

“In 2015, young people
could find themselves
with more electoral power
than ever before...”

TUNE IN, TURN OUT

Jonathan Birdwell
Charlie Cadywould
Louis Reynolds

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Jonathan Birdwell
Charlie Cadywould
Louis Reynolds
December 2014

Foreword, John Bercow

It is a real pleasure to be able to write a few words in support of this pioneering piece of work by Demos, and supported by vInspired. Young people are the future of our democracy yet all too often they are written off as disengaged individuals or caricatured as one simple collective mass, when in the real world life is far more complicated than that. The value of this research is that it shines a light in this direction.

There is much in here that represents a serious challenge to the traditional political order. It is for us in that ‘establishment’ to change to meet the demands of new voters, not the other way round. This will not be a straightforward task but that is no excuse for not undertaking it. If we do not, then over time our democracy will atrophy and while it will not disappear it will lose some of its meaning.

Two aspects of many findings that are identified here strike me as particularly significant.

The first is that young people are not a ‘lost cause’ as far as electoral participation is concerned. A large proportion firmly intends to vote and another sizeable section would vote if inspired to do so. Furthermore, there are some precise policy areas where the political parties – if they demonstrate sufficient imagination – should be able to seize the minds of the younger end of the electorate. No politician who takes the trouble to read what is written here and then reflects on it can complain that no road map is being offered to attract younger voters. The opposite is manifestly true.

Second is the importance that younger voters place on social media and new technology both as the preferred means of casting a ballot and in political engagement more broadly. This is a cause close to my own heart. At the end of 2013 I established the first Digital Democracy Commission for the House of

Commons to examine means of employing new communications between citizens of all ages (but with a particular emphasis on the young) and the House of Commons as an institution. Those conclusions will be published shortly. I hope and believe that when aligned with this report we will have a clear and compelling blueprint for how to encourage young voters not only to be voters in an active sense of taking part but to become permanently more engaged politically.

Rt Hon. John Bercow MP
Speaker of the House of Commons

Foreword, Kenny Imafidon

When young people hear the word ‘politics’ what springs to mind? Most young people associate politics with:

‘Boring’

‘The thing Russell Brand keeps on banging on about nowadays’

‘Something for people not like me’

‘Corruption’

‘A waste of time because things will never change’

But politics is far from a waste of time and things can be changed as changes are happening now in British politics. Gone are the days when the Conservative and Labour parties were the only contenders in the race to get into government.

With the rise of political parties such as UKIP, SNP and the Greens, and the decline in support for the Liberal Democrats, we could see another coalition government.

Political parties are beginning to wake up and realise that the youth vote is a very powerful voting bloc, which could swing almost 200 seats in the 2015 general election.

Political parties are beginning to understand now that they need to engage with younger voters and that they need to make it crystal clear – ideally in the form of a youth manifesto – what they have to offer them in relation to policy areas they care about such as employment, education and health.

But bigger changes are needed as well.

Young people want to see more politicians who represent them; they want to see more women, ethnic minorities and younger politicians they can relate with. They also want more genuine engagement with them, on platforms such as social media.

This report by Demos, supported by vInspired, makes it clear that young people cannot be simply branded as ‘apathetic’

as a significant majority of them say they intend to vote in May 2015.

This report makes bold, innovative and progressive recommendations, which I support in their entirety, and should be taken seriously by politicians, as they will surely remove the many barriers of youth engaging with politics.

While the report calls for measures such as the introduction of online voting and same-day registration, I would argue that the Government needs to go further and consider a reversal of individual voter registration (IER), and instead allow automatic voter registration for students and for parents to register their children up to the age of 25, to be implemented.

This last recommendation is particularly important because since the registration system changed from household registration to IER, registration rates among those aged 18–24 have dropped and in places such as Oxford, registrations in some wards with large student populations fell by 60 per cent since the change to IER.¹

Finally, this report also highlights the importance that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can have to increase young people's participation in politics.

Although attempts are being made by party leaders to engage with young voters via social media through events such as Bite The Ballot's #LeadersLive, more still needs to be done to bring the excitement that young voters had in Scotland during the referendum campaign to the rest of the UK.

Young voters need to feel their participation in politics can make a difference and that together as a collective they can create massive changes and challenge the status quo and politicians living in the Westminster bubble!

Kenny Imafidon

Political commentator and author of *The Kenny Reports*.

Executive summary

The British political system is being shaken up in a way not seen for at least 70 years. The Conservative and Labour parties have dominated parliament for generations, yet their support bases are declining, and their memberships are at historic lows. Labour faces an existential challenge in Scotland, while all parties, and particularly the Conservatives, are leaking support to the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Meanwhile the Lib Dems, traditionally the main alternative to Labour and the Conservatives, are polling at less than 10 per cent: 2015 is set to be the closest and most unpredictable election in living memory.

It is in this context that today's young people, often referred to as Generation Y, could find themselves with more electoral power than ever before. We could be heading for a fundamental realignment of British politics, and young people, with distinct concerns and policy preferences, have a unique chance to shape it.

Despite this opportunity, young people remain less likely to vote than older generations, and many are disengaged from traditional politics completely. Previous Demos research shows this is due not to apathy, but disillusionment with politicians and political parties.² Young people do care about social and political issues, but they feel ignored, and so they are less likely to turn out to vote, and in turn politicians are less inclined to listen to them.

While low youth turnout relative to other age groups is common across the Western world, it is not inevitable. In the US, young people have represented an important part of the Democrats' successful supporter base in the past two presidential elections. In the recent Scottish referendum, 16 and 17-year-olds were able to vote for the first time, and three-quarters did so.³ Similarly, the fact that young people do care deeply about social

and political issues shows that the opportunity for engagement does exist, if only politicians can tap into those concerns and show they are addressing them. Moreover, as our research shows below, the narrative suggesting that young people do not vote and are therefore not worth politicians' effort is false and politicians ignore the youth vote at their peril.

This report

Before the 2010 election, Demos partnered vInspired to produce the report *An Anatomy of Youth*, which dissected the concerns and issues young people were facing at the height of recession and the birth of social media.⁴ This year Demos and vInspired aim to make young people a vital component of the UK electorate, to determine which subjects are foremost in their minds in the run-up to 2015 and what – if anything – would make them more likely to vote. The research presented in this report will be used to inform vInspired's Swing the Vote campaign, which will seek to give young people a platform to help ensure that the issues they care about are front and centre in political party manifestos.

To understand voter intention among 18–25-year-olds, we surveyed over a thousand young people in this age range from across the UK, allowing us to provide a map of young people's beliefs, concerns, policy preferences, and views about wider political reforms. We also ran two focus groups to gain a more detailed understanding of how young people are engaging with the topics they care about, and why they are so fed up with traditional politics. We present the findings of our research below and make a number of recommendations for how political parties can engage with the next generation of voters.

Key findings

Three in four young people say that they are likely to vote in the 2015 election

Our survey suggests reasonably high levels of voter intention among young people, six months before the election. More than

half (52 per cent) of young people say they will vote at the next general election, with a further one in four saying they will probably vote. With next year's election outcome in the balance, politicians cannot afford to dismiss young voters. Over half of young people are undecided about whom to vote for; the youth vote is still up for grabs.

Young women, and young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), report less interest in politics and lower levels of voter intention

Our survey suggests there are considerable differences between men and women, and between young people who are in education, work or training, and NEETs. Although young women are more likely to participate in social action,⁵ young women respondents to our survey reported that they are less interested in politics and they are less likely to vote than men at this point in the election cycle (57 per cent of men plan to vote compared with 48 per cent of women). Moreover, 46 per cent of NEET young people said they planned to vote in 2015, compared with 52 per cent of overall youth voters.

Young people cannot easily be characterised as left or right wing

Young people's views transcend what would be traditionally considered 'left' and 'right'. On the one hand, a majority of young people placed themselves on a spectrum closer to individual responsibility and away from state assistance, when given a choice. This was particularly true for young women: 52 per cent of young women said individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves, compared with 45 per cent of men; and just 36 per cent of young women felt the state should take more responsibility to ensure everyone is provided for, compared with 43 per cent of young men. On the other hand, more than half of young people said they were very concerned about the gap between rich and poor in Britain, and the policies most likely to motivate them to vote for a party were oriented towards more state intervention, such as a jobs guarantee and raising the minimum wage.

The top concerns for young people are living costs, affordable housing, unemployment and the NHS

Young people are no different from everyone else: they want a good job, a better standard of living, and access to good quality healthcare. These issues were right at the top of the list for all young people, regardless of gender or whether or not they were in education or employment. At the same time, younger voters are less concerned about welfare, immigration, the EU, extremism and crime, despite dominating media headlines and political debates. More young people are concerned about online privacy and the gap between rich and poor than any of these subjects.

The top three policies for young people that would make them more likely to vote were guaranteed jobs for long-term unemployed young people, reducing the cost of higher education, and raising the national minimum wage

In addition to asking young people which issues most concerned them, we also asked them to select whether specific policies would make them more likely to vote for a party. The most popular policies were a guaranteed job or apprenticeship for long-term unemployed, reducing the cost of higher education, and raising the national minimum wage – mirroring concerns around living costs and unemployment.

Young people want MPs from working class backgrounds, and from the local area they intend to represent

MPs' backgrounds – where they are from and what experience they have had – matters to younger voters. While many wanted there to be more women, ethnic minority and younger MPs, class appears to be the biggest barrier between politicians and young people. Over half (56 per cent) of respondents said they would be more likely to vote if there were more working class MPs. Our focus group participants felt that too many politicians went to the same schools and that they had no idea what life was like for most people. More than one in three (37 per cent) of young people also said they would be more likely to vote if the

candidate was from their local area, mirroring the importance of ‘localness’ highlighted in other recent research.⁶

Young people say they would be more likely to vote if they could do so online, if politicians were more effective on social media, and if they knew that their friends and families were voting via social media

The use of social media is a way to get the message across to young people, but politicians need to learn to use it more effectively, and the message needs to be right. There is an opportunity for the political system to engage young people if it connects with them effectively online. Two-thirds (66 per cent) of young people felt that they would be more likely to vote if they could vote online; one-quarter (25 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if politicians were more effective on social media, and if they knew via social media that their friends and family had voted.

Celebrity endorsements add little value in getting young people to vote

Just 19 per cent said they would be more likely to vote if celebrities and musicians they admired told them they should vote, with 18 per cent saying it would make them less likely to vote. Among women and NEET young people, the two groups least likely to vote, this kind of celebrity endorsement is likely to put off more potential voters than it engages. Our focus group participants were similarly sceptical about celebrity endorsements, and were more likely to cite the influence of their friends and family on whether or not they vote.

Recommendations

Below we present our recommendations to political parties, third sector organisations and social media platforms, as well as suggestions for broader political reforms.

Recommendations to political parties

To win the youth vote, political parties should offer clear, positive policies on issues young people care about, including: a jobs guarantee,

a reduction in the cost of higher education, an increase in the national minimum wage, and better provision of mental health services

Political parties need to present a positive platform that will address young people's concerns. Negative campaigning is more likely to put young voters off. As well as offering the right policies, political parties should seek to create separate social media-friendly summaries of the policies they have on offer that young people care about, and promote them vigorously through social media marketing. These summaries and shareable policy proposals need to be short, in straightforward language, use infographics, and include videos and BuzzFeed-style lists.

All MPs should hold regular internet-based surgeries and town hall meetings, and attend meetings in schools, youth clubs and university campuses

While some MPs already do this, all MPs should rotate where they hold surgeries to include places where young people spend their time, such as university campuses, schools and youth clubs, in order to increase youth attendance. MPs should also seek to hold more online surgeries and virtual town hall meetings, and these should be widely promoted to local constituents via social media platforms.

