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To cite this article: Jon Tonge (2009) REVITALISING POLITICS: ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE, Representation, 45:3, 237-246, DOI: [10.1080/00344890903129418](https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890903129418)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890903129418>



Published online: 04 Sep 2009.



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# REVITALISING POLITICS: ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

**Jon Tonge**

*Prompted by sharply falling voting turnouts, there has been much talk in recent years of a crisis of political engagement amongst young people. The Labour Government in the UK was sufficiently concerned to establish a Youth Citizenship Commission in 2008, to explore how to better connect young people to politics and to lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered. In this article, the Chair of that Commission examines the extent of the crisis and explores some possible means of redress.*

Much of what is portrayed as politics in the UK might be seen as sterile or superficial, disconnected from many citizens. Media coverage often appears obsessed with the three Ps – personalities, polls and propriety – at the expense of serious intellectual or substantive consideration of debates and issues. Such superficiality is not confined to ‘analyses’ of UK politics; the same three Ps dominated, as one recent conspicuous example, coverage of the US primary and presidential elections 2007–08. Amid the froth, observers of the television reporting would have been hard-pressed to identify a single substantial policy difference between Clinton and Obama in the primaries, or between Obama and McCain in the main bout. Lightweight concentration upon which individual was winning displaced serious analysis of the likely implications of an outcome for the electorate. Guessing the result is fun, but engenders only transient interest and is not a substitute for real political debate. What then of real politics, beyond the race to be elected? The term ‘politics’ often has negative connotations in everyday life; the label ‘office politics’ is rarely deployed as a compliment regarding discussion and organisation in the workplace; local politics are seen as disconnected from immediate needs, while national politics and politicians are often scorned and derided as, variously, remote, meaningless, self-promoting, or even corrupt. This article examines the extent of discontent with politics and assesses whether remedies exist to help connect political life to that section of the population apparently the most disengaged; the young, defined here as 16- to 24-year-olds.

## **Crisis? What Crisis?**

Given that Bernard Crick’s *In Defence of Politics* first appeared in 1962, concerns over how to connect citizens to their polity are scarcely novel. Nonetheless, they have been given new urgency by the apparent disengagement of swaths of the electorate, particularly young people, from political activity. These worries have been reflected in the emergence of a body of concerned literature, attempting to understand why electors have switched off, examining whether causation is understood primarily as a problem of demand (the nature of electors) or supply (the lack of quality and inadequacy of politicians and institutions) (Stoker

2006a; Hay 2007; Hay and Stoker 2008; Hay *et al.* 2008). Critique tends to outweigh remedy, but some material has also offered prescriptions (Stoker 2006b).

In their individual and combined works, Hay and Stoker score useful hits. They highlight valid concerns regarding lower levels of participation and turnout. They offer cogent criticism of the hiving-off of decision-making to unelected commissions with a consequent lack of accountability. A first step in reconnecting public and politics would be to place decision-making powers primarily in the domain of those we elect, while our elected representatives ought to be fully cognisant of pressure group and public opinion. Stoker (2006b) and Hay (2007) also demonstrate how 'anti-politics', in which politicians are held almost universally in contempt by the public and criticise each other on issues of sleaze and propriety, has displaced genuine political debate. Moreover, the authors correctly associate this form of non-politics with the displacement of older forms based upon ideological contestation, strong political parties and greater belief in political capabilities.

Modern politics is marked by two trends: fragmentation, often based on single-issue campaigns in which political parties may be bypassed; and 'sleaze politics', in which individuals attempt advance via negative portrayals of rivals. The identification and analysis of these problems, involving a lack of confidence in politicians and disenchantment with institutional politics, needs to be accompanied by an appraisal of the broader societal trends from which politics can hardly expect to be immune. As such, talk of a crisis of politics, or political engagement, is overblown. This is not to deny disenchantment with 'conventional' institutional and electoral politics, particularly among young people.

