

Book Review: Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies

by blog admin

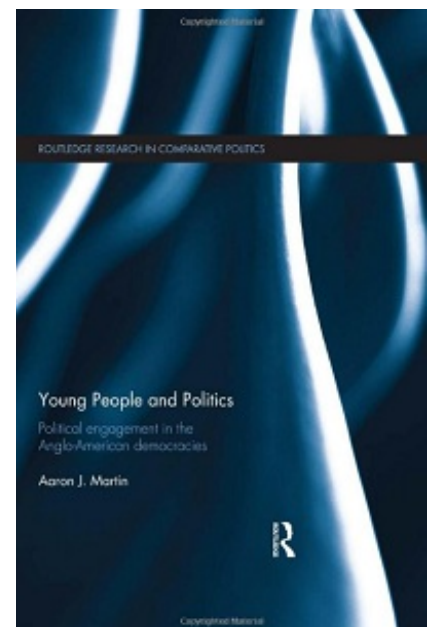
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*This book provides a comprehensive account of young people's political engagement in the US, Britain, Canada and Australia, challenging conventional wisdom on a number of fronts by showing young people's political engagement to be much more complicated than many of the stereotypes suggest. **Jacqueline Briggs** thinks the book will spur further research into the area of youth political participation, quite rightly labelling young voters as 'volatile' rather than 'non-voters'.*



Young People and Politics: Political Engagement in the Anglo-American Democracies. Aaron J. Martin. Routledge. May 2012.

Youth political engagement is of increasing interest to political scientists, politicians and policy makers. There is a [burgeoning literature in the field](#) and Aaron J. Martin's timely book constitutes a welcome addition to that important debate. Focusing upon the US, Britain, Canada and Australia, Martin's work examines the extent to which young people are engaging with the political process in the Anglo-American democracies. Written in a lucid and accessible style, the work is ostensibly divided into four key sections, examining; voter turnout, political attitudes (levels of trust and interest), participation beyond voting and what can be done/suggestions for the future.



There is a perception that young people don't vote and that they have relatively low levels of political interest and involvement. In the United Kingdom, for example, at the 2010 General Election, only 44 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds actually turned out to vote. Yet, this figure was up by seven per cent on the previous general election. Taking this perception as his starting point, Martin questions the extent to which a lack of political interest and involvement is true. Essentially, the book flags up the changing nature of youth political participation and how, in terms of behaviour and attitudes, young people have become more 'volatile and unpredictable'.

Given recent changes, such as the lowering of the vote to 16 and 17 year olds in some states and, issues, such as the high levels of youth unemployment, politicians and political scientists alike neglect the youth vote and their participatory potential at their peril. As the scope suggests, Martin's book constitutes a far-reaching and impressive contribution to the debate about youth political engagement. Martin highlights a number of key concepts in relation to young people and politics. For example, he provides us with a clear distinction between generational and life-style effects. Lifestyle effects centring on the idea that '...young people eventually come to be more politically engaged as they age, [being] linked to the responsibilities of adulthood' (p.3). The idea being, as people age, they change their political attitudes and behaviour. Conversely, the generational effect means that '... experiences during adolescence and early adulthood make a lasting imprint on young people's attitudes and behaviour' (*Ibid*). If we adhere to the generational effects thesis then we will see the electorate changing significantly over time. If young people are disengaged and not voting, this will stay with them as they age.

All the chapters provide a fascinating insight into the topic of young people and politics but, of particular

interest, is the detailed discussion of the political engagement facilitated via the internet. This new channel for political participation and political communication is discussed in an analytical and thought-provoking manner. The topic is given added relevance when one considers the way young people adopt new technology and are often at the forefront of its usage. New technology has the potential to facilitate the political socialisation process. The speed and ease of access mean that political messages can spread around the globe in a nanosecond. Witness, the 2011 Arab Spring and the way in which young people were at the forefront of that wave of protest and political action. An interesting aspect of internet usage, however, is the participatory inequality, not just in terms of who can access the internet but also in relation to what usage they make of it. This is to say that those young people more likely to participate in politics *per se* are precisely the young people who will participate via the internet. As Martin states, '... the more educated and politically interested (i.e. precisely those who would participate in politics regardless of the internet) are the group most likely to be politically engaged on the internet' (p.113). 'Twas, ever thus!

Martin's work is also interesting not just in terms of its analysis of various forms of political participation, such as via the internet but also because he argues that, rather than seeing young people as non-voters it is better to view them as '...volatile voters' (p.21). This enables the participatory potential of young people to remain at the forefront of any debate. Clearly, there are examples of extremely low levels of young voter turnout, such as the 2000 US Election and the 2005 UK General Election, but to say that young people are habitual non-voters is to neglect their potential power and influence. It appears to be the case that young people have lower levels of civic duty than their older counterparts but that does not mean that their non-voting is a foregone conclusion. As Martin says, 'Voting, it seems, is attractive to young people at times and at others it is not' (p.35).

Young People in Politics will no doubt spur further research into the area of youth political participation, providing us with a clear framework for analysis. It is well written and avoids dry, academic prose. The book is both innovative and informative and should be of interest to, amongst others, students and scholars of politics, public policy making and sociology.

Dr Jacqueline Briggs is Acting Head of the School of Social Sciences, the University of Lincoln and Principal Lecturer in Politics. She is also Programme Leader for Lincoln's MA Globalising Justice. She has a forthcoming book titled *Young People and Political Participation*, Palgrave Macmillan. [Read more reviews by Jacqueline.](#)

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