Political parties should open up selection procedures to encourage more candidates from diverse backgrounds to run for political office

While many parties have already introduced measures to increase the number of female parliamentary candidates, more needs to be done to increase the diversity of candidates, and in particular to encourage candidates from working class backgrounds to stand for office. There should also be a greater attempt to increase diversity on the front benches, where MPs are most visible nationally.

Recommendations to third sector organisations and social media platforms

Third sector organisations working to mobilise voter turnout should use social media platforms specifically to target women and NEET young people on the issues they care about

Women and young people who are not in education, employment or training are less likely to use their vote in 2015 than men and those in education or employment. Thus, there is a greater risk that the issues they care about will be less reflected in the political debate. Political parties and third sector organisations that focus on voter mobilisation should use social media advertising tools to ‘micro-target’ these groups with material specifically tailored to them and their concerns.

Social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter should continue to run voter campaigns (such as Facebook’s ‘I voted’ button) on polling day and should seek to develop these further

These approaches have been used in the US, and most recently in the Scottish independence referendum, and are proven to increase turnout. While it is unclear whether social media platforms plan to do the same thing in the 2015 general election, Demos recommends that these initiatives should become standard practice at election time, and further innovations should be explored.

Politicians need to prioritise their social media engagement as a core part of their work, and not simply as a public relations add-on

Many MPs have a Facebook page and Twitter profile, but they need to do more to use social media platforms to build trust with voters. Research suggests that the most effective MPs use social media to engage in two-way conversations with constituents, to show their followers a more ‘human’ face to their work and personality, and to explain their positions on various key topics. One way of encouraging more MPs to put social media engagement at the heart of their work could be to link social media pages with websites such as TheyWorkForYou (www.theyworkforyou.com), allowing constituents easily to identify how their MP voted on certain issues, and allowing MPs to communicate the rationale for their decisions.

Third sector organisations should draw on the importance of peer influence, social sharing and new technologies to encourage young people to vote

Our research suggests there are several ways to help lower the barriers to voting. Nearly two out of five (38 per cent) respondents to our survey said they would be more likely to vote if they had someone to go to the polling station with them on polling day. Similar numbers (39 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if they received a text message reminder on polling day. One in four young people said they would be more likely to vote if they knew via social media that their friends and family had voted.

Recommendations for reform of the political system

The House of Commons should introduce a code of conduct for Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) as a sign that politicians recognise the need to change their behaviour

Most MPs work very hard for their constituents; one study found the 2010 intake of MPs work an average of 69 hours per week.⁷ However, public perceptions of MPs are tainted by scandals, and the unruly behaviour often exhibited at PMQs. While Demos believes that PMQs plays an important role in British democracy, reforms should be considered. MPs should develop a robust code of conduct for PMQs that would proscribe and prohibit the worst offences.

Local authorities should run registration drives in schools, colleges and universities to encourage young people to register to vote

Individual electoral registration has been brought in for the 2015 election, so students living in halls are no longer automatically registered by their university or college, and those living at home cannot be registered by their parents. In order to reduce the impact of this policy change on young people, electoral registration officers should run registration drives in schools, colleges and universities. In the run-up to the Scottish referendum, electoral registration officers from a number of local

authorities visited schools to register eligible people, and many councils ran referendum activities, including debates, hustings and mock referendums.⁸ Activities in schools may well have been a factor in the high turnout among 16–17-year-olds in the Scottish referendum compared with 18–24-year-olds. Demos is a long-time supporter of votes at 16, and the experience in Scotland provides further support for this cause.

The Government should investigate the potential for allowing online voting and same-day registration in the long term

While serious security concerns remain, online voting offers huge potential for increasing turnout. The government should establish a commission on online voting to allow for careful consideration of the various options available for such a system, introduce pilots in local council elections, and evaluate the results. The government should also strongly consider allowing same-day registration. Voters currently have to register at least 12 days before the election.⁹ Research shows that in the last US presidential election states that allowed voters to register on polling day had higher turnout rates than other states.¹⁰ While there is no doubt same-day registration would be a large logistical challenge, the potential benefits are enormous, and worth the investment in the long term.

A ‘none of the above’ option should be included on all voting ballots

Disillusionment with the political system was apparent throughout our research. In our focus groups, many who said that they were not going to vote said they would change their mind if there was a ‘none of the above’ option on the ballot. Demos recommends that a ‘none of the above’ option should be included on all voting ballots as standard practice. This would allow us to measure different levels of disillusionment across the country, and mechanisms could be designed to trigger another election or a new selection process if the ‘none of the above’ vote reached a certain threshold.

The Government that wins in 2015 should hold a post-election constitutional convention that goes beyond devolution and considers larger reforms

The devolution debate provides a once in a generation opportunity to discuss basic questions about our democratic institutions. A wide-ranging constitutional convention is needed that incorporates questions about our electoral system, the funding of political parties, the structure of parliament, elements of direct democracy, digital democracy, and the role of each of our democratic institutions.

Introduction

The 2015 general election is shaping up to be one of the most uncertain elections in a generation. The fragmentation in British politics that led to a coalition government in 2010 is set to unsettle the system even further in 2015. UKIP, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Greens are taking advantage of a growing anti-establishment mood in the UK, and threatening the Conservative and Labour parties' 100-year hold on parliament.

For the past five years, anti-establishment parties and movements across Europe and North America have used social media platforms effectively to achieve electoral success; these include the Tea Party Movement in the US, Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy, and Syriza in Greece. A significant part of the success of these groups has been their ability to use social media to mobilise people who are disaffected by 'the system' and 'the elites'. Often, young people make up a significant size of these groups' online support base.

The same anti-establishment mood music that these parties tapped into is now currently playing out at high volume in the UK. With Russell Brand's call for a 'don't vote' revolution, combined with a cast of uninspiring party leaders, it is feared that young people in particular will switch off politics in 2015 more than ever before.

In this report we analyse the depth of young people's disillusionment with politics. We look at whether they are planning to vote in next year's general election, and what the key issues are that will drive their decisions at the voting booth. We look at what efforts can be made to nudge them to turn out, using social media, influence and new technologies. We also look at the bigger reforms to politics that they want to see.

The chaotic uncertainty of the coming election means that young people may have more electoral power than in previous

years, should they choose to exercise it. Many young people are passionate about having a positive impact on society and their local community, but they see politics as sclerotic and out of the touch. Instead of voting, they are taking direct social action, volunteering, joining a political demonstration, or starting or supporting a campaign on social media in greater numbers than previous generations. Nonetheless, voting is and must remain critical. As a society we need to devise ways of reconnecting younger generations with the act of voting.

An anatomy of youth

Four years ago, Demos and vInspired partnered together to investigate the key concerns of young people ahead of the 2010 general election. The report *An Anatomy of Youth* argued that many young people felt powerless in the face of economic recession, excessively negative media narratives, and an out-of-touch political class.¹¹ Four years on, their future is still clouded with obstacles.

Youth unemployment still weighs heavily on the minds of young people. Though the figure is down from its peak of a million at the end of 2011, over 700,000 young people are still looking for work. In response to these poor labour market conditions, many young people have decided to stay in education for longer, potentially getting into debt that may take decades to pay off because of higher fees.¹² This, combined with falling real wages, and a chronic shortage of affordable housing, all serve to paint a bleak picture of the future for young people, and create a sense of powerlessness in the face of difficult economic conditions.¹³

This feeling of powerlessness extends to politics. Turnout at elections among young people is in long-term decline in the UK. In 1964, young people voted in the same proportions as the over-65s. Since then a steadily widening gap has emerged between younger and older people's voting habits. In 2010, less than half of all 18–24-year-olds voted.¹⁴ British Future has estimated that more than 2 million of the 3.3 million young people eligible to vote for the first time in 2015 will not exercise

their democratic right,¹⁵ which suggests that they have lost faith in the ability of government and politicians to tackle the topics they are concerned about.

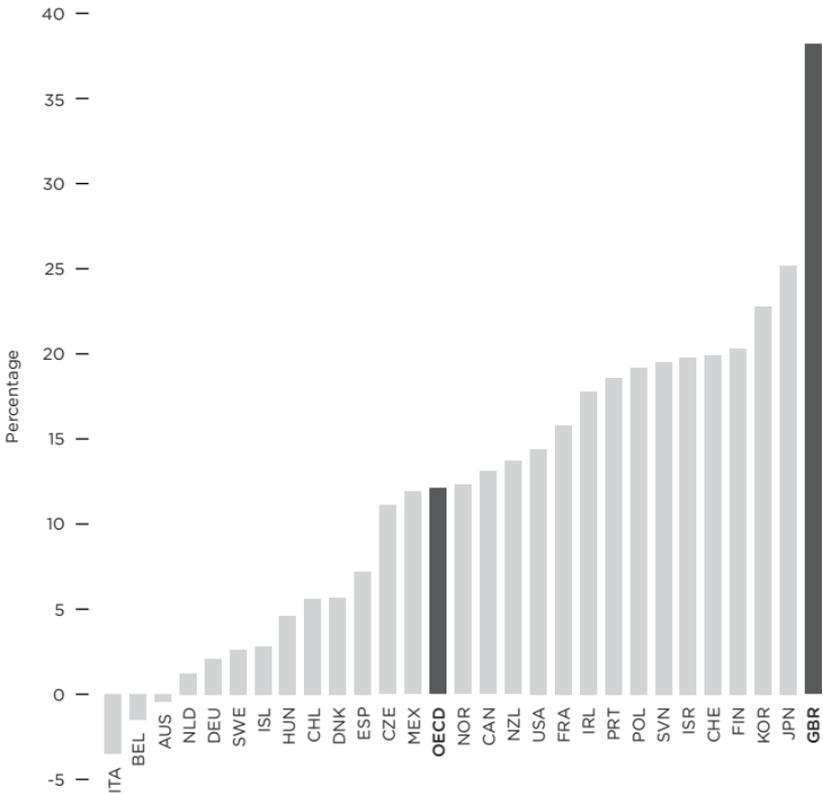
This report

This report aims to map young people's concerns and frustrations, to understand how they are engaging with the issues that concern them, and to explain why young people are more disengaged with the political system than previous generations. We surveyed over 1,000 18–25-year-olds, asking them about their interest in politics, what concerns they have, and the policies and changes that might persuade them to vote in future. We also ran two focus groups in order to gain a more detailed understanding of young people's concerns, how they engage with social issues, and why they are so fed up with traditional politics. Based on our research, we make recommendations for policies and reforms that would encourage young people to play a more active role in the traditional democratic process.

Generation Y should I vote

In May 2013, the Hansard Society launched its 10th Audit of Political Engagement.¹⁶ The results were widely reported, showing a sharp drop in voter turnout in recent years across the UK, accelerating what has been a gradual, long-term trend: 41 per cent of the British public said that they were absolutely certain to vote in the event of an immediate general election, declining from 48 per cent at the same time the year before, and down 17 percentage points from 2011.¹⁷ More notable, however, and what most of the headlines focused on, was the fact that only 12 per cent of 18–24-year-olds said that they would be certain to vote in an immediate general election (a decrease of 10 percentage points from 2012). The latest Hansard report shows a recovery to 49 per cent of all adults and 24 per cent of 18–24-year-olds, although this is still very low, and if replicated at a general election, turnout would be lower than at any previous election.¹⁸

Figure 1 **The percentage point difference in voting rates in various countries between those aged 55+ and 16-35, most recent general election**



Source: OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011*

While low youth turnout is a phenomenon across the Western world, the UK's gap between youth turnout and turnout among older people is the largest in the OECD (figure 1).¹⁹ Why this is particularly the case in Britain is not clear and likely attributable to a range of factors. But as the Scottish referendum showed, young people can be motivated to vote and are just as eager to participate in big political decisions as any other age group. The Electoral Commission estimates that 75 per cent of 16

and 17-year-olds voted in the referendum, although this motivation did not extend to 18–24-year-olds, the group we are focusing on for the 2015 election. Among this group, just 54 per cent turned out to vote.²⁰ The reasons for this divide are not clear at this stage, but the engagement and registration efforts held in schools, as well as the role of families, are likely to have played an important role.

