

First-time compulsory voting is designed to get politicians to engage with young voters' concerns

By Democratic Audit

This week on *Democratic Audit*, Matt Henn and Nick Foard argued that introducing compulsory voting would *risk increasing the resentment of young people* toward politics. In this post we feature a response from **Glenn Gottfried** and **Sarah Birch**, who have proposed compulsory voting for first-time voters. They argue this could be an effective tool to help people form the voting habit and to get politicians to listen to the concerns of young people.



Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg engaging with young people. Credit: [Liberal Democrats](#), CC BY-ND 2.0

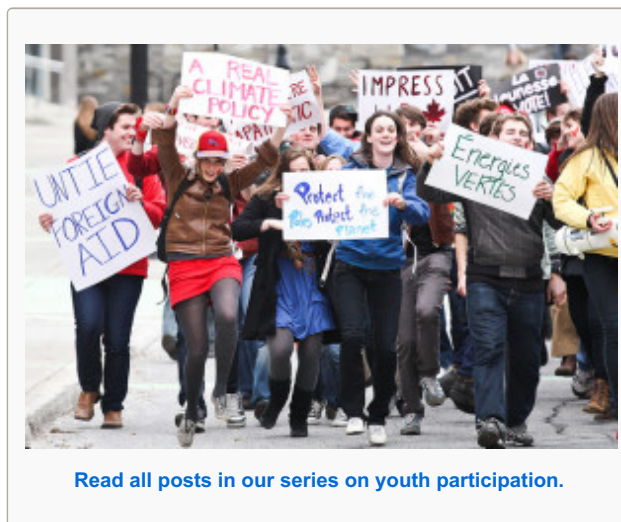
Falling voter turnout in the United Kingdom has been well recorded over the past several decades. But it's not the decline in overall turnout that should just worry us. A deeper underlying issue is the growing inequality in turnout as younger and poorer citizens are removing themselves from the electoral process at a much faster rate than those who are older and more affluent. This has profound political consequences as politicians tend to respond to the interests of voting groups over non-voting groups which we've empirically demonstrated in our report *Divided democracy: Political inequality in the UK and why it matters*.

When politicians favour the interests of higher turnout groups it unleashes a vicious cycle of disaffection and under-representation of lower turnout groups. As policy becomes less responsive to their interests they're more likely find that politics has nothing to say to them, thus reducing their motivation to vote. We find that such a radical problem within our democracy requires a radical solution. Our approach to this concern is to make voting compulsory for first-time eligible voters only. The logic behind this proposal is that voting – and non-voting – is habitual. Those who don't vote at an early age are *less likely to pick up the habit of voting* later in life.

A common criticism of our proposal for first-time compulsory voting is that it addresses the symptoms rather than the causes of low turnout among young people, and that it may simply breed resentment among the young. This is the conclusion arrived at by several of the authors who have contributed to *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics*.

We are very pleased that the idea of first-time compulsory voting is being given serious consideration, but we wonder whether the contributors to this volume have fully taken in the intent of the proposal in our report.

We agree wholeheartedly that on its own, requiring members of a particular group to vote will have virtually no impact on the genuine engagement of that group with politics, and for some it may even be counterproductive. However, that is not how we see this proposal. Granted, young people will, upon achieving the age of electoral majority, be required once – and only once – to attend a polling station, collect a ballot and deposit it in the ballot box (whether they actually vote for a party is entirely up to them as they will have a ‘none of the above’ option).



[Read all posts in our series on youth participation.](#)

Clearly if our proposal is explained to young people as “you have to do this, it’s good for you” they certainly may have a strong reaction against it – and understandably so. Instead it must be rationalised within the context of empowerment. It’s not just about changing the minds of young people towards the political process but changing the actions of our politicians as well. First-time compulsory voting will force politicians to cater to the interests of young people who will, under this system, represent a far greater proportion of the total electorate (even if not all first-time voters actually do vote, as [Henn and Foard’s data](#) suggest they might not). The ‘compulsory’ aspect of first-time compulsory voting will therefore mainly reside in the fact that it will compel politicians of all stripes to sit up and pay attention to what young people are saying, take account of their needs, and develop policy that caters to those needs.

Older people have been in politicians’ sights in recent years because *they vote and politicians know that they vote*. Thus politicians across the political spectrum have introduced and maintained policies that benefit the old and disbenefit the young. We have a triple lock on pensions, maintained winter fuel allowances and continued free transport and tax breaks for the old yet there are declining numbers of youth centres, an increase in university fees, while the EMU has been scrapped, and zero-hour contracts for the young. The only way to change this bias in policy-making is to get young people to the polling station. This will compel politicians to pay attention to their collective voice.

Regarding the ‘compulsion’ this represents for young people, it pales in comparison to other mandatory tasks in our lives as citizens, attending school being one of them. The 15 minutes of a person’s life that is typically expended on the task of voting is almost nothing compared to the time that the typical 18-year-old devotes to activities such as: completing application forms for their first job; getting an MOT for their first car; collecting references, bank statements, letters from mum & dad and sundry other documents required to rent their first flat; not to mention registering to vote, which is effectively compulsory in the UK. And if an 18-year-old is particularly time-poor, he or she can always apply for a postal ballot.

It is also worth addressing the [reproach](#) that singling out young people as ‘different’ by making them vote would reinforce stereotypes about young people. There are many institutions in contemporary Britain that are age-specific, such as the requirement to receive formal education, eligibility for certain types of insurance, and eligibility to be a magistrate. Moreover, everyone enters the electorate once (including naturalised citizens, who may well not be young), so the proposed institution will in that sense be equitable, once it has been established for a period.

We are not arguing that first-time compulsory voting is a panacea. We believe that it would be best combined with other reforms designed to overcome low political efficacy – including enhanced citizenship education, registering to vote in their school and more accessible polling stations – and other initiatives to raise the profile of young people in politics. But we believe that in addition to increasing demand on the part of young people *for* representation, it is important to increase the incentives for politicians to supply representation *to* those young

people.

Virtually all those who write about youth participation in politics argue that it is up to politicians to inspire and motivate younger members of the electorate by engaging with their concerns; we completely agree, and first-time compulsory voting is designed to achieve precisely that end.

This post is part of a series on youth participation based on the Political Studies Association project, [Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission](#). For further details, please contact [Dr Andy Mycock](#). An electronic copy of the *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: Young People and Politics* volume can be downloaded [here](#).

Note: This post represents the views of the author and does not give the position of Democratic or LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before responding. Shortlink for this post: buff.ly/TB6FC7



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