'Young people are not apathetic about issues and indeed can and sometimes do get irritated 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. We asked respondents to tell us how important it was to them who win the next General Election. A larger percentage believe voting holds little importance than participants that believe that voting is, to some degree, important. The option with the least votes is the view that voting is very important. Over 50% believe that voting is not important to some degree.

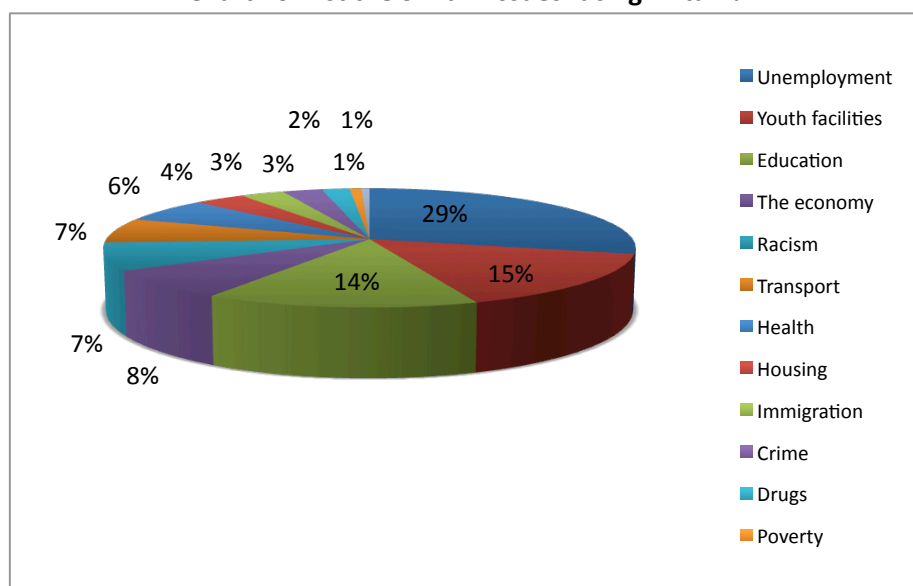
Chart: 15 How important is it to you personally who wins the next General Election?



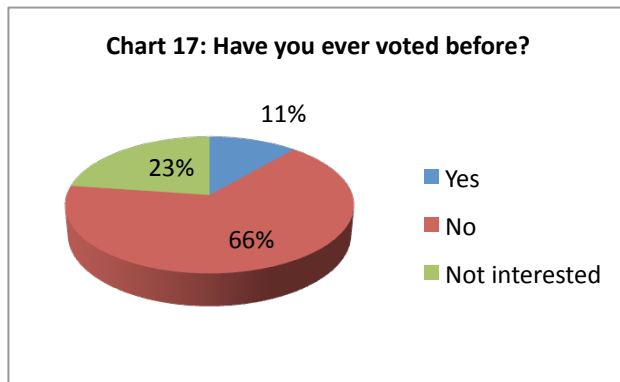
Some of the young people admitted that they didn't have a clue how to go about voting. As young citizens confront their first election, all of the costs of voting are magnified: some have never gone through the process of registration, may not know the location of their polling place, and may not have yet developed an understanding of party differences and key issues. Moreover, their peer group consists mainly of other non-voters: their friends cannot assure them that voting has been easy, enjoyable, or satisfying. Young people also lack many of the resources that can promote participation. They have little disposable income, they are not attractive targets for parties seeking campaign contributions or for interest groups mounting direct mail campaigns. Few of them own homes, or have stakes in community politics. Thus it is not surprising that turnout is relatively low.

We asked young participants to list the three biggest issues facing Britain. 29% said unemployment, followed by lack of youth facilities then education. These issues are not dissimilar from what most people would have listed.

Chart 16: List the 3 main issues facing Britain?



