

Political interest and engagement among young people

During the 1990s media speculation and academic debate have been increasingly exercised about the alienation of young people from political life. However, there has been a lack of evidence of how young people visualise politics and the reasons why they appear to be uninterested. This qualitative study carried out by the National Centre for Social Research explored in detail the nature of young people's political interests and behaviour. It consulted a cross-section of young people, aged between 14 and 24, from a range of backgrounds and circumstances in Britain. It found:

- f** In spite of generally low levels of interest in politics, the issues that concerned the young people covered the broad political agenda.
- f** Their views and images of politics were often based on a lack of understanding of politics and little trust in politicians to represent their interests.
- f** Irrespective of levels of interest in politics, the young people had engaged in a range of different activities that were concerned with politics. Even those with little interest had sometimes voted or taken part in some other activity, like signing a petition or attending demonstrations.
- f** Young people, however, consistently referred to their feelings of powerlessness and the limited opportunities for them to engage in politics until the age of 18.
- f** Across the sample, young people proposed various initiatives for stimulating their interest. These proposals were aimed at making politics more interesting and accessible, ensuring politicians were more responsive to the needs of young people and facilitating young people's involvement in the political process. Some young people did not think anything could be done to arouse their interest.

Background

Evidence suggests that young people have low levels of political interest and knowledge, and poor opinions of politicians. This study investigated the reasons for this and further explored young people's political views and behaviour.

Political interest across the sample

The research identified five different groups of young people, each of whom varied in their level of interest in politics and the way in which they displayed this interest. The first two of the groups lacked any interest in politics; they were united in their dislike of politics and shared a general perception that politics is boring. However, the first group reported being indifferent to politics, and the second group was more cynical about politics and actively avoided anything to do with the subject.

The third group of young people was selectively interested and only engaged with politics when it related to an issue which was of concern to them – otherwise, they shared similar views about politics as the previous two groups.

The fourth group took a passive interest in general current affairs and issues which were personally relevant. They tended to be at an early stage in the development of their views about politics.

The final group of young people were highly interested and displayed a high commitment and active interest in politics. Of all the groups, these young people tended to have the most sophisticated understanding of politics, which had been shaped and informed by a variety of sources.

What switches young people off politics?

The findings confirm and contribute to existing evidence about the factors that disengage political interest.

Because the young people conceptualised politics in a limited and narrow way they perceived the subject as boring and irrelevant to their lives at present. Indeed the young people often reported that they were preoccupied with other interests and activities that dominated their lives, which resulted in their having little time to devote to politics.

The young people's lack of knowledge and

understanding about politics, and the difficulties they perceived in trying to grasp such a 'complex' and 'dull' subject, meant they did not actively seek information about political matters.

The young people lacked faith, or sufficient trust, in politicians to tell the truth or keep to promises. This had also alienated them from politics.

The young people identified a lack of opportunities for them to engage in the political process until the age of 18. This and their perception that politicians did not respond to their needs had also contributed to low levels of political interest.

Acquiring an interest in politics

The young people interviewed identified a number of ways in which their political interest had been activated. The realisation, as they grew older, that politics was of relevance to them had been stimulated by changing personal and financial circumstances, and this sometimes triggered an interest in politics. In addition, being exposed to discussions or information about politics had sometimes aroused an interest. Finally, the young people also identified the opportunity to get involved in politics, typically on reaching the age of electoral eligibility, as having activated their interest.

Images of politics and politicians

With the exception of young people with higher levels of interest, politics was generally viewed as dull and boring. The mere mention of the word was enough to make some 'switch off'. Others reported their boredom with party political squabbles, which, they indicated, were irrelevant and removed from the lives of young people.

In general, politicians were viewed by these young people in a negative light; they were seen to be remote, untrustworthy, self-interested and unrepresentative of young people. They were consistently described as white, male and middle-aged, and often portrayed as being affluent and upper class.

How are young people engaging politically?