Low turnout in elections signifies wider disengagement with traditional politics and political parties. Broken promises (for example, over tuition fees) have not helped, but the disconnect runs deeper. More and more, young people do not see traditional politics as relevant to their lives. In an August 2014 survey, only a quarter of 16–24-year-olds said they knew the name and party of their local MP. In the same poll, just 7 per cent said they were fully engaged in the political process, compared with 46 per cent saying they were not engaged.²¹ Young people are also less likely than in the past to see themselves as a supporter of any political party, and less likely to say they are interested in politics (dropping from 42 per cent in 2011 down to 24 per cent in 2013).²²

To some extent low voter turnout among young people should not be surprising. Young people in every generation are less likely to vote in elections. Sociologists refer to this as an ‘age’ or ‘lifecycle’ effect. But on top of this ‘lifecycle’ effect, there are also ‘cohort’ and ‘period’ effects. ‘Cohort’ effects refer to social changes that affect whole generations, but in different ways, creating shifts in attitudes from one generation to the next.²³ A common example is the invention of the contraceptive pill (leading to a liberalisation of social mores among younger generations in the 1960s). ‘Period’ effects refer to events, social trends and technological shifts that affect everyone regardless of which generation they belong to. Examples are the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the shift to a less ideological party politics. These have changed how we all perceive and interact with politics.

Usually most or all generations are affected by an event or trend, but each is affected in a slightly different way, or to differing degrees. For example, all generations were appalled by the MPs’ expenses scandal, but Generation Y experienced it

right at the start of their political lives. It was the first time for many young people that MPs as a group had been in the spotlight, and it is likely that the scandal had a profound effect on their perception of politicians. Together, these effects can present a dangerous cocktail of disillusionment that specifically affects Generation Y.

Don't vote, can't complain

Many commentators have cited the lower electoral turnout of young people as a cause of political bias in favour of older people, particularly when dishing out spending cuts.²⁴ Older people have benefited from the 'triple-lock' on state pensions and ring-fenced NHS spending; in contrast students have seen the abolition of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, the tripling of tuition fees and cuts to youth services across the UK.

Numerous studies show that young people *feel* ignored and powerless. In a recent Survation poll of young people, just 12 per cent of respondents felt their voice was heard in society, compared with 44 per cent who tried to have their concerns heard but do not feel listened to, and 42 per cent who did not try to make themselves heard.²⁵ Similarly, a 2011 survey of 18-year-olds conducted by the University of Exeter found that just 15 per cent of them felt the government treated young people fairly, with 52 per cent disagreeing. More than half believed that young people have no say in what the government does, and that there are not enough opportunities for young people to influence political parties.²⁶

Feelings of powerlessness are exacerbated by the predominant negativity of portrayals of young people in traditional media. In the Survation poll, four in five young people reported a belief that the media do not represent their generation accurately.²⁷ The same percentage was found in a Demos survey of 14–17-year-olds, which further showed that 85 per cent of teenagers felt that negative media portrayals affected their employment opportunities, and 58 per cent felt that it made them less likely to be actively engaged in their community.

Yet, the perception of out-of-control, rebellious youth is outdated. Research shows there have been significant declines in smoking, drinking and drug taking among young people over the past decade. For example, prevalence of smoking and illegal drug use is down considerably among 11–15-year-olds, and one in four 16–30-year-olds now reports never drinking.²⁸ Far from wild party-goers, a recent ComRes survey indicates that many young people are anxious about their futures, concerned about their health, and spend more time at home socialising over the internet than going out.²⁹ One commentator has described the rise of the anxious, health-conscious youth, increasingly educated to higher levels, as the ‘Hermione Granger effect’, after the well-behaved and studious friend of Harry Potter.³⁰ In a similar allusion to popular culture, Fraser Nelson of the *Spectator* referred to young people as the ‘Ab Fab’ generation, after the TV programme *Absolutely Fabulous* – with its famously louche mother Eddy and the prudish, sensible daughter Saffy.³¹

Out with the old, in with the new

In the same way that young people are finding new ways to entertain themselves they are also finding new ways to engage with the world around them and have a positive impact on society. In *An Anatomy of Youth* we argued that while many young people are disillusioned with traditional politics, their lack of engagement was due neither to selfishness nor apathy.³² Despite voting in lower numbers, they are finding new opportunities to engage. For example, younger generations are more likely to choose a career that has a positive impact on society. In a recent Demos survey three out of four teenagers (77 per cent) said that being happy with the ethical record of their employer was a must, and three out of five specifically aspired to careers that helped people less fortunate than themselves.³³ Starting a new business – or a new social enterprise – that benefits society has never been easier than at any time in history. Aided by technology, the internet and social media, new campaigns or social enterprises require less capital than in the past. These

innovations have also revolutionised the way we access information about the world, and how we interact with each other – and with politics.

There is now a more natural openness and inclination among young people towards non-electoral forms of political engagement – which has increased across the entire British population in the past 30 years, according to the British Social Attitudes survey.³⁴ In a comparative study of political participation in Germany, France and the UK, Melo and Stockemer found that while young people are less likely to vote than older generations they are ‘the thrust behind participation levels in demonstrations’.³⁵ Political actions such as signing a petition, joining in a boycott, or participating in a demonstration or political march are activities that are more favoured by younger generations than older generations. Indeed, the student protests of 2010/11 included occupations and strikes on university campuses across Britain, and a march on London involving an estimated 52,000 demonstrators.³⁶

The preference for new forms of political participation is reflected in a variety of recent surveys. The August 2014 Survation poll found that voting was still seen as the best way for young people to have an influence on politics (with 22 per cent). However, when asked what were effective ways to have influence, only 8 per cent said joining a political party, 6 per cent said standing for elections themselves, and just 4 per cent said lobbying their MP. Some felt that more direct social action was the best way for young people to have an influence on politics, with 11 per cent saying some form of protest was best, 9 per cent saying signing a petition was best, and 7 per cent in favour of volunteering for a campaign organisation. Fully 15 per cent felt that campaigning on social media was the best way to have an influence. Grouping all responses (which are not all listed above), 40 per cent favoured traditional means, while 43 per cent favoured some form of new or non-traditional means of influencing politics.³⁷

There is also an emerging body of academic literature on new forms of citizenship and civic cultures tied to new technologies. These new conceptions of citizenship are seen as

being separate to, but also impacting on and affected by traditional politics and political institutions.³⁸ Bennett argues that a new type of citizen, the ‘self-actualising citizen’, is emerging, for whom voting is less meaningful than other, more personally defined, acts such as community volunteering and transnational activism. This new type of citizen favours loose networks of community action maintained by interactive information technologies as a way of positively impacting the world, rather than relying solely on participating in the electoral system every four or five years.³⁹

This new type of citizen engagement can be seen in the attitudes of younger teenagers as well. In the Demos report *Introducing Generation Citizen*, we surveyed 1,000 teenagers and 500 teachers. Both groups felt that today’s teenagers were more concerned about social issues than previous generations of teenagers: 88 per cent of teachers said teenagers were more likely, or as likely to, volunteer for good causes as previous generations.⁴⁰ The annual Community Life Survey backs up these findings: 16–25-year-olds are now more likely than any other age group to be involved in volunteering: 80 per cent said they had volunteered at least once in the last year in the 2013/14 survey, up significantly on previous years.⁴¹ Part of this is a rise of new actors and methods for having an impact through more direct, practical action than politicians. For example, teenagers were significantly more likely to see ‘charities and social enterprises’ as having a positive impact in their community than MPs (60 per cent compared with just 10 per cent), and were also more likely to favour ‘businesses’ and ‘campaigners’ (30 per cent for both compared with 10 per cent for MPs).

You say you want a revolution

The task for the twenty-first century is not simply to herd young people to the ballot box, but to move the ballot box, and democracy, closer to the new, self-actualising citizen. Even though young people are turning away from politicians and voting in lesser numbers, it is important to emphasise that a significant number of young people still support the ideals and

maintenance of representative democracy. For example, a 2011 study by Exeter University showed that support for voting and elections among 18-year-olds was up since 2002, with 51 per cent saying they would get a sense of satisfaction from voting, and 53 per cent saying elections give voters an opportunity to tell politicians what they think is really important.⁴²

Nonetheless, the rise of disillusionment with traditional politics has left space for the likes of Russell Brand offering promises of ‘revolution’, and telling people not to vote.⁴³ Brand’s style of anti-politics has been widely criticised, but he has tapped into something that party leaders have so far been unable to respond to. When asked which party had the best policies for young people, the most popular response among 16–24-year-olds polled by Survation was ‘don’t know’ on 32 per cent, Labour on 24 per cent, and ‘none’ and the Greens tied on 11 per cent.⁴⁴

However, it is interesting that while young people are increasingly disillusioned with politicians and government, not all share Brand’s antipathy towards ‘the system’; there is little truth in the stereotype of ‘rebellious’ youth fighting the establishment. A 2012 YouGov poll showed that young people are more likely than older people to trust judges, police officers, BBC journalists, civil servants and people who run large companies to tell the truth.⁴⁵

But will they vote?

In the following chapters we present the results of our research into young people’s attitudes towards voting. Political parties that are serious about winning the 2015 election cannot afford to take youth voters for granted. In our survey, three-quarters of young people said that they will vote in 2015, or that they will probably vote. Whether these survey answers will translate into votes at the ballot box depends on whether political parties can offer positive policies that address the issues young people care about. It will depend on whether they can communicate to young people in a language they understand and respect, and in the social media spaces in which they live and receive their information about the world.

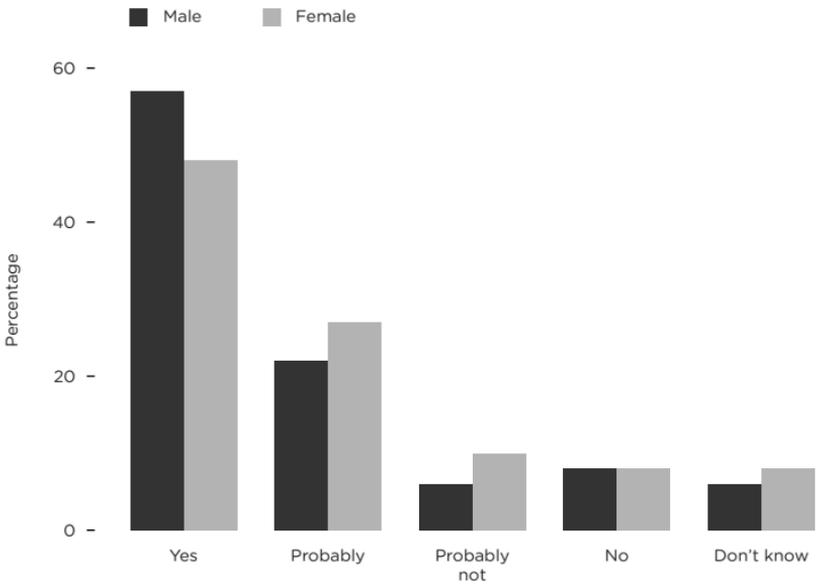
1 Will young people turn out in 2015?

