

Young people feel distant from the ‘pale, male and stale’ political class, but are eager for change

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The General Election showed further evidence of young people’s disengagement from politics, with turnout continuing to lag behind older voters. But does this mean that young people don’t care? **Simon McMahon** and **Jessica Allen** argue that this is not the case, and that distance from the political class should not be equated with disinterest of disengagement.*



Credit: Coventry University

The recent general election was heralded as gifting young people greater political power than ever before (see the Demos report [here](#) for an example). Uncertainty about levels of voter turnout and support for the traditional parties meant that every vote would count. Yet despite this the outcome of the election was a parliament with an average age of 51 (up from 50 in 2010), described as ‘[male, pale and stale](#)’.

This all suggests that young people continue to be largely removed from mainstream politics, which are in turn resistant to change. But to say that young people are apathetic and disinterested is misleading: they *do* engage politically and the way that they do so has important implications for the future of Britain’s democracy.

The disillusioned and disengaged

Even before the election campaign was underway, young peoples’ participation in politics was high on the agenda. In 2013 Russell Brand [famously stated](#) that he had never voted and that ‘until there’s a genuine alternative ... then don’t bother’. It was seen as a call to arms for young people not to vote. In fact, not so long ago it looked like youth abstention would become the norm: according to [British Election Survey data](#), in 2001 just 40% of 18-24 year olds voted, falling to 38% in 2005, before rising slightly to 52% in 2010.

Since then, a plethora of efforts to engage young people have become more visible. In 2014, 16 and 17 year olds in Scotland were given the chance to vote in the independence referendum. Elsewhere, organisations like [Bite the](#)

[Ballot](#) were formed to encourage young people to engage with politics, along with campaigns such as Rick Edwards' push for a '[none of the above](#)' option on voting slips.

And yet data suggests that at the 2015 election there was little wholesale change in young peoples' participation with an [estimated 58%](#) of 18-24 year olds turning out, lower than the 66% overall.

Voices of a new generation

While youth engagement with mainstream politics remains low, the assumption that young people are apathetic towards politics is quite simply wrong. As shown by recent research and a public debate at Coventry University, young people are passionate about a huge range of issues and committed to challenging injustice, but they tend to express themselves in ways that often fall outside the realm of traditional party politics, such as [student protests](#), and [online campaigns](#) on education, housing and voting rights through the use of new technology.

Whilst not all young people are voting, examples also abound of those seeking empowerment through other means. There is a groundswell of youth activism on issues of inclusion, poverty and identity, exemplified by people such as [Rose Neelam](#) of UK Black Pride. And young entrepreneurs such as [Jamal Edwards](#) and [Curtis Blanc](#) have used music and the arts to establish successful businesses which also help young people to be independent and responsible citizens.

What comes next?

The gap between 'traditional' and 'youth' forms of politics needs to be bridged to ensure that Britain's democracy is truly representative, bringing the concerns, interests, energy and conviction of young people into the mainstream.

On the one hand, young people want to be taught about politics in schools and communities and given more accessible information about their representatives. [Kenny Imafidon](#), a 22 year old political commentator and special advisor on youth politics, stated in Coventry that 'it's dangerous that young people aren't taught politics in schools' because it leaves people feeling uninformed and uncertain of the practicalities and significance of utilising their right to vote.

On the other hand, there is also a need for a cultural shift in the way that politics works. Curtis Blanc, an ex-prisoner turned entrepreneur and mentor commented to us that young people often feel undervalued and underestimated, whereas what they need is to be inspired and have courage to push themselves to speak out on the issues that matter. Positive role models in schools, in business and on social media can be the source of this inspiration.

As it stands, young people feel distant from the male, pale and stale political class and victimised by stereotypes in the media. They are not disengaged from politics in general, because they can be found at the heart of grassroots movements for change. Yet they are separate from traditional sources of power and this has to change to improve how democracy works in Britain today.

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