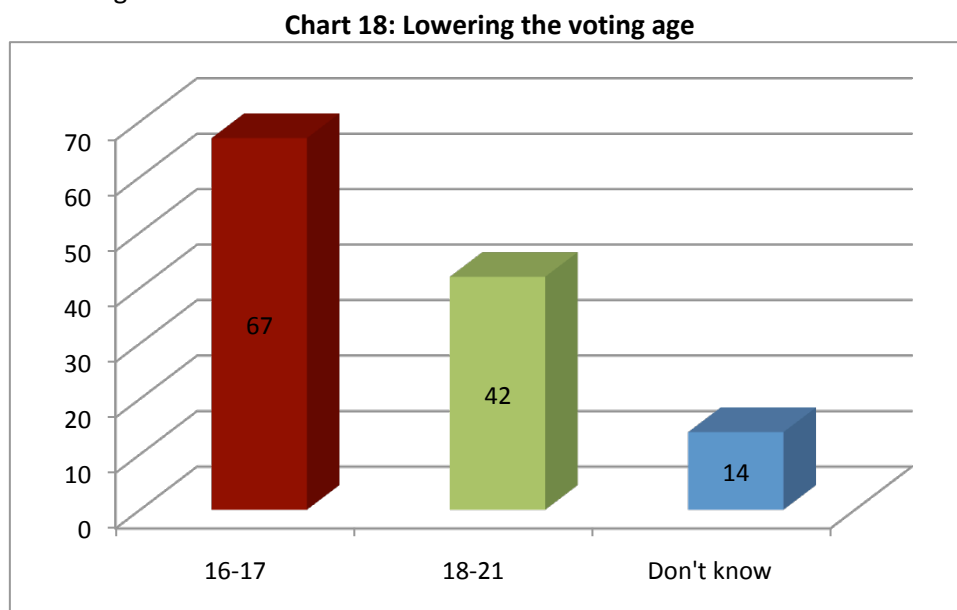
Given the majority views, have any of the participants actually voted before?



“ 66% of young people said they have never voted ”

In addition to the 66% (n81) who said they have never voted, 11% (n14) said yes they had and 23% (n28) were not interested. We also need to consider that 22% of participants who participated was under the voting age when making our assumptions. However, it is nevertheless clear that 2 out of 3 people asked did not vote, a large majority. The second largest result is ‘not interested’, a result that suggests that almost 90% of all people will not vote due to being uninterested or simply not wanting to.

As the majority of respondents said no to ever having voted or that they were not interested we wanted to get their opinion about lowering the voting age to 16 year olds. Surprisingly the majority thought this was a good idea.

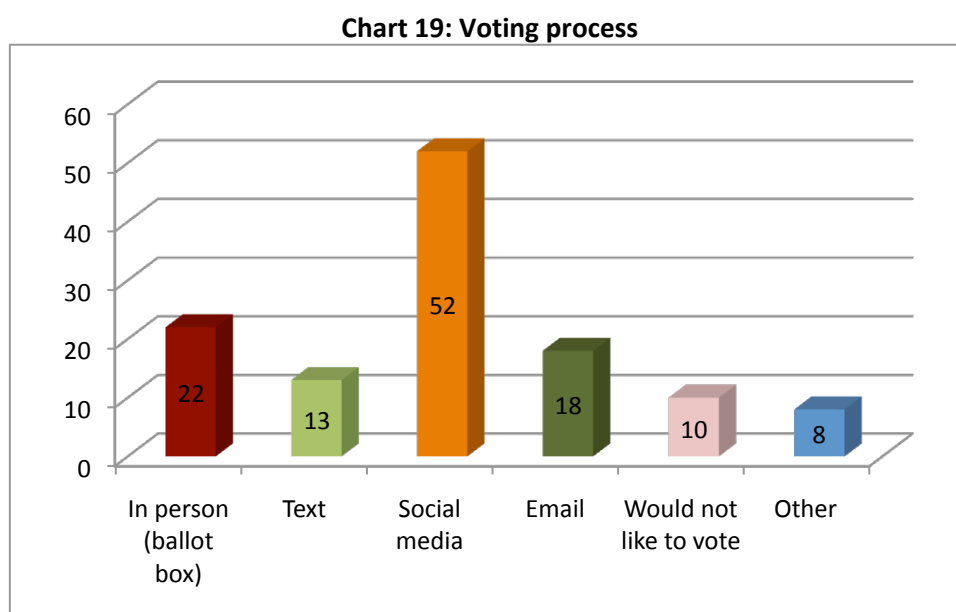


Votes at 16; students registered by and at their place of study; a polling booth in every school, college and university; preparation for voting being a key part of citizenship education – these simple reforms would address most of their concerns. If they were implemented, virtually all 16-18 year olds, and about half of all 18 to 22 year olds (i.e. those at university or full-time college), would be registered at their place of study and cast their first votes there. Voting en masse would reduce many of the psychological barriers for young people approaching their first vote. It would be a group activity for young people and an expectation within their educational institution. Citizenship education (introduced into English schools in 2002) would then lead naturally to voting; mock elections would lead to real elections, just as mock exams lead to real exams; and local candidates and parties would treat schools, and their voters, with a degree of attention and seriousness largely lacking at present.