Surveys of likelihood to vote are notoriously difficult to translate into actual turnout on election day. It has been found that polls conducted immediately before an election tend to overestimate turnout by an average of 8 points, while those conducted several months before underestimate turnout by an average of 9 points.⁴⁶ There are also many different ways to ask about voter intention producing large variations in percentages, which can be misleading when taken out of context. For example, the Hansard Society measures respondents based on how certain they are that they would vote in an immediate election held the following day. Respondents are asked to say how likely they are to vote on a ten-point scale, and only responses of '10' are considered to indicate certainty to vote. On that measure, as indicated above, the Hansard Society has reported exceptionally low levels of voting intention among young people.

With these caveats in mind, we wanted to use our survey to establish a baseline of stated voter intention among 18–25-year-olds, six months ahead of the general election in May. Our survey results indicate that, despite the pervasive narrative around a decline in young people voting, when asked directly whether they will vote in the next general election in May 2015, more than half (52 per cent) of all respondents to our survey said they would vote, with a further 25 per cent saying they would probably vote (figure 2).

It nonetheless remains inevitable given past trends that older citizens will vote in far larger numbers than 18–24-year-olds. Opinion polls consistently show that older people are more likely to vote. For example, in May 2013 Lord Ashcroft's polls surveyed over 20,000 people, which allows for a detailed examination of each age bracket. Ashcroft found that the over-

Figure 2 **The proportion of respondents who say they will vote in the May 2015 general election**



Source: Demos survey, conducted by Populus Data Solutions 2014

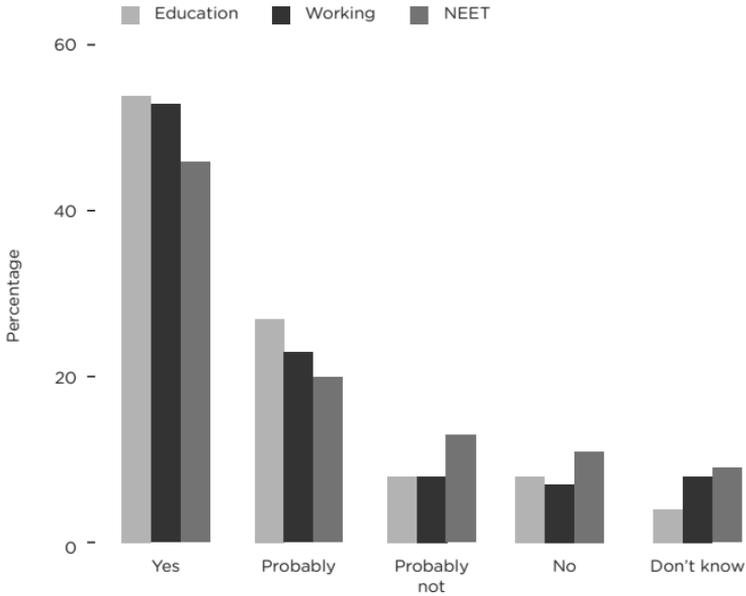
65s were twice as likely to be absolutely certain to vote (74 per cent) as 18–24-year-olds (37 per cent).⁴⁷

We cannot conclude definitively that those respondents to our survey who say they are going to vote definitely will. Nonetheless, our survey paints a more sanguine picture of voter intention among young people than the figures in Hansard's *Audit of Political Engagement*.⁴⁸ It is important that politicians recognise this and don't dismiss young people because of public perceptions that the youth vote has collapsed.

Targeting the least likely to vote

For those concerned with mobilising young people to vote, the disparities between different demographic groups that our

Figure 3 **The proportion of respondents who will vote in May 2015 general election, by whether in education, work or neither**



Source: Demos survey, Populus Data Solutions 2014

survey highlights provide an indication of where efforts to improve political engagement and turnout should focus.

Our survey shows clearly that those in work or education are more likely to vote than young NEETs (figure 3), and young men are more likely to vote than young women. This fits with Ipsos MORI's estimation that in 2010 half (50 per cent) of 18–24-year-old men turned out to vote, compared with just 39 per cent of women.⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, we found the same groups were less likely to say they were interested in what is going on in politics, and there is a strong correlation between levels of interest in politics and likelihood to vote ($r = 0.54$). Just a quarter of NEET young people and 30 per cent of young women said they had a great deal or quite a lot of interest in what is going on

in politics, compared with one in two men (48 per cent), and four in ten of those in education, work or training.

Given these disparities, the concerns and preferences of these groups should be taken into account as part of any efforts to increase youth turnout. As we argued in *Like, Share, Vote*, social media advertising tools can be used to identify and directly engage with these different demographics in a way that may make them more likely to vote, for example, by highlighting the issues they are most concerned about identified above. It is also important to note that while fewer young women said they were interested in politics, research by Ipsos MORI and the Cabinet Office shows that they are more likely to be involved in social action.⁵⁰ Again, this is further evidence that low levels of voter intention and interest in politics do not imply apathy towards social issues.

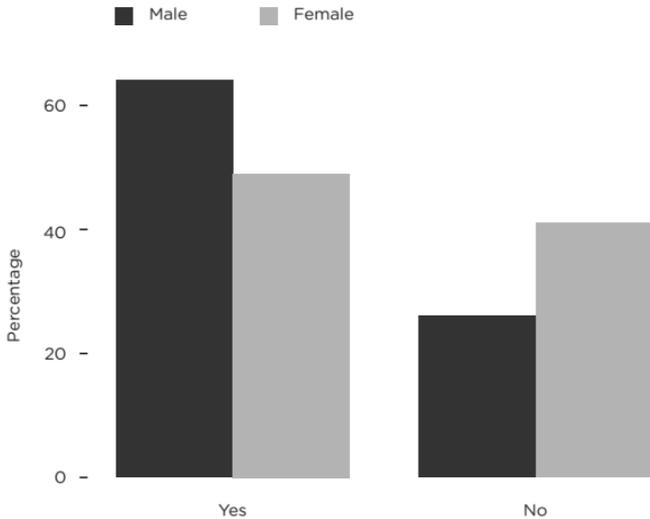
A referendum effect

British Future's May 2014 study 'Voice of a generation' found strong evidence for a 'referendum effect' in Scotland, where 62 per cent of young Scots said they would definitely vote in the general election compared with just 33 per cent in London.⁵¹ The theory is that the referendum galvanised young voters and raised political awareness, which will transfer over, at least in part, to the general election. This is partially discredited by the Electoral Commission's report showing that turnout among 18–24-year-olds in the referendum was not much higher than at the last general election.⁵² The discrediting of the 'referendum effect' is compounded by our survey, conducted just over four months after British Future's survey (and immediately before the referendum itself), which found no evidence of such a phenomenon. Young Scottish voters were no more likely to vote than Londoners or young people from many other regions.

Party identification

Our research also supported the widely held belief that party identification is low among young people. Just 56 per cent of

Figure 4 **The proportion of respondents who know who they would vote for if the general election was today**



those we surveyed said they knew who they would vote for if there was a general election today. Few of our focus group participants identified with a party, and some said they did not know anyone their age who was a member of a political party. Many felt this was the fault of politicians, who ignored the concerns of young people. Others simply disliked the idea of permanently identifying with a party. One participant said:

I don't believe in sticking to just one party and not changing your vote. I don't think that's being true to yourself and wielding your power properly. That way you don't hold them accountable because you're going to vote for them whatever... The party should have to work for your vote.

In fact, our research shows that there is a strong gender divide on this issue. Less than half (49 per cent) of young women said they knew who they would vote for if there were a general election today, compared with 64 per cent of men (figure 4). While most of those who did not know who they would vote for

were non-definite voters, even among those certain to vote, 19 per cent of women did not know who they would vote for, compared with just 10 per cent of men.

Why don't young people vote?

In addition to demographic considerations that are linked to turnout, our focus groups provide insights into why young people might not be planning to vote. Three related reasons were cited again and again in our focus groups: not being listened to by politicians, not feeling politicians could be trusted to deliver on their promises, and not feeling their views were represented by the options available to voters.

Although most participants said that they were likely to vote, these concerns made them less inclined to do so: one said she might not vote unless there was someone standing whom she trusted and represented her views. Another was sceptical about voting as she felt the parties had merged together at the centre, so there was no real difference.

The issue of feeling ignored was particularly strong among participants in our focus groups. One, who said she was certain to vote, still felt that most parties targeted older voters because they were known to vote:

Nobody listens to what we've got to say... they think we're not interested in politics but we really are.

Another said:

The baby boomer generation are the ones that get looked after.

Another felt that the problem went both ways:

There's a vicious cycle going on here with young people as a demographic not being interested in politics, and so parties not being interested in them, because, why bother?

Lack of trust was closely tied to Generation Y's experience with the Liberal Democrats' U-turn on tuition fees. One participant said she felt the Lib Dems were the only party trying to engage young people at the last election, but then betrayed those voters once they got into power. Another observed:

I had friends at uni who voted Lib Dem. They said 'we tried to be involved and read all the things and thought this was going to happen and then it didn't happen', so they gave up.

While feeling ignored and not trusting politicians tended to spark frustration and anger among focus group participants, it was the lack of representation that was most likely to make people switch off. The lack of relevance to young people's lives came up persistently. One said:

A lot of people my age feel that politics isn't looking after them – look at housing, education, all these different issues that people have marched on the streets for in their hundreds and thousands and nobody's batted an eyelid.

Interestingly, young people's political outlook makes little difference to their likelihood to vote, suggesting that parties of all ideological persuasions are struggling to engage young people. The biggest differences were among those who thought that success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.

Indeed, non-definite voters were more likely to agree that success in life was determined by forces outside their control than to think everyone has it in their power to succeed. This is worrying, and highlights a key theme observed throughout this report: many young people today feel powerless in their lives, and this feeling of powerlessness is both rooted in socio-economic demographics and tied to attitudes towards politics and intentions to vote.

Box 1

Young people's views on Russell Brand

In an interview with Jeremy Paxman in late 2013 Russell Brand said that he did not vote because, in short, the entire system is corrupt.⁵³ His comments, particularly on voting, received widespread criticism, but also outpourings of agreement from people on social media. He has now published a book in which he expands on his political views, and was on a recent episode of Question Time (alongside Nigel Farage).⁵⁴

We were interested in what young people thought about Brand's views on voting and politics. A survey of young people undertaken by vInspired as part of their Swing the Vote campaign showed that more than two out of three (69 per cent) disagreed with Brand's views on not voting.⁵⁵ We did not ask our survey respondents about Brand's views but discussed them with respondents in our focus groups for this project, who expressed a slightly more nuanced view towards Russell Brand.

While most focus group participants disagreed with his attitude towards voting, they liked the way he sought to engage people. They were in favour of a more egalitarian society, and felt that Brand was targeting the right issues to achieve this goal. When asked what Britain would look like if Brand were prime minister, participants said they thought it would be a better, more equal place. When asked directly about the prospect of a revolution, however, they were more cautious. The majority disagreed with Brand telling people not to bother voting. Most felt that voting was important, and that unless young people voted, the kinds of changes they wanted to see would never be made.

2 What issues do young voters care about?

In this chapter we present young people's attitudes towards some key political debates, which span the political spectrum (and how these differ from other generations). We also describe our findings on the social issues they identify as most important to them ahead of the general election.

Our results confirm that young voters have a slight preference for individual responsibility over state intervention. Yet, the issues that they are most concerned about are rising living costs, unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, the NHS and the growing gap between the rich and poor in the UK. And these concerns are leading them to support policies that feature decisive action from government, such as guaranteeing a job or apprenticeship for long-term unemployed young people, or raising the national minimum wage.