Irrespective of their interest in politics, young people across the sample had engaged in a range of different activities which were concerned with politics. Even members of the low-interest groups had sometimes

voted or taken part in some other activity, like signing a petition or attending demonstrations. However, the researchers suggest that because of the young people's narrow conception of what constitutes 'politics', they were sometimes unlikely to perceive their actions as political.

The young people consistently referred to the ways in which they felt they were excluded from participation in the political process. Even where they acknowledged there were opportunities, they argued that the views of young people remain unheard and are treated as immature and childish.

Views about voting

Their views on voting did not necessarily hinge on levels of interest or on reported voting behaviour. Young people emphasised the importance of voting even when they had not voted and did not intend to vote in the future.

The role of family and class in driving voting decisions was most apparent amongst young people who were still living in the family home. Otherwise, voting decisions were driven by peer group influence, a particular policy, a desire for a change in government, and the sheer novelty of voting for the first time.

The lack of relevance or interest in politics was a key reason why the study participants had been apathetic about voting. In addition, lack of understanding about politics, registration issues and a lack of trust and faith in politicians were given as reasons for not voting.

Encouraging political interest

The suggestions young people made for encouraging political interest centred on the factors that were turning them away from politics. They were therefore concerned with four related areas:

- making politics more interesting;
- making politics easier to understand and more accessible;
- making politicians more responsive to the needs and concerns of young people;
- finding new opportunities and routes for young people to enter the political process.

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that the challenge to those who are keen to kindle political interest is to ensure that young people are aware of the relevance of politics within their lives. While they need to be shown that politics is more than party politics, they also need to be made aware that politicians share a number of their interests and concerns. However, in order to engage their attention, politics needs to be delivered in an accessible and enjoyable way that enables them to consider and appreciate the issues being discussed. Political parties will clearly have a role to play in achieving this.

The Government's plans to add 'citizenship' to the national curriculum should be applauded, as formal political education clearly has an important role to play. But it is essential that this will operate and coexist alongside the other ways in which young people can be empowered and informed – for example, at home, at school, or amongst the local community. In addition, politicians need to give more consideration to the concerns of young people, and forums that facilitate such dialogue are required. Ways of involving young people in the structures and processes of decision-making are also needed.

The impact which these initiatives will have, however, depends upon the degree to which, and manner in which, young people believe their interests and needs are being heard and responded to. In order to convince young people that their interests will be effectively represented they will want to see politicians from a wider cross-section of society. They will also want to see evidence that politicians are acting on their behalf.

A balance needs to be struck between empowering and engaging young people and pressurising them to participate and be interested in politics. Young people seem keen to ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for their involvement but they may feel increasingly burdened if there are too many requests for their participation; the electorate as a whole is increasingly being asked to vote in more elections. In participating in these elections they are also required to fathom their way through a range of new and complex proportional representation voting systems. Ironically, these moves towards greater participation may be in danger of resulting in what might be termed 'democratic overload'.

Finally, it should be recognised that young people are currently taking action in a range of political activities even if they do not see them as political. In addition, while they often do not assess themselves as being interested in politics, they are concerned about issues - such as education and qualifications, job availability and security, and discrimination - which are at the core of the Government's agenda. In the past, too much emphasis has focused on the apathy of the young. It is now time to focus attention on the role of politicians, educators and elders in engaging and representing the interests of young people.

About the study

A cross-section of young people, aged between 14 and 24, from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances in England, Wales and Scotland, were consulted. They were invited to consider politics in their terms, employing their reference points as well as conventional political benchmarks. A research team from the Qualitative Research Unit at the National Centre for Social Research carried out the study.

A total of 24 focus groups, 16 paired and 20 individual interviews were carried out with young people across four different age groups, 14-15, 16-17, 18-20 and 21-24 years.

A set of verbatim transcripts were produced from the tape recordings of the interviews and focus groups. Analysis was undertaken using 'Framework' a qualitative analytic method developed at the National Centre for Social Research.

How to get further information

The full report, **Young people's politics: Political interest and engagement amongst 14- to 24-year-olds** is published for the Foundation by YPS (price £13.95, ISBN 1 902633 64 4).