

# There is a clear disconnect between young people and political institutions. The Electoral Commission's proposals to boost engagement will not address this problem

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*The Electoral Commission released a report outlining changes, such as same-day voter registration and e-voting, they believe will make citizens more engaged with the democratic process. However, research shows the motivations underlying young people's participation in political processes is more rooted in people not seeing the point of voting for individuals and institutions rather than not being able to work out how. It would seem to be something of a red herring to pursue the proposed 'fixed' when actually the issue is one of hearts and minds, writes **Martin Price**.*



In the news yesterday evening, I read [coverage of the Electoral Commission's report](#) on its review of modern voting. The emphasis in this coverage has been on the recommendation that e-voting would help young voters to engage with the process: "Whether it is the ability to register to vote on the day of the election, or voters being able to use any polling station in their constituency, or the introduction of advance voting, or even more radical options such as e-voting, we plan to look at a variety of options assessing how they will help citizens engage more effectively," said Jenny Watson, quoted in *The Guardian's* article. I would like to challenge this, and particularly I would like to challenge this report's notion of what constitutes "engagement."

My opinion on this topic is heavily influenced by the evidence we found in a project I currently work on. [MYPLACE](#) (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) is a major social research project, funded by the European Commission which employs a combination of survey, interview and ethnographic research to provide new empirical data that will not only measure levels of participation but capture the meanings young people attach to it, and thus examine the motivations underlying young people's participation, in both formal political processes and other forms of social and civic activity.

A core part of the project is measuring young people's participation using a survey delivered in 14 countries with 17,098 respondents and understanding that participation using 900 in-depth follow up interviews.

In the UK, this work was carried out across two field sites in the West Midlands: one comprising two wards in a multi-cultural regional city, and the other a smaller, relatively ethnically homogenous former industrial town. Across these sites, 1,092 people aged 16-25 completed a detailed face-to-face questionnaire survey, providing an overview 'synopsis' of the beliefs, attitudes and values of young people in these locations towards a variety of themes, including political interest, political participation, citizenship, social networks, gender & sexuality, religion, minority groups, understanding of democracy and history and memory.

These issues were then explored in 61 semi-structured follow-up interviews with survey respondents.



(Image credit: Comedy\_Nose)

As part of my remit for non-academic dissemination, I recently prepared a written evidence statement to the Parliamentary Select Committee on Political and Constitutional Reform on just this subject. You can find the full report [here](#) and I won't repeat that analysis in detail.

The findings of our research point to a clear disconnect between young people and political institutions. This is characterised by a breakdown in communication, expressed by one of our respondents:

*The language of politics... can be damaging, I think it stops some people from getting involved, if they don't understand the terminology, I think it can make it quite difficult, for some people, to interact with it.*

There was also dissatisfaction with politicians who are referred to in interviews as out of touch, privileged (rich, posh), out for themselves (corrupt, interested in their own wealth and career), hypocritical or not keeping their promises, and 'not listening to people like us'. Notably, "politics" and "politicians" are almost always conflated. In the survey data, 43% in one research location (the larger regional city) and 47% in the other location (the smaller post-industrial town) state that they disagree (disagree and strongly disagree on a five point Likert scale) with the statement that "Politicians are interested in young people like me"

In another survey question, respondents were asked to rate thirteen institutions in terms of how much they trust them; the army was the most trusted institution, followed by the police and the courts. The media and political parties scored the lowest levels of trust, followed by The Prime Minister and Parliament. Respondents to in-depth interviews often suggested that politicians are 'out of touch' with ordinary people. I could go on, and of course I would recommend [our research outputs](#) as further reading. In the end though, the crux of my argument is this:

It would seem to be something of a red herring to pursue the idea that the 'fix' is technological, when actually the issue is one of hearts and minds. I'm pretty sure most young people could figure out how to vote if they were motivated to do so. The notion that young people aren't voting because they can't work out how is quite patronizing, particularly when so much evidence exists to suggest that the issue is more rooted in people not seeing the point of voting for individuals and institutions they see as (at worst) corrupt or (at best) irrelevant. In that context, e-voting seems to me like a pretty superficial way to address a deep-rooted problem.

More disturbingly, it doesn't seem a huge leap to wonder whether simplifying the process might ultimately mask the problem. It does seem plausible that more people might vote if they could do it from their smartphone on the bus, or by a couple of clicks on links from social media. Would those new voters really have engaged more meaningfully with the democratic process though? In that sense, might we not reasonably conclude that voter numbers in a given demographic are too crude a metric to use if we really want to assess engagement?

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Photo credit: pjohnkeane*

## About the Author

**Martin Price** is the Project Manager for [MYPLACE](#), a large scale EC-funded project. Martin is based in the Sociology Departments at the University of Manchester and University of Warwick. As well as managing the implementation of big research projects, he operates the non-academic dissemination of the project's work, in particular focusing on the inter-related challenges of engaging with public audiences and forging stronger links between research evidence and social policy.