Generation DIY

Previous studies such as Ipsos MORI's 'Generations' and various opinion polls give us a good idea of how young people's attitudes differ from older generations.⁵⁶ While in the past young people tended to hold left-wing attitudes, they can no longer be taken for granted by the left. In *Generation Strains*, Demos and Ipsos MORI examined the views of four generations on a series of statements about welfare. The research showed that those in Generation Y are least likely of the generational groups to agree that the government should spend more money on welfare benefits for the poor, even if it leads to higher taxes. Similarly, those in Generation Y are least likely to agree that the creation of the welfare state is one of Britain's proudest achievements, and they are more likely than either Generation X (those born between 1966 and 1979) or Baby Boomers (those born between

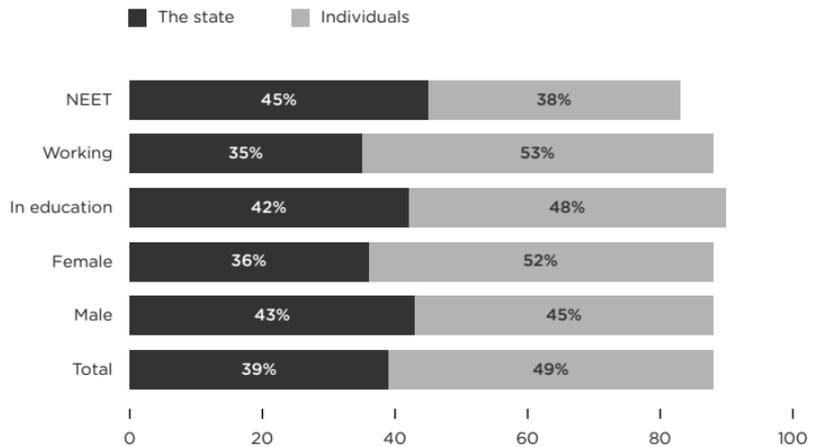
1945 and 1965) to believe that most people on the dole are fiddling in one way or another.⁵⁷

While support for higher spending on welfare has declined over time among all generations, Generation Y's scepticism about welfare spending has helped to trigger a historic crossover in attitudes. In 1987 more than twice as many people supported extra welfare spending than opposed it. Today, more oppose the sentiment than support it.⁵⁸

Our work in *Generation Strains* suggests that generational trends in welfare are due to an increasingly individualistic outlook, whereby younger generations are more likely to see the role of the state as a provider of skills and opportunities rather than as a manager of risks. This has led some commentators to cast today's young people as 'Generation Right'.⁵⁹ However, this is not quite accurate. First, as our research described below shows, while more young people lean towards believing that individuals should take more responsibility for themselves, there are nearly as many who believe that the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for. There are also notable differences in young people's views on the questions discussed in our research depending on whether they are in education, employment or neither.

As one might expect, young people also display more progressive attitudes on gender and homosexuality than previous generations: they are most likely (along with Generation X) to believe that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are 'not wrong at all', and least likely to agree that 'a husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family'.⁶⁰ Ipsos MORI's 'Generations' also found that young people tend to be more pro-immigration and favourable to freedom of religious expression than previous generations, despite being less likely to identify with an organised religion.⁶¹ They are also less likely to describe themselves as racially prejudiced.⁶²

Figure 5 **Respondents' views on whether the state or individuals should take more responsibility for providing for people, by whether in education, work or neither, and gender**



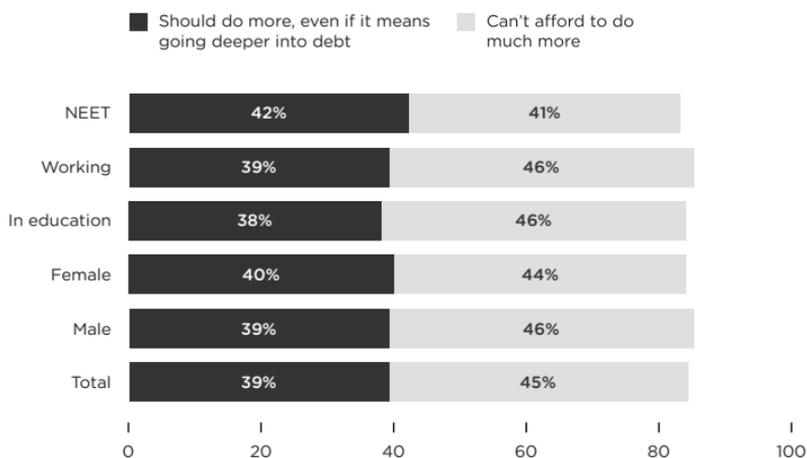
Our research: basic values and social attitudes of Generation Y

We wanted to explore these trends in further detail. We asked respondents to our survey to consider two different policy choices that typically represent left-wing and right-wing views. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a 0–10 spectrum between these two views, with ‘0’ representing the strongest left-wing feeling and ‘10’ representing the strongest right-wing feeling. With ‘5’ signifying neutrality on each question, answers of ‘0–4’ were classified as ‘left wing’, and answers ‘6–10’ were classified as ‘right wing’.

The respondents – particularly women – tended to place themselves on the traditionally ‘right wing’ or individualist side of the spectrum when considering each policy choice. More young people agreed that:

- individuals should be responsible for themselves rather than the state being responsible (figure 5)

Figure 6 **Respondents' views on whether the government should do more to help needy Britons, by whether in education, work or neither, and gender**

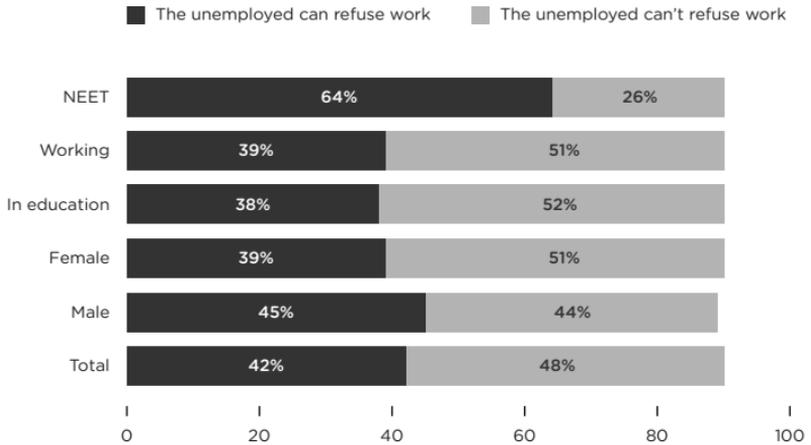


- government cannot afford to do more to help the needy (figure 6)
- unemployed people should have to take any job available or lose their benefits, than have the right to refuse a job (figure 7)

Yet, combined with these tougher views on welfare was a greater concern that more needed to be done to give ethnic minorities equal rights with white people (figure 8).

Interestingly, despite the general trend in Britain and in many other Western democracies for women to be more likely to support left-of-centre parties, Generation Y women in our survey were more likely to believe in individual responsibility and less likely to favour state assistance. They were also more likely to agree that people should have to work or lose their benefits than favour the right to refuse work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those not in education, employment or training were less likely to believe that the unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their benefit, and they also displayed a preference for more state intervention.

Figure 7 **Respondents' views on whether unemployed people should be allowed to refuse work, by whether in education, work or neither, and gender**

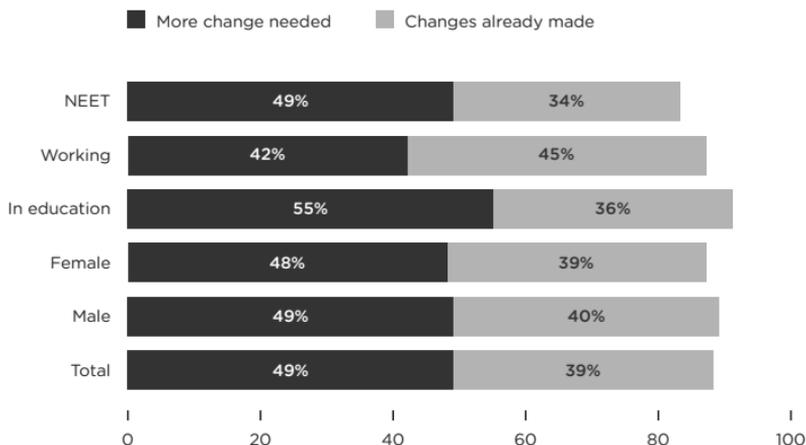


In their own words

Like our survey respondents, a slight majority of participants in our focus groups believed that individuals rather than the state should take more responsibility for providing for people, and were in favour of more action on rights for ethnic minorities. Just over half – 12 out of 22 – of the participants in the two focus groups felt that individuals should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for, with ten saying the state should do more. However, these beliefs were far from uniform and focus group participants made clear their diverse range of views. For example, half of our focus group participants felt that, contrary to the majority of survey respondents, unemployed people should have the right to refuse a job, and 18 out of 22 thought that the government should do more to help the needy even if it means going deeper into debt, compared with just 35 per cent of survey respondents.

One participant felt that many people were blaming the government when their expectations were simply too high. For example, one commented on housing:

Figure 8 Respondents' views on whether Britain has made the changes needed to give ethnic minorities equal rights with white people, by whether in education, work or neither, and gender



A lot of people in my age group have really high expectations. They say there's no way I'll ever be able to afford the average house, like £275,000 or whatever, but there are houses out there that are a lot cheaper, just maybe not in the area you want, or in the condition that you want it.

When discussing issues such as welfare with our focus groups in more depth, some participants were sceptical about claimants, but many felt that the subject had been rather distorted by the media:

Sometimes they [governments] try to be too fair, like too many benefits for the wrong people. People abuse the system and it should be monitored a lot better than it is.

When you see things like Benefits Street, it gives an expectation of what people on benefits are like... it's a stereotype.

One participant spoke about her own experience:

Right now I'm on benefits – I've just graduated from university... Even for myself when I go to the job centre, I feel a stigma... The media stigmatises people so much... The focus gets put on benefits when actually it's the fact that we don't have any jobs.

Our focus group participants were also particularly concerned about inequality in various forms: racial and gender inequality, the North–South divide, and extremes of wealth. When one participant raised the idea of a mansion tax, many expressed strong support. One said:

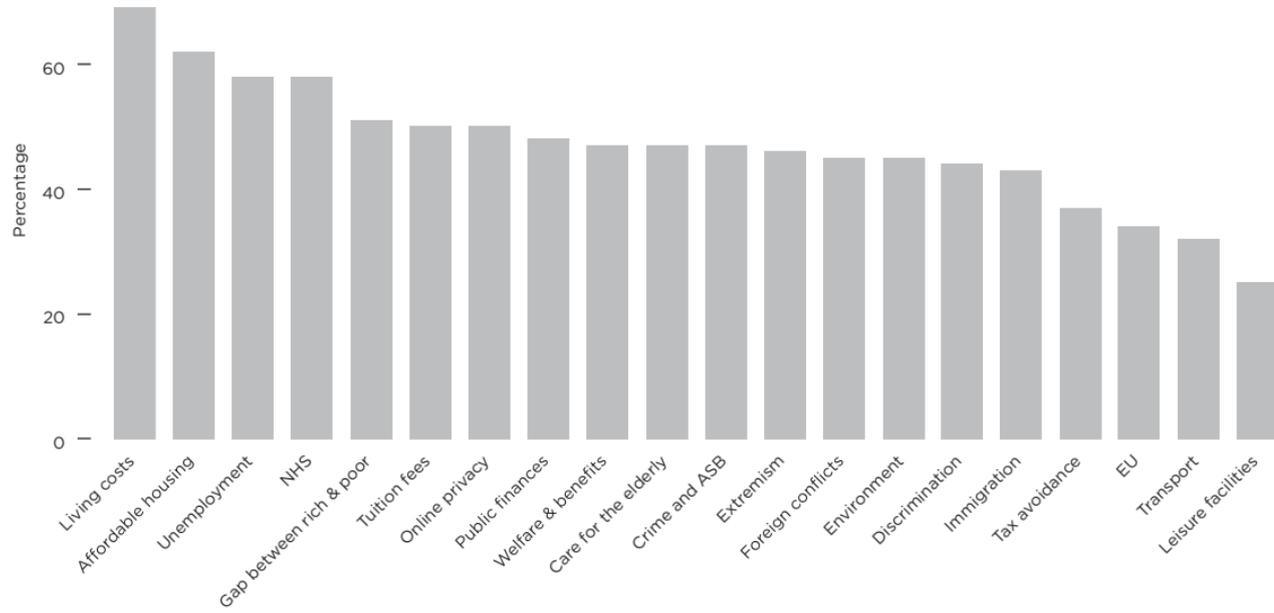
Everything just benefits rich people, bankers... young people get shafted.