Intelligent critiques of what is wrong avoid assuming an earlier 'golden age' of citizenship involvement in politics. As Hay (2007: 7) indicates, we 'would be wrong ... to attribute current political disaffection solely to the critique of *contemporary* political personnel, their conduct and their motivations ... we would be wrong to assume that the predominantly negative associations and connotations of politics today are unprecedented historically'. So why all the fuss? Electors hold politicians in contempt in a similar way that many football supporters dislike footballers. It may form part of a broader dislike of the rich, famous or successful, which is irrational, unpleasant and disreputable, but politicians are not alone in receiving such mistreatment; they are victims of a wider malaise. The analogy can be extended in terms of the expectations gap. Electors expect quick fixes and early results from politicians in a similar manner to the demands placed on football managers and players by supporters. However, this comparison does not quite work when extended to young electors; they begin with low expectations of politicians, unaltered by events. What needs to be established is why expectations are so low and what can be done to connect young people to politics.

Political participation is related to low political knowledge and economic location and has diminished on some indicators, such as party membership (Pattie *et al.* 2004). Indeed membership of the Conservative and Labour parties has never been lower; voting in local elections is a minority taste and the majority of young (18- to 24-year-old) people did not vote in general elections in 1997, 2001 and 2005. So far, so bad, but why should political activity be expected to be markedly different from other types of behaviour? What may be true is that more people abstain from collective activity *per se*, a reduction evident for decades and evident in other spheres, ranging from preferences for private consumption to the decline of religious worship (e.g. Putnam 1990, 1995). The idea that political action can somehow buck other societal trends appears optimistic.

Many individuals recognise that it may be the achievements of architects, technicians, engineers and other individuals who will make far more material difference to their lives than

politicians, or even politics academics. Cognisance of this triumph of technocracy over polity is not to be anti-politics, and important debates will continue around who governs and why, relationships between electors and elected and resource allocations; but it acknowledges realistically the limits of what democratic politics can shape and control, amid overblown political rhetoric from politicians concerning what they can achieve.

Mass participatory politics during the era of an ideological, party-driven model of politics was not a cherished era. Within many Western democracies (particularly, arguably, the UK) it reflected an often destructive capital versus labour contest, which, while episodically capable of mobilising the masses in political activity, did not create a 'healthy democracy'. The decline of parties may partially reflect a 'de-tribalisation' of politics, as a more sophisticated electorate recognises that the sophistry of politics demands more than two major parties pretending to represent the vast majority of an individual's ideological or political preferences.

Indeed, the polity of the committed electorate has rarely produced an ideal-type, too often based upon sterile class or ethnic contestation. In a UK context, the most politically active society is also the most conflictual, until recently the site of the worst ethnic conflict in Western Europe in many decades. In Northern Ireland, many people place a great deal of trust in recent or current political leaders, such as Gerry Adams or Ian Paisley, but this deep admiration is almost entirely conditional upon which side of an ethno-political divide an elector is located. Levels of political mobilisation and election turnout have often been considerably above those found elsewhere in the UK, yet the polity is often perceived as dysfunctional. Here strong political activity is seen as a problem. There has thus been an attempt, via the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, to *depoliticise* questions of territoriality and colonialism by shifting them into less tangible issues of culture and identity. Politics may indeed '*get the levels of political participation they deserve*' (Hay 2007:155, italics in original), but is vigorous political rivalry a welcome feature or, would politics such as Northern Ireland benefit from *less* political action? There is no essentialist definition of what constitutes a 'healthy' polity with a 'good' or appropriate level of political engagement, nor can the relationships between governors and governed be readily quantified as 'sound', 'adequate' or 'unsatisfactory'. Using criteria commonly deployed in 'audits' of political engagement, Northern Ireland would score well. Should it?

A major quantitative indicator of disengagement, reduced electoral turnout, which (rightly) has caused concern, is described by Hay *et al.* (2008: 2) as a 'surface expression of political engagement and political disengagement' and the authors are mildly optimistic that it will increase in the event of a close election contest. The recent audits of political engagement conducted by the Hansard Society (2008) reveal significant levels of political inactivity, but no great trends in the direction of inertia or action. Record numbers of students study politics in sixth forms and at university and the case that disengagement in politics has increased is, at best, not proven. O'Toole *et al.* (2003) caution against an overly reductionist definition of politics, which quantifies participation in orthodox terms, overlooking more informal modes.