Engaging young people in the electoral process

A number of programs and initiatives should be introduced in an attempt to enhance young people's participation in the electoral process. Parliament, Election Commission and NGOs should contribute these programs and initiatives. Every school should reorganize their debating societies to encourage politics in youngster. Parents should accompany their children when they cast their very first vote in polling station. This could be seen as a rite of passage, a moral duty of every parent to, at the very least, making the first journey with his or her children. Arranging newspapers and encourage watching political talk shows on television would also help. The introduction of citizenship education in secondary schools should be developed which may help encourage young people to become more involved in the democratic process.

The voting method is also important for young people.



The young people responding to this survey are involved in shaping a new wired and wireless world. They are driving a communication revolution. A large percentage of the sample said voting should be done via social media. This effectively is rewriting all the rules and we are invited to engage with them and they in turn engage in the democratic process via social media. Their world appears to evolve around social media from music sales to fashion, friendship and even politics.

Issues affecting engagement

Some of the young people said voting should be compulsory. There are at least nineteen countries which have some form of compulsory voting including 5 EU countries. One other country is Australia where all citizens, 18 years of age and over, are required by law to both enroll for voting and attend a polling place at election times in all federal, state and territory elections. If an enrolled citizen is unable to give a legitimate reason for not voting a fine or possible prison sentence can be imposed. The arguments for compulsory voting include:

- It is a civic duty;
- It encourages political participation; and
- It increases the legitimacy of those elected.

However, those against compulsory voting feel that it is undemocratic to force people to vote, it forces those with little interest or knowledge in politics to vote, and it increases the number of spoiled ballots.

A useful review of recent literature on the subject of voter engagement and young people can be found in a research report published by the Electoral Commission in July 2002³. In the report the authors identify a range of factors that have a key influence on young people's decisions about whether to vote. These include:

- Personal or convenience issues
- Levels of voter registration
- Apathy
- Alienation

On turnout amongst the young, the report states:

Young people are some of the people least likely to turn out and vote. In 2001 MORI estimates that only 39% of 18 – 24 year olds voted, compared to 70% of those aged 65. This research found that young people would vote if the conditions of their engagement are right.

Programmes and initiatives adopted in other countries

Trying to find further ways to encourage young people to participate in the electoral process is not unique to the United Kingdom. In the USA there is a strong view that young people are not participating in civic life in large numbers. Approximately 33% of 18-24 year olds turned out to vote in the USA Presidential election in 2000 similar to the turnout in the UK during the 2001 Westminster elections (39%). This was a record low turnout for an American election and part of a twenty-five year trend of decline. In a review of the various programmes and initiatives that individual States in the USA have developed to encourage youth participation in the electoral process, it emerged that several States:

- Send birthday cards to residents turning 18 encouraging them to vote;
- Provide voter registration cards at high schools and colleges;
- Visit schools to demonstrate electronic voting machines and hold registrations;
- Recruit young people as poll workers;
- Hold mock elections in colleges and youth centers; and
- Provide outreach materials and support to schools on the electoral process.

Evaluation and Recommendations

The young people also felt that holding workshop sessions with politicians should be considered. These sessions would give young people an opportunity to ask politicians a variety of questions and also to get to know them better. The young people also suggested that information on politics and voting should be placed in establishments that young people would frequent such as clubs, universities and schools. Again it was emphasised that this information should be presented in a 'youth friendly way'.

³ *Voter engagement and young people*, by Russell et al, Electoral Commission, July 2002

Recommendations

1. More education for young people on politics, elections and voting through various mediums such as schools and youth groups.
2. The Election Commission to engage in a programme for schools providing information workshops.