All these data show that young people – as Generation Y – have discernible and measurable different concerns from those of older generations. However, it would be wrong to conclude that there is a shift towards more conservative values and policies among young people. In the next section we outline the key issues that young people are concerned about today. As we show, economic considerations around living costs and unemployment are dominant, and subjects which are typically important to those on the right of the political spectrum (including immigration and the EU) are less important to young people.

The key issues that young people are concerned about

When we asked the young people who took part in our focus groups which issues they were passionate about, an array of specific subjects were raised, such as genetically modified (GM) products, racism, gender inequality, organised crime, youth services, child tax credits, fracking and asylum policy, but the same central topics came up again and again: the NHS, jobs, housing and living costs. Our survey respondents were very or extremely concerned about living costs (69 per cent), affordable housing (62 per cent), unemployment (58 per cent) and the future of the NHS (58 per cent).

Figure 9 **The extent to which respondents feel very or extremely concerned about various social issues**



The cost of living was the top issue of concern for young people across gender and occupational divides. It is clear that the impact of the economic recession, and concerns over labour markets that are characterised by high levels of flexibility and flux, are weighing heavily in the minds of young people. However, it is also interesting to note that many of the topics that tend to get media and political attention – immigration, welfare, extremism and crime – were not high on the list. In fact, more young people were concerned about online privacy than any of these. The EU, transport and leisure facilities came right at the bottom of the list of concerns across all demographic groups (figure 9).

Youth divides on issues of concern

While economic issues were foremost in the minds of all young people, there were interesting variations in the top concerns of young people depending on whether they were in education, work, or neither. While NEET young people were generally less likely to be concerned about a given topic (displaying a slight tendency towards a more general apathy), they were more likely than those in education or work to be concerned about:

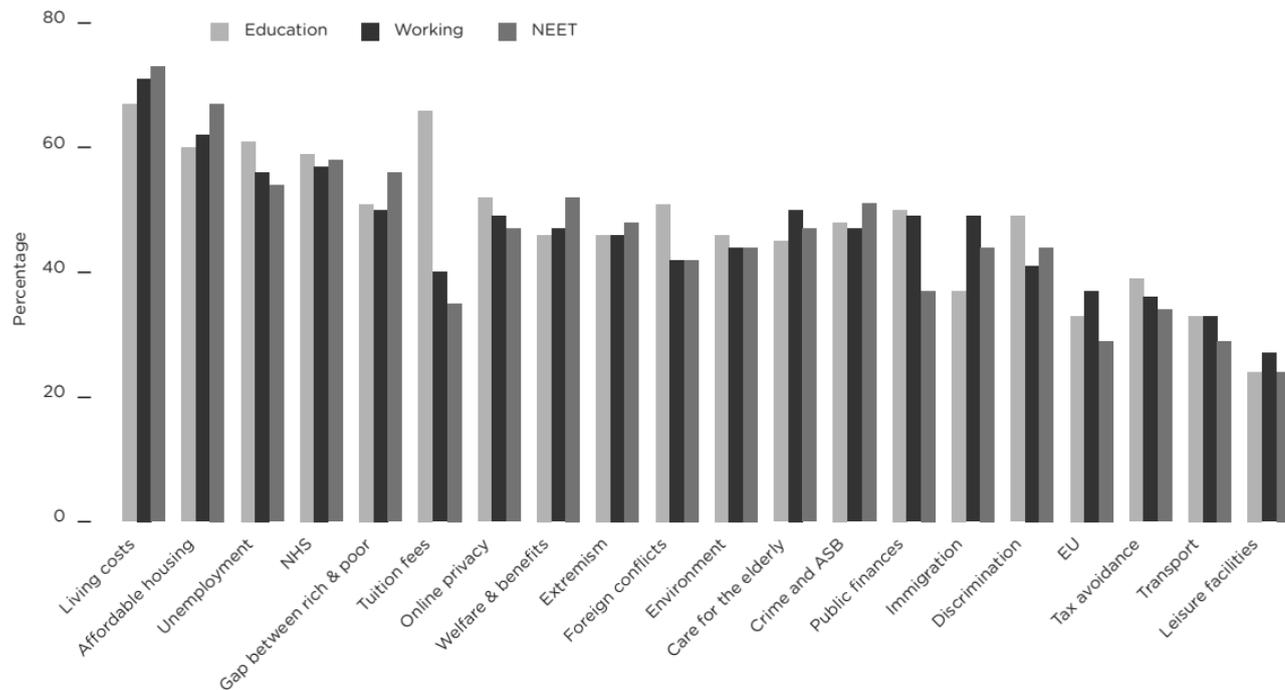
- the gap between rich and poor
- living costs
- affordable housing
- welfare and benefits
- crime and anti-social behaviour

Those in education were most likely to be concerned about:

- tuition fees
- public finances
- the NHS
- tax avoidance
- the environment

What issues do young voters care about?

Figure 10 **The extent to which respondents feel very or extremely concerned about various social issues, by whether in education, work or neither**



Those in work were the group most likely to be concerned about:

- care for the elderly
- the EU
- immigration

On the face of it, the distribution of the issues of most concern across these three groups appears to be attributable to differences in immediate economic circumstances (figure 10). While tuition fees understandably top concerns for young people at university, students are also more likely to express concern for a range of subjects that are not economic in nature – such as the environment, discrimination and tax avoidance. Issues generally perceived as being directly related to economic scarcity, such as housing and immigration, are a lower priority for those in education than for those no longer in education. The current debate around immigration appears to be particularly resonant for young people who are in employment, and they are also concerned about care for the elderly – perhaps driven by consideration of their own parents’ ageing. While these figures appear to conform to the popular stereotypes of young people in these different stages of life and their different positions in society, there are some findings which confound expectations. For example, NEET young people were less likely to be concerned about unemployment than those in education – perhaps because of their concerns over paying back tuition fee debt in a difficult labour market.

3 What policies will motivate young voters?

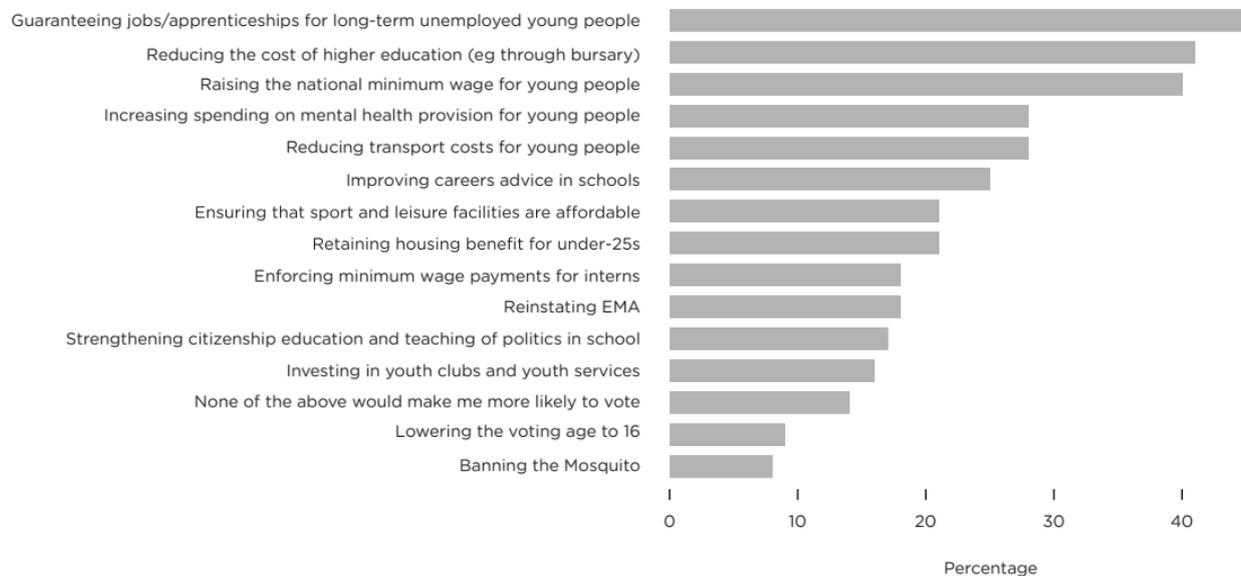
In the previous chapters we described the subjects that young people care about, and whether or not they intend to vote in 2015. Despite the rhetoric around the collapse of the youth vote, our survey suggests that up to three in four young people say that they will vote or will probably vote. Moreover, they are mostly concerned about issues the general public also care about, namely living costs, housing and the future of the NHS. In other ways, young people are distinctive: for example, they are more concerned about online privacy than immigration or the EU. And what they are concerned about varies depending on whether they are in work, education or neither.

In the next two chapters, we turn our analysis to specific policies and broader political reforms that could make young people more likely to vote. We consider the policies and reforms that could cement the participation of young people who are already inclined to turn out, as well as – importantly – those that could convince young people who are disillusioned and not planning to vote to change their mind.

Talk us into it

Our survey shows that positioning young people on a traditional political spectrum is a difficult task. Thus, understanding how young people can be encouraged to participate in elections requires moving beyond general ideological statements towards specific policy proposals. To that end, we asked survey respondents and our focus groups to pick up to three options from a list of policy proposals specifically relating to young people that would make them more likely to vote for a political party in the next general election. The results are shown in figure 11.

Figure 11 **The percentage of respondents who said that various policies would make them more likely to vote for a political party**



The three most popular policy ideas among our survey respondents were guaranteeing jobs or apprenticeships for young people in long-term unemployment (45 per cent), reducing the cost of higher education (41 per cent) and raising the national minimum wage for young people (40 per cent). Given the top concerns of young people highlighted in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that policies that aim to tackle these issues feature highest in our list – and by a notable margin compared with the other options.

One worrying finding is that the fourth most popular policy was increased spending on mental health provision for young people, with one in four saying that it would make them more likely to vote for a party. Young women in particular were likely to cite this policy (33 per cent compared with 23 per cent of men) (figure 12). The fact that this policy received such high levels of support substantiates recent reports (such as the Prince's Trust *Macquarie Youth Index*) suggesting that there are high levels of mental health problems among young people, particularly those who are long-term unemployed.⁶³

Our focus groups broadly replicated these findings: the most popular policies were reducing the cost of higher education (14 out of 26) and raising the national minimum wage (11 out of 26). Next down the list came a jobs guarantee (8) and enforcing the national minimum wage for interns (8), and reducing transport costs for young people (7).