Moreover, there *have* been worthwhile attempts at addressing the disjuncture between citizens and political structures according to citizen preferences. Hay *et al.* (2008: 4) are harshly sceptical of one of the key aspects of this redress, criticising the delivery of 'only a rather haphazard and idiosyncratic system' of devolution. The criticism is excessive, given that what has been created is a nuanced, asymmetric reflection of the variable strengths of nationalist sentiment and support for devolved institutions across three very different

nations. A 'one-size-fits-all' model of devolution would reflect neither democratic preferences, nor the variable strengths of nationalism. Hay *et al.* (2008: 12) ask why 'if five million people in Scotland are encouraged to do their own thing to the extent of making their own legislation why can't the five million citizens of the West Midlands enjoy similar freedoms?' when the reason is apparent: there is consensus for devolution in Scotland, but little enthusiasm for such in English regions, as demonstrated in the overwhelming rejection of a north-east assembly. Good democratic politics can also legitimise the status quo where this is desired in a democracy, rather than produce endless new innovations or institutions. Surely the aspects of politics that generate the greatest contempt are those in which citizens' views are dismissed or misled (as perhaps in the presentation of the case for the war in Iraq) or when local powers are removed (the diminution of the powers of local government might offer an example)?

### **Citizenship, Young People and Generating Interest in Politics**

The term 'politics' elicits negative reactions from young people in particular, who tend to associate the term with national government and leading politicians.<sup>1</sup> Although the need for the invigoration of politics is one without demographic boundaries, the problem is often seen as being particularly acute among young people. If cavalier in its overlooking of the need for young people to consider electoral participation as a civic duty, the Power Inquiry (2006) was correct in its contention that young people are not apathetic towards politics *per se*. However, this grouping seems less persuaded of the utility of some conventional forms of political activity.

As a means of redress, the government established the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) in 2008,<sup>2</sup> a body first mooted in the Green Paper *The Governance of Britain* (HM Government 2007). Reporting in 2009, the YCC's terms of reference were:

- (1) To examine what citizenship means to young people.
- (2) To consider how to increase young people's participation in politics; the development of citizenship among disadvantaged groups; how active citizenship can be promoted through volunteering and community engagement; and how the political system can reflect the communication preferences of young people.
- (3) To lead a consultation on whether the voting age should be lowered to 16.

These terms of reference fused the ideological with the practical. They recognised that good citizenship was detached from political participation among young people and sought to make the link between the good civic participant and the active political contributor, a laudable aim.

The task set for the commission implicitly acknowledged the division between community action and political engagement. Efforts to define all voluntary action as political fail to bridge the gap between the good civic activist and the political activist. Instead, the YCC wished to encourage young people to engage in civic and political work and recognise links between the two. Volunteering to assist one's community might be construed as a purely civic action, but may be extended to campaigning on behalf of that community, at which point the civic-political boundary becomes blurred. Encouraging a broader definition of the political was accompanied by a much more clearly defined task: whether the voting age should be lowered in order to stimulate young people's interest in politics. This specific measure might appear as a 'bolt-on' to a more conceptually oriented remit, but a commis-

sion charged with the task of increasing young people's interest in politics could hardly ignore the growing debate over when one of the most visible manifestations of that interest – a vote – should be permitted.

