

Engaging young people to vote: Between “clickocracy” and realism

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Milan Dinic on the “Engaging young people to vote” session from Polis 2015 Conference, 27 March.
Speakers: Emily Reves (chair), Danny Bartlett, Matteo Bergamini, Alan Strange, Georgia Gould

Young people aged 18-24 are the least likely to turn up and vote. [A 2013 Cabinet Office study](#) showed that young people living in communal establishments or private renters were less likely to register for voting. This especially applies to students who, in most cases, study in away from home and live on their own. So, often it is not just the fact that young people don't feel a connection to politics, but there are other, more technical reasons as well.

However, the main argument is – politicians do not appeal enough to the young and that is why they are not involved. As a Labour political activist [Georgia Gould](#) said in her speech to the panel on “Engaging young people in politics”, at the [LSE Polis journalism conference in March](#):

| *“Voting is a passive act for a generation used to direct action”.*

As she – rightfully so – puts it: young people are bored of the media always asking “what is wrong with the young” and seeing them as “a problem”. On the contrary, the young are creating their own leaders spheres of communication – and Gould pointed to videos dealing with various topics posted by young people on YouTube. And, unsurprisingly, at the same panel the other three speakers used their own video material to show how politics can be made appealing and entertaining to the young.

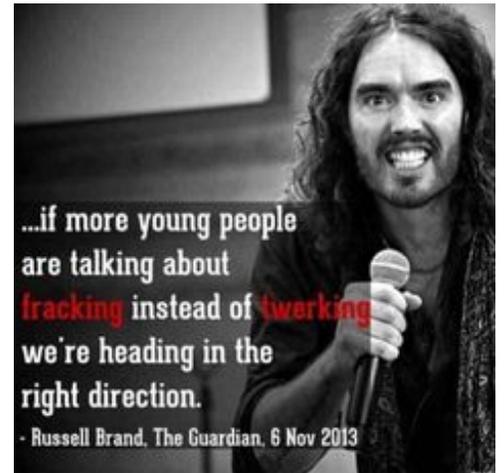
“App-up” the politics

So, what better way to engage young people than by using that for what they are often criticized for spending too much time with: the (social) media? Various platforms and apps such as [Stand-up](#), [Tickbox](#) or [ElectUK](#) have sprung up recently aiming at bringing British politics closer to the young. In Sweden, the national radio created [Debattle](#) – an app that allows users to do a DJ “rap-up” of politicians’ speeches. And, if you are not in the mood to protest on a cold/rainy/snowy/windy day, or you just feel like chillin’ – organize a [hologram protest](#) and play it wherever and whenever you like! The first one ever was recently held in Spain.

The idea is to show politics is funny, fun and simpler than it is made to be in real life. The logic: that is how it will appeal more to the young. While it is true social media and technology may be a useful tool in attracting the attention of the young voters, one should beware an oversimplification just so it would seem “more appealing”. The point is to engage young into politics, and not to reduce politics to a game or a funny video/post on social-media with most “likes” and “shares”.

A big contribution to this is made by people who are very socially active, or have a high social profile but whose background in knowledge and education of politics can be put into question. For example, while [Russell Brand's interview with Ed Miliband](#) got well over 1 million views on YouTube, it wasn't hard to notice – even for me someone who is a foreigner to British politics as I am – that oversimplifying view in suggestive questions, pointing to the “control behind the scenes”, “the system that's not work” and that there is no place for “us ordinary people”, along with that very rebellious move of drinking fluid from a large bottle instead of a glass...

This all blends very well in with the image of a rebel fighting the corrupt system and speaking “The Truth”, which is definitely appealing to the young as they grow up. The problem is, once you grow up – you realise politics is not like that but much more complicated and intertwined (as most of the politicians try to explain to Russell Brand in the interviews).



“I click therefore I am”

Today it is easier than ever before to “participate” in democracy by clicking on an online petition. But, do people – especially the young who are always in a run and looking for more dynamics – read everything they click? Various research projects showed most people don't bother to read “Terms and Conditions” when signing up online at, Gmail or PayPal for example.

A fighter against youth political apathy, Danny Bartlett from the “[Who's bored](#)” project, said at the LSE conference he himself will not read the party manifestos! Rather, he suggests, we should utilize things through social media and discuss it. However, how can we debate something if no one has read it? So – if everyone, especially young people, do not find it appealing to read pages upon pages of parties' manifestos, can we really fully sum it up in an *appealing* 5-10-minute YouTube video or a 140-character Twitter explanation? The answer is – no. There is no way of knowing more by learning less.

Political education in schools

On the contrary, what is needed – and what was emphasized by speakers at the Polis conference – is education about politics and how democracy works. By learning about politics one inevitably gets involved in it. This means more education about politics and the political system in schools for – If you wish to change the system, you must know it.

By undergoing education about politics one learns that democracy has its faults and it always will, for – “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others”, as Churchill said. That may not be appealing to the idealism most nurtured by the young and people like Russell Brand, but the biggest changes were made by those who faced reality as it is, with its full complexity.

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