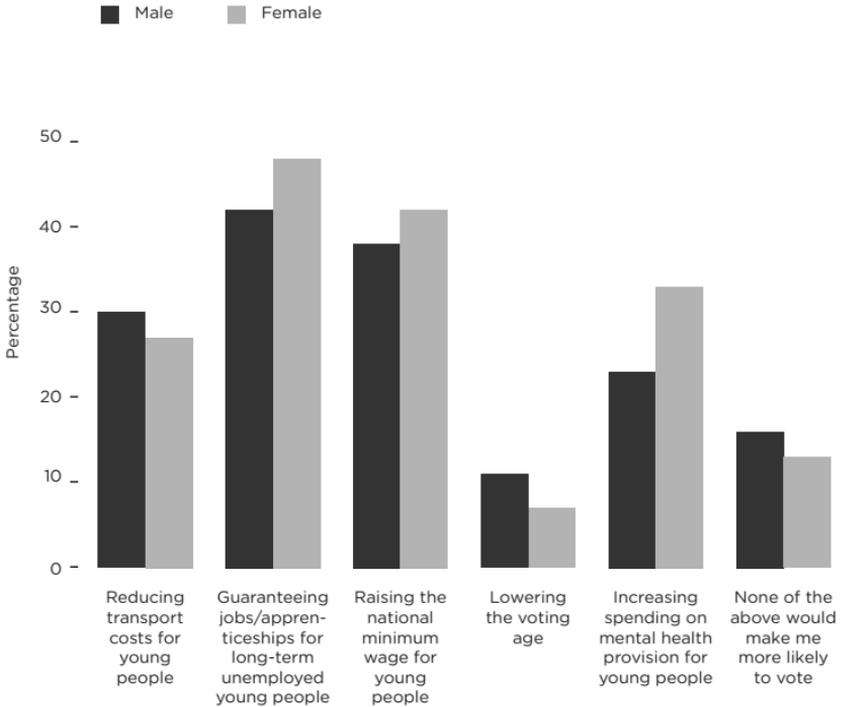
When discussing these policies in more depth in our focus groups we found that people were most keen to talk about the issues of which they had direct relevant experience. One current student, who does not currently plan to vote, said:

My maintenance grant isn't enough so I have to live at home and do four hours' travel a day. If I didn't live at home I'd have to work practically full time to pay the rent so that's a no-go, but now I have to pay travel, which is so high.

A recent graduate, who does intend to vote, discussed the problems with housing from her own experience:

What policies will motivate young voters?

Figure 12 **The options chosen by respondents when asked to choose three proposals that would make them more likely to vote for a political party, by gender**



I've gone from being at university and being independent to living back at home. I don't know when I'm going to be able to afford rent, let alone have my own house... A lot of people have the same issue.

Studying policy preferences by occupation reveals that survey respondents were most likely to support policies that directly affected them. In line with findings of participants' concern about the rise in tuition fees, far more of those in education said they were more likely to vote for a party that promised to reduce the cost of higher education than those no longer in education. They were also more likely to support

reducing transportation costs for young people, and improving careers advice in schools.

Those in work were more likely to support raising the minimum wage for young people, while NEETs were most likely to support raising housing benefit for under-25s and a job or apprenticeship guarantee. This fits in with a further finding that more than three-quarters (76 per cent) said they would vote if they felt it would make a difference to their life, and 77 per cent said they would be more likely to vote if they felt it would make a difference to the subjects they cared about. With this in mind, we can interpret the decline of youth voting as not stemming from a growing apathy among young people, but rather resulting from the failure of politicians to understand the issues that they care about and to offer policies that seek to tackle them.

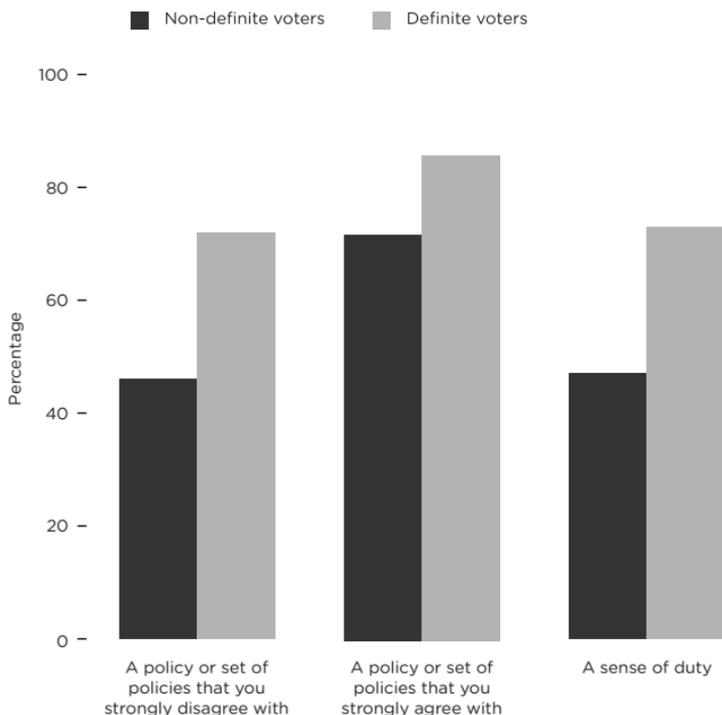
Transport is a good example of a subject that could motivate young people to vote if policies are communicated in a way that is relevant to them. Transport appears way down the list of young people's concerns when presented in an abstract form. However, when asked to choose from a list of youth-related policies that would make them more likely to vote for a party, 28 per cent chose a policy to reduce transport costs for young people, making it the fourth most popular choice. Today's more sceptical youth seek concrete, relevant policies and are much more likely to respond to a targeted proposal to reduce transportation costs for young people than to a vague proposal to prioritise transport infrastructure or provide more funding for public transport.

Speak to the unheard

Given our interest in mobilising young people who feel disengaged from the system, we split the respondents in our survey according to whether they were definite voters or non-definite voters. This allowed us to consider which policies, if any, are more likely to convince young people who are on the fence about voting that their vote matters.

Our analysis suggests that there is little difference between definite and non-definite voters in their choice of policies. The

Figure 13 **Whether respondents would be motivated to vote by policies they agreed or disagreed with to some or a great extent, or a sense of duty, by non-definite and definite voters**



favourite policies of both groups were the job or apprenticeship guarantee and raising the minimum wage. Yet worryingly, non-definite voters were far more likely to say that none of the policies listed would make them more likely to vote for a party. It seems that disillusionment with voting runs deeper than specific policies for many of these young people. Whether this is because of general apathy or cynicism about whether any of these policies would in fact be enacted is unclear.

We also wanted to find out more generally whether young people were motivated to vote by the policy platform of a party, negatively in reaction to a party whose policies they disagreed

with, or out of a sense of duty. Overall, young people, especially young women, were most likely to vote because they supported a policy platform. Importantly, though, we found that non-definite voters were far more likely to vote positively than negatively or out of a sense of duty. Disengaged voters are not going to vote for tactical reasons, or out of a sense of duty, but they are more likely to consider voting if they feel that a party is proposing policies that will have an impact on their lives (figure 13).

Our focus group participants were split on whether they would vote primarily because of support for one party, or to stop another party getting in. Few mentioned the notion of duty in voting:

I'm going to vote Labour, but I'd rather vote Green if free healthcare wasn't at stake.

If you don't vote, you can't complain because you haven't taken action to change something. If you don't speak out, no one will speak for you... even if there's no party that ticks all your boxes – find the party that ticks the most, or otherwise you might end up with a party that's completely contrary to your beliefs.

Give them something to vote for

Young people want policies that work for them. Many of the issues cited above are at the forefront of the election debate, and will feature in political party manifestos. For example, the Lib Dems recently pledged that mental health will be a top priority for them; the Tories and Labour have pledged to raise the national minimum wage; and the Labour Party has discussed whether to offer a guaranteed job or apprenticeship for long-term unemployed young people.

Ensuring that the parties have the right policies is one thing; ensuring that they communicate those policies to young people in a way that engages them is another. In the next chapter we look at some of the additional factors that influence voting, including the role of social media, peer influence and celebrity endorsements.

4 Can social media mobilise voters?

Growing up in a household of voters has a strong impact on whether you vote or not. Without these networks, knowledge about politics is lacking and this goes to the heart of why people don't engage: they don't feel they have enough information, they cannot tell the difference between the parties and they cannot see how voting can have an impact on their lives. In our survey, three out of four young people said that they would be more likely to vote if:

- they felt that voting would make a difference to their lives (77 per cent)
- they felt that voting would make a difference to the issues they care about (76 per cent)
- they had clearer information about what parties stand for (74 per cent)
- there was a clear difference between what different political parties stand for (70 per cent)

Social media and new technologies could provide an opportunity to address some of these topics and nudge young people closer to the ballot box.

Bringing politics on to social media

Social media are a critical new space for political discourse and engagement, which political institutions cannot afford to neglect.

This space is particularly important to young people. Thinkbroadband's 2012 survey showed that over half of 18–24-

year-olds spend more than six hours a day using the internet, compared with 10 per cent of over 65s.⁶⁴ They are also more than twice as likely to think social media most adequately reflect their views and concerns (45 per cent) compared with traditional media such as newspapers and television (18 per cent).⁶⁵

This matters for voter turnout because young people get much of their information about the world from social media, and because traditional means of contacting voters often do not work with young people. Many don't have fixed landlines, and thus cannot be polled or canvassed over the phone, and those who have never registered to vote will not appear on the electoral register, and so cannot be reached unless and until they make that crucial first step. The internet provides an important means to get around these issues, as well as the opportunity to address the barriers to voting bulleted above.

Issues engagement

As noted above, three out of four people said they were more likely to vote if they felt it made a difference to their lives and the issues they cared about. Social media provide an opportunity to understand what they are, and to communicate with young people about them.

This is especially important for young people. Research suggests that young people are more likely than previous generations to engage with politics through specific issues that affect their lives and those in their communities. Baby Boomers and other older generations are more likely to have a firm allegiance to a specific party.

Those attempting to increase voter engagement among young people therefore need to consider what young people care about, and prioritise engaging with them on these matters. Social media analytic tools provide an opportunity to find out what young people care about (by analysing the things they share, like and retweet), and to communicate with them about these issues and make the link with voting.

Clearer information: where do they stand?

Social media can also be used to provide information on what parties stand for, and help people understand the differences between the parties, for example through the use of voter advice applications. Our focus group participants echoed the sentiments stated above, that lack of information acts as a barrier to engagement. Many said they did not know enough about party policies, and felt they were all the same.

Voter advice applications (VAAs) are online political quizzes that help users determine which political party's policies are most closely aligned to their views on key issues. They are used extensively across Europe including in the UK, and research suggests they can increase engagement in politics and voting. Research on voter turnout in Finland in 2007 found that, even after controlling for demographic variables, men using the tools were 21 per cent more likely to vote, and women 23 per cent more likely, as a result of their use of a VAA.⁶⁶ In self-assessment surveys in Germany after the 2005 election and in the Netherlands after the 2003 election, 8 per cent and 12 per cent of VAA users respectively considered voting as a result of their use of VAAs.⁶⁷ In Switzerland, the VAA has become part of the national political landscape.⁶⁸

Social influence

As noted above, our social networks have a strong influence on our voting behaviour. Thus, harnessing these networks – to get young people to reach out to their friends and encourage them to vote – should be at the heart of voter mobilisation strategies. For example, this could include asking young people to commit to taking five friends (preferably friends who would not otherwise vote) with them to the polling station on polling day. In our survey, over one in three young people (38 per cent) said that they would be more likely to vote if someone accompanied them to the polling station.