Disentangling the YCC's role from the plethora of other commissions and reports was difficult. Furthermore, in seeking to help young people make connections between citizenship and politics, the YCC feared that the votes-at-16 issue would dominate at the expense of deeper concerns. The YCC's demographic remit and concentration upon citizenship distinguish it from the Power Inquiry, although Power did support a reduction in the voting age. The Russell Commission (2005) advocated a national framework for youth action and engagement, primarily volunteering. While organisational coherence is welcome, getting young people to volunteer is not a major problem; two-thirds already claim to do so each month (Institute for Citizenship, 2008: 2). The *Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review* examined whether British social, political and cultural history should be pillars of the citizenship curriculum (DfES 2006). The Yvote/Ynot? project examined how to tackle voter disengagement among the young (DfES 2002) and the Electoral Commission (2004) previously rejected lowering the voting age, albeit with a recommendation for the idea to be reviewed. Perhaps surprisingly, a report for the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA 2007) made few connections between good citizenship and political participation. The YCC did not follow the Goldsmith Commission's (2008) approach of linking citizenship to British identity, a logical sidestepping given the different constructions of this according to region. In Northern Ireland, the equal legitimacy of an Irish identity is explicitly recognised in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, while in Scotland, Britishness is a secondary identity to Scottishness.

### **Can Better Citizenship Education Assist Re-engagement?**

Worryingly, many young people still tend to perceive good citizenship as primarily a negative duty to not break the law; some see citizenship more positively in terms of volunteering and 'doing good', but few see good citizenship in terms of engagement with politics, even at the basic of level of voting. Citizenship education, if properly taught and delivered, may assist political engagement. A statutory part of the secondary school curriculum since 2002, citizenship education has been successful in terms of take-up, with 75,000 schoolchildren undertaking a GCSE in the module in 2007. Citizenship is thus the fastest-growing GCSE, and an A level in the subject was introduced in 2008, with the Goldsmith Commission (2008) advocating the extension of citizenship classes to primary schools. While citizenship education has the potential to demystify political institutions, greater awareness of the flaws of those institutions may accentuate youth disengagement. Moreover, delivery of citizenship classes varies hugely in terms of commitment and quality, with 'perhaps fifteen or twenty per cent [of deliverers] ... doing little, perhaps hoping that Citizenship is a passing initiative that will go the way of others' (Breslin *et al.* 2006: 3). Perturbingly, a recent study suggests that 'dedicated citizenship lessons appear to undermine future electoral participation' (Whiteley 2008: 26).

The compulsory status of citizenship education in secondary schools contrasts with the low-key teaching of politics in schools and colleges – voluntary, taught only from age 16 upwards and entirely absent as a subject in many institutions. Given its growing importance in the curriculum, citizenship education has 'a key role in terms of giving young people a sense of what they share in common and developing their interest in civic participation' (Goldsmith Commission 2008: 89). Yet there are two contrasting interpretations of its utility.

Citizenship education might merely be regarded in instrumental terms by students and educators as a route towards another qualification, in which the main drivers are high take-up and pass rates. This classroom-confined model offers little prospect of a sustained positive contribution in terms of encouraging young people to develop engagement in local or national politics. A more positive interpretation is that citizenship education will improve to become 'citizenship-rich', fostering an active culture of civic and political participation, one in which the rights, duties and benefits of political engagement are inculcated from an early age. Citizenship education needs to promote interaction with the political sphere, which presently lies some distance beyond the community, peer group and family tiers in terms of engagement. This may facilitate transfer from self-referential identity communities of young people, defined (sometimes online) by shared interests and distinctive modes of consumption, to a broader community of active citizens working with adults on local projects and engaged in neighbourhood political action. Such movement will also require a better cross-generational understanding of young people from adults, who may tend to fear, demonise or merely fail to understand youth cultures.

Part of the difficulty in fully embedding citizenship within schools is the lack of understanding of the term. Among young people and adults, the word 'citizenship' is a largely abstract notion, with the only tangible associations being with British identity and the institutions, such as the monarchy, with which Britishness is associated. This narrow conceptualisation tends to bypass political engagement and community involvement. Citizenship is thus defined in static terms: who we are, rather than what we do. Moreover, there is the potential for recurring tension between the celebration of collective identity and the multicultural, regional or local celebration of difference. The inculcation of a more proactive, effective citizenship, incorporating extra-curricular community action and the encouragement of political debate and activity, may rectify this problem, but there remains considerable uncertainty over how citizenship classes should be delivered. Thus far, when they have strayed beyond British history and identity, schools have tentatively promoted the idea of citizenship as the constructive individual, accepting responsibilities and duties (the civic and 'moral' dimensions) but have tended to shy away from overly encouraging political engagement. Only when political activity is promoted as a central aspect of citizenship can the distinction between 'us' (the non-political citizenry) and 'them' (politicians) be shaped in favour of a more organic relationship.

