

The under 30s in the UK: A generation used to not getting what they voted for

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The EU Referendum underlined a clear disconnect between the ruling elites and the electorate, writes **Benjamin Bowman**. Disappointment with political choices is particularly marked among the younger generation, whose disaffection exemplifies a deeper depolitisation. Much can be learned from recent episodes such as the Iraq War and the increase in tuition fees if we are to prevent a further failure of the transmission belt between constituents and government. Bowman suggests a mainstreaming of youth politics, for instance by including youth branches within party lists.*



Britain voted to leave the EU, but now little is certain in British politics, except that more uncertainty beckons. Whether you voted Leave or Remain, you are likely disappointed with this situation. For young people the experience of disappointment and disaffection is nothing new. Britain is currently on the cusp of constitutional change: we must, seize this opportunity to rebuild the connection between everyday people and institutional politics in our modern democracy. The way recent political choices have impacted the way younger generations perceive politics offers some lessons in this sense.

Brexit, like the Iraq War and the increase in tuition fees, risks alienating the young

Our political moment is a deeply elitist one, despite the hullabaloo of the democratic mandate of the 52%, or the call to “take back control” at a national level. The referendum was [criticized](#) as a “media circus of exaggerated claim and counter claim” in which voters were called to muster into opposing camps by elite actors, rather than having the capability to make fully informed decisions. both campaigns were cursed by male-dominated (and indeed, white male-dominated) politics, as Professor Jacqueline Rose [wrote](#) last month.

Young voters may feel that “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”: the more things change, the more things stay the same. Brexit is another episode in a long political soap opera for young people, in which the vote represents the dissolution of complex individual concerns, needs, experiences and feelings into a binary (and non-

binding) vote for one elite group or another, whether between Remain or Leave, between David Cameron or Boris Johnson, between Nick Clegg or Nigel Farage, none of whom are generally perceived to be seeking to represent voters' needs, but simply to be hunting a democratic mandate for a plan that has already been settled.

As in the case of the Iraq War, or the Liberal Democrats short-lived pledge to oppose tuition fees, the [shortening of the odds](#) that Brexit will ever actually happen will be familiar to young people as a process of voting for one thing and getting another, a failure of the democratic transmission belt between everyday life and the representatives selected to organize it.

Young people will also likely feel that the representation of older generations has been fortified at the expense of the young. Young turnout was reportedly [high](#) with a [75% majority](#) among 18-24s voting to remain. This, of course, didn't stop a tidal wave of criticism aimed at young people who didn't bother to vote (largely based on a [discredited estimate](#) tweeted by Sky, which was based on data from the 2015 General Election and had nothing do to with the Referendum itself).

Blaming young people for their own marginalization has become commonplace, to the point that the words "they should bother to vote if they care that much" is a kneejerk reaction happening all too often. The stacking of the deck against young people is thus blamed on young people themselves, while it is easily forgotten that there is now a whole generation whose experience of voting is largely that you don't get what you voted for. On a deeper level, this represents an uncoupling of politics from governance, a failure of the transmission belt between constituents and government. The alienation of young people is just one symptom of [broader depoliticisation](#).

All about the money: why young people are abandoning politics and vice versa

As part of a recent research project, I was working with teenagers in a small town in rural England. We discussed how they saw themselves fitting into British society and politics. The participants in the group had a good working knowledge of how the local council functioned and what the big issues in their community were. They were also very clear about the reality for everyday people who needed local government to take action: "I know what the answer will be", said one participant, a 15-year-old girl, "it'll be: well, we ain't got the money".

Young people's experience of politics in our austerity era is a complicated relationship between citizens and everyday lives, and elite-level governance. As such, rather than a single political arena, we actually have two sets of politics in Britain – the everyday and the elite. The relationship between the two, in the words of this participant, is a question of not having the money. It is about blaming the inability to transmit popular voice into popular power due to budget constraints or the need to privatize the tools of government. This could be called a failure of the transmission belt between constituents and their representatives. "Well, we ain't got the money" is a keen observation of the main political event of our time for the young: the breakdown of the transmission belt between the everyday and the elite level.

Everyday politics is a remarkably vibrant and accessible field for young people, who are more educated in citizenship and in methods for making a difference than ever before. They are connected to the world around them, informed about current events from the local to the world stage, and trained in tools from fundraising and volunteering to petitioning at a remarkably young age. The everyday level is about celebrating young power and raising the volume of young voices.

On the other hand, the elite level – the level at which governance is performed – is largely geared against the young participation that is so celebrated at an everyday level. Political parties continue to keep youth wings in policy silos, using them to float youth-specific policy, or as foot soldiers for handing out pamphlets, but little else. The hallmark of young politics is [diverse participatory acts](#), and we celebrate diverse ways to give young people a voice, but mostly fail to transmit that voice into effective power. And it is not just the young who feel disheartened by British politics. We know from the decades of [post-war data](#) that there is a growing distance, distrust and even hatred that citizens perceive towards politicians. Where do we go from here?

We need broadband democracy for a broadband age

We must fix the transmission belt between everyday politics and elite governance. There is no better time than now, and no better group to bring into the heart of the process than the young. The Referendum was politics done wrong. Though we are voters with a world of information at our fingertips, we were subject to a circus of exaggerated and (at best) poorly explained claims. Though we have a wealth of tools for communication, our needs, voices and actions were boiled down into a simple In or Out decision.

The UK's EU Referendum was thus Morse code politics in a broadband age. For young people, especially, this was a poisonous experience, since the modes of democratic activity the young most value – [direct participation](#) – were the least represented in a campaign led at a distance by male, aging elites and dominated by grandiose economic, political and social claims rather than by clear connections to everyday life. The Brexit era provides us with the opportunity for a fuller democratic relationship between everyday and elite, institutional politics.

We need to upgrade the transmission of democratic power from the everyday level to the institutional. Young people need direct avenues for participation. Practically speaking, political parties could strengthen the representation of young people directly in their Party structures: not just in segregated youth wings, but at the heart of policymaking, and on Party lists. As long as local politics was able to get things done – which, granted, may be a larger, budgetary issue – this would be especially valuable at local level where young people would be best able to make direct contact with representatives. For the same reason, MPs should be working to get young people into contact and into their surgeries.

A voice for young people must also mean effective power, and there are practical ways to do this too. Unions need to be reaching out to the young: both the working young and those out of work or on insecure contracts. Like Party youth wings, Unions can be a transmission belt by which young people can make a difference on the way society is run at an institutional level, and perceive the effects of those institutions on everyday life. The same could be true of public consultations. For one example, the [LSE's project for The People's Constitution](#) could teach us a lot about the value and potential for popular participation in upcoming constitutional reform.

We have a new Prime Minister, a new Government, and we are looking at a period of constitutional reform even to the possible extent of Scottish independence and the dissolution of the Union. An era of political change is on the cards. Involving young people at the heart of that change is not only practical, it is essential if we are to rebuild the connection between everyday people and the institutions that serve them.

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This post represents the views of the author and not the position of the Democratic Audit blog, or of the LSE.

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