Possibly even more important is the role that social media can play in using networks and social influence to encourage voting. In our survey, one in four young people said that they would be more likely to vote if they knew via social media that

their friends and families had voted. There is considerable evidence from the US that backs this up. University of California San Diego and Facebook partnered to run a randomised control trial with 61 million Facebook users.⁶⁹ The trial included three test groups, including a control group (which saw no message), an information group (which saw a message saying that it was election day and included a link to find the nearest polling station), and a test group. Those in the test group were presented with an interactive 'I voted' button, and it listed the names of each of their friends who had clicked that they voted, and the total number on Facebook who said they voted as well. The research showed that those who were in the test group were more likely to vote, equating to approximately 300,000 voters who would not have otherwise done so. This research thus highlights the importance of social influence and the ability of social media to utilise this influence. Those who received a message encouraging them to vote without seeing which of their friends had voted were no more likely to vote than those who received no message.⁷⁰

In 2012, the Obama campaign adopted a 'targeted sharing' strategy on Facebook, in which supporters gave permission for the campaign to see their friend list, and were asked to share online content. The rather passive act of clicking to share content gave the campaign access to more than 5 million contacts, with measurable results: people who were sent requests to vote by their friends were more likely to do so.⁷¹ Our focus group's positive response suggests there are strong prospects for such a strategy in the UK.

Text message nudge

One small nudge that is often discussed in terms of voter mobilisation is the use of text messages to remind people that it is election day, and where their nearest polling station is. Our survey suggested openness towards this idea: over one in three respondents (39 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if they received a text message reminder on polling day. This suggests that partnerships with phone companies to provide this

service could have an impact on youth turnout. However, these sorts of initiatives do need to tread carefully as they could annoy and put people off further. In our focus groups, many participants hated the idea, and said they would see it as yet more spam. Many said they would be happy to receive a text message on polling day if they had signed up for it at some point previously, but not otherwise. Still, given the number of people in our survey who say they would be more likely to vote, this sort of intervention should be tested in 2015.

Do celebrities encourage young people to vote?

One possible way of encouraging young people to vote – particularly those who are disengaged – could be through the advocacy and influence of celebrities and people they look up to. Indeed, while many young people disagree with Russell Brand, as noted above, it is undeniable that his comments and recent book have encouraged many young people to talk about politics.

However, our research suggests that celebrity endorsement can go either way. Indeed, approximately the same number of young people (19 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if celebrities and musicians they admired told them to vote as those who said that such endorsements would make them less likely to vote (18 per cent). Moreover, this kind of celebrity endorsement is likely to put off more potential voters than it engages among women and NEET young people, the two groups least likely to vote.

5 What reforms will motivate young voters?

A focus on mobilising young people to vote by proposing policies that address their concerns could lead to measurable increases in turnout in 2015. But in the long term greater reforms are needed to address the deeper disillusionment that exists. We asked young people what reforms would make them more likely to vote and have more trust in the political system. We asked about MPs' behaviour and their backgrounds, their use of social media, and the possibility of reforming the ballot through online voting. Of the reforms that we asked about, the three most popular were:

- online voting (66 per cent)
- politicians setting better examples in debates and discussions (62 per cent)
- having more MPs from working class backgrounds (56 per cent)

Reforming the ballot

Online voting

It is perhaps not surprising that substantial numbers of young people would be in favour of online voting given the prominence that social media and the internet play in our lives nowadays. Indeed, two-thirds (66 per cent) of respondents felt they would be more likely to vote if they were able to do so online. This included 65 per cent of non-definite voters, 70 per cent of women, and 59 per cent of NEET young people.

The Electoral Commission has considered online voting as a way of increasing turnout, particularly among young people. Indeed, voter registration has already moved online, although this change has taken place too recently for us to evaluate the effects. However, there are serious questions about the security

and reliability of online voting. For example, hackers from the University of Michigan were able to access the District of Columbia's online voting system in a test run for security.⁷² Transparency is also a serious issue: the UK has not even moved to machine counting, instead sticking with thousands of human counters in halls across the country, and party representatives laboriously checking every bundle. If we are not willing to allow machines to count physical ballots, the idea of a computer counting votes that don't exist in physical form seems unlikely to gain public approval.

While there is no doubt that British elections are some of the most trusted in the world, there remains a large degree of cynicism and mistrust among the public – particularly over large-scale, public sector IT systems.⁷³ Given the potential for increased turnout, this is a measure that should be considered carefully, but one that comes with serious challenges.

None of the above

With levels of disaffection running high, it is arguably time to reform the ballot box in order to include another option for voters that is equivalent to 'none of the above'. Doing so could help allow us to measure the levels of disillusionment with all of the parties on offer in a very real way during elections. We did not include a question about this in our survey, but we asked participants in our focus groups for their views on putting a 'none of the above' option on the ballot paper. Some initially said they did not see the point, but once they heard other participants' reasons for supporting the idea, they came round to it. They were particularly interested in what would happen if the 'none of the above' option received more votes than any of the candidates. When asked whether they would ever consider spoiling their ballots, some participants needed the concept explained. One said: 'If I knew ballot spoiling was an option, I would have done it last year.'

Better codes of conduct and behaviour

In February 2014 it was reported that the speaker of the House of Commons wrote to the party leaders criticising MPs' behaviour at PMQs as 'yobbery and public school twittishness'.⁷⁴ He went on to say, 'I am not sure we're setting a good example to the next generation of voters'; our research suggests young people agree: 62 per cent of our survey respondents, including 56 per cent of non-definite voters, said that they would be more likely to vote if politicians set a better example in debates and discussions.

We played a word-association game with our focus group participants, asking them to shout out words that came to mind when they thought about politicians. We received mainly a volley of insults, either associated with financial sleaze – 'corrupt', 'self-serving', 'slimy', 'money-motivated' – or directed at politicians' general demeanour. One participant said: 'When you switch on the TV and they are having debates you think 'they're not taking it seriously so why should I?''

This suggests that if politicians' behaviour could be improved, particularly the way in which they conduct debates, young people might be more willing to engage. While we did not discuss PMQs specifically, this might be one area where the impression politicians give could be improved. The Hansard Society's recent Audit of Political Engagement asked people for their views on PMQs, finding that half of 18–24-year-olds felt there was too much party political point-scoring, less than a third thought it was informative or dealt with the important issues facing the country, and just 7 per cent said it made them proud of parliament.⁷⁵

Making politicians more like us: increasing diversity

Other responses in the word-association game were associated with the lack of diversity in parliament: 'Oxbridge', 'public school boys', 'white middle-class males'. However, while both the focus group participants and the survey respondents supported the idea of introducing more diversity into parliament, they were sceptical about how much difference it would really make. They knew that an MP's gender or ethnic

background was no guarantee of quality, but disliked the fact that so many MPs seemed to have been to the same expensive schools, and had never experienced a life like theirs. One said:

If they didn't all go to the same club at Oxford, that would be nice. That would be a good start. Just get some normal Oxford people, not the Bullingdon Club people!

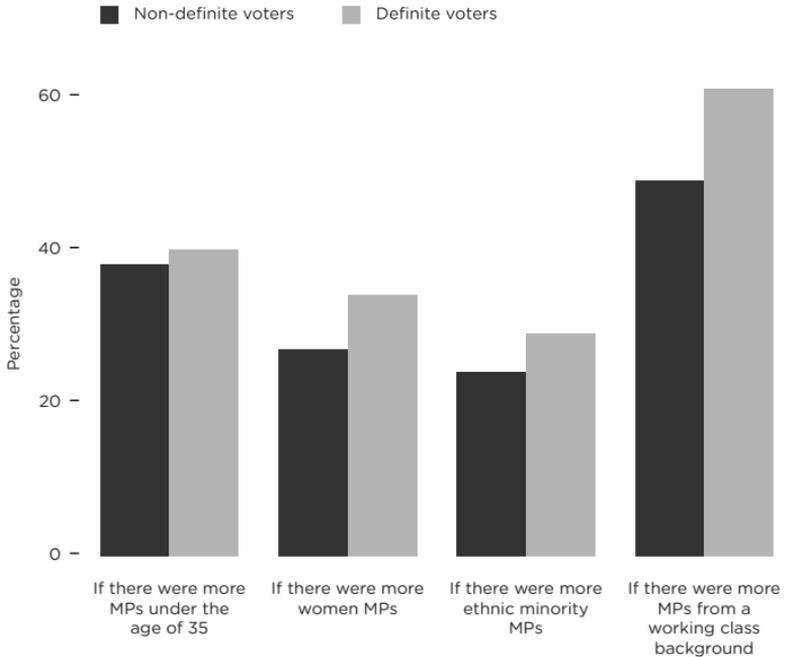
When presented with a range of ways parliament could be made more diverse, one participant suggested:

I think out of all of them, class is most important. But they all play their part. If government was more diverse, you are more likely to see it as trustworthy.

The survey results reflect this sentiment: respondents were far more concerned with class diversity than gender or ethnic background. More than half of survey respondents (56 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if there were more MPs from a working class background. The second most popular response to our question on this subject was a desire to see younger MPs (39 per cent), followed by more women MPs (31 per cent) and more MPs from ethnic minority communities (27 per cent).

By breaking survey respondents down into component groups based on voter intention (definite and non-definite voters), we can see the potential payoff that increasing the diversity of MPs could have in mobilising non-definite young voters to vote. We cannot say precisely how many of them would actually vote in practice, but it is worth noting that half (49 per cent) of all non-definite young voters say they would be more likely to vote if there were more working class MPs; 38 per cent more likely to vote if there were younger MPs, 27 per cent more likely to vote if there were more women MPs, and 24 per cent more likely to vote if there were more ethnic minority MPs (figure 14).

Figure 14 **Whether respondents would be more likely to vote if there were more MPs from non-standard backgrounds, by non-definite and definite voters**



Keep it local

Whether MPs came from the local area that they represented was also important to our survey respondents. Over one in three (37 per cent) said that they would be more likely to vote for a candidate if they were from the local area, and this view was strongly supported in our focus groups. One participant observed:

It's a bit of a piss-take if you have an MP standing for your area but they don't actually live there but in a nice house across the park, which was the case where I grew up.

While voters as a whole are more likely to trust their own MP than the government or politicians, a 2012 YouGov poll showed that 18–24-year-olds were considerably more likely to trust their local MP than older people.⁷⁶ This suggests that any institutional or electoral reforms should protect the constituency link, and that political parties need to focus on developing local candidates for selection, rather than parachuting politicians into safe seats.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although it is a significant challenge to increase the youth turnout at the next general election substantially, this is an attainable goal. Our research identifies the kinds of reforms that the political establishment needs to make in order to engage young people, as well as the kinds of campaign efforts that are likely to increase youth turnout. It also highlights a number of important lessons for all parties about the kinds of policies that are likely to resonate with young people.

Although we often refer to ‘young people’ in this report en masse, we have tried to draw out the various differences between them, depending on their gender, and whether they are in education, employment, or not currently in either. Political parties and third sector organisations need to recognise this heterogeneity. Some groups are more likely to vote than others; in particular, women and young people not in education, employment or training need to be targeted in voter turnout efforts. Much of the narrative around young voters treats them as synonymous with students, yet the groups most disillusioned with politics – often the hardest to reach – are no longer in education.

Young people have a diversity of beliefs, concerns and policy preferences so all parties have good reason to engage with them, at the places where young people spend their time and using the media through which they prefer to receive information.

Below we present recommendations to political parties, third sector organisations and social media platforms, and make suggestions for broader political reforms. The recommendations in this report are designed primarily as solutions for turnout in 2015. Some are shared by the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, which recently published its proposals on voter engagement.⁷⁷ We also go beyond the Committee’s

recommendations to address the way that politicians and parties themselves need to change in order to make young people want to vote.

Recommendations to political parties

Positive policies for young people

No political party can count on the youth vote, but nor can they afford to dismiss young people. Instead, they need to offer clear, concrete proposals, and explain how their policies will improve the lives of young people. Our research suggests that the top policies for young people were a jobs guarantee for the long-term unemployed, reducing the cost of higher education, and raising the national minimum wage. We found that a number of other policies were also popular among those we surveyed, including reducing transport costs for young people, increasing mental health spending on young people, and retaining housing benefit for young people. Parties who offer these kinds of policies – or other policies that seek to address the underlying concerns, particularly around