### **Would Lowering the Voting Age Assist?**

Few would regard lowering the voting age to 16 as a panacea for political engagement among young people. Adopted in isolation without wider connections between young people and politics, the measure would have a marginal, symbolic effect. Giving more young people the vote would not eliminate the cynicism towards politicians evident among schoolchildren, with levels of trust substantially below those found towards other groups such as family, police, teachers and people of the same age (Kerr 2008). Furthermore, many young people appear unaware of who their elected representatives are, or how to contact them (Youth Citizenship Commission 2008).

The evidence suggests that 16- and 17-year-olds are isolated in their desire to reduce the voting age ([www.ycc.uk.net/votes/ycc.pdf](http://www.ycc.uk.net/votes/ycc.pdf)). The Electoral Commission (2004) found a majority of 18- to 24-year-olds against lowering, the proportion of opponents increasing among older electors. A sizeable number of youth organisations have nonethe-



less articulated the case for lowering the voting age. Support for a reduction is also offered by the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. In 2007, the Welsh Assembly voted in favour of votes at 16 and change is supported by Plaid Cymru and by the Scottish National Party. Ten countries currently have a lower voting age for national elections, with a further three reducing the age for municipal contests (Youth Citizenship Commission 2008).

The arguments put forward by supporters for change can be summarised thus. Firstly, votes at 16 would add participation in a meaningful electoral process to the current citizenship tuition on offer. Presently, school-age students are encouraged to be good citizens, but barred from a key expression of citizenship. Secondly, reducing the voting age will counter-balance the demographic of an ageing society. Thirdly, 'maturity' is a slippery concept, exemplified by the range of ages at which activities become permissible and many 16-year-olds are ready to vote. Under variable electoral cycles, some 18-year-olds may be obliged to wait until they are aged 22 before being able to vote. Finally, extensions of the franchise, such as votes for women, have been – and should be – based upon whether they are the correct thing to do, rather than be based upon speculative debates around turnout.

When the UK last reduced the voting age, to 18 in 1969 (the first country to do so) it was amid greater political consensus on the desirability of change (Fielding 2003). However, any party proposals for a reduction in the age are likely to be opposed by the Conservative Party. Many of the young people involved in focus groups for the YCC opposed the extension of the voting age to their age group, citing lack of knowledge. There is no evidence that percentage turnout would increase as a consequence of lowering the voting age and the risk of increasing percentage electoral abstention is apparent. The Isle of Man and Jersey have reduced the voting age to 16, but only a minority of 16- and 17-year-olds bothered to register, let alone vote, in the election to Tynwald, the Isle of Man's parliament. Across the UK, Park *et al.* (2004: 20) found that almost one in five teenagers viewed voting as a 'waste of time'. While a positive interpretation might be that 80 per cent of this category might be persuaded to exercise a right to vote, the risk of pervasive abstention is apparent. Moreover, allowing young people to vote at 16 without concurrently addressing the supply-side problems of unrepresentative institutions, inadequate communication and negative perception of politicians may add to disenchantment among young people.

A drastic proposal in terms of enforcing political engagement would be to make voting compulsory, a measure that would need to be universal rather than confined to a specific age group. The arguments for compulsion are grounded ideologically in terms of civic duty and instrumentally in respect of habit-forming. However, these arguments are outweighed by the superficial nature of engagement yielded and the unsatisfactory basis of participation engendered. It is difficult to demur from the view that 'creating a legal duty to vote would either attract very significant resistance, because people do not believe that they really owe such a duty; or it would lead to people merely complying with the law in order to avoid a penalty' (Goldsmith Commission 2008: 107). Reform of the voting system, a relic of a bygone era of two-party dominance, for UK general elections and local elections in England and Wales might also improve democracy in terms of institutional representativeness, but turnout may be unaffected.

### **Improving Engagement**

Beyond improved citizenship education, what else might be of value in engendering a more positive conception of the political among the young? Given the apparent



disenchantment with aspects of national politics, it is sensible to encourage engagement at local level, where the distinction between formal (representative institutions) and informal (local pressure group and community action on issues such as crime and drugs) political activity is less apparent. Within local government, there is scope for meaningful dialogue and partnership between politicians and young people, which could reduce barriers and give young people a voice. Indeed some local authorities have incorporated young representatives into decision-making by providing budgets for youth projects, funding for youth workers and outreach to marginalised groups. Under this model, priorities are shaped by young people and effective liaison mechanisms with, for example, regional members of the UK Youth Parliament are evident. Local councils can foster political leadership skills and activism in this manner (the Lewisham young major project provides one successful model), but without statutory implementation of youth engagement programmes and backing via financial resources and decision-making structures within local authorities coverage is liable to remain patchy. Local government needs to improve its profile and raise awareness of how young people can influence its decision-making.

A model of sustained involvement is preferable to the minimalist 'one-off' engagement of ad hoc protest (against the closure of a local facility, for example) which provides transient political activity of the kind measurable in audits of engagement, but does not yield a sustained or deep level of political work and may increase the extent of marginalisation already claimed by over 80 per cent of young people (Henn *et al.* 2005). There is also a duty upon elected representatives (and politics academics) to 'sell' the idea of political engagement and activity via visible communication and dialogue, including school and college visits, to young people.

## Conclusion

In prescribing treatment for the apparent malaise of political disengagement, it is important that we do not treat the patients with too many remedies or force 'treatment' upon the non-afflicted in a fruitless search for a utopian ideal of an 'active polity' blessed with a politically committed electorate. Citizen engagement in politics is not in acute crisis, its current level being comparable with that of previous generations, although regrettably political parties, as conduits of engagement, may be in irreversible decline. There is also a need to avoid using audits of political engagement as crude tools to pronounce on the health or otherwise of a polity. The results of such audits are often indicative, but need to be used with caution.

What is rightly of concern, however, is the apparent disengagement, even from the basic act of voting, of many young people, who may become serial abstainers from the electoral process. Life-cycle effects may elicit greater conventional political activity in future, as young people hold a greater stake in society when they age, but the beneficial electoral participation effect is assumed, not proven, given that we have not seen such a high level of youth electoral abstention in previous generations. Lack of interest in politics among the young cannot easily be explained by fashionable ideas of an 'expectations gap'; their expectations are often grounded at base from the outset. Non-voting among the young is a serious manifestation of the lack of regard for conventional politics and politicians. It symbolises political disengagement and its absence may not be compensated by other forms of political activity.

The solution to disengagement lies not in creating new sets of institutions and more, ever less meaningful, elections, (although locally elected youth bodies with real powers

would assist) but in bolstering existing representative political institutions, particularly at the local level, by giving them more powers, creating greater accountability, easing access and offering transparent scrutiny. These prescriptions are partial remedies and disengagement from politics will continue to be related to the alienation accruing to social and economic factors in addition to age. The economically disadvantaged youth will continue to be the most resistant sector in terms of political participation. More generally, it is disturbing that, despite the onset of citizenship education within schools, only a minority of young people connect citizenship to political engagement. By encouraging a variety of modes of meaningful political activity, via conventional and less conventional mechanisms, a proper connection is possible.

## NOTES

1. This section is based upon qualitative evidence given by several hundred young people across the UK to the Youth Citizenship Commission in 2008. The evidence is summarised in Anderton and Abbott (2009).
2. I was appointed as chair of the commission. Twelve other commissioners, drawn from a variety of sectors, were also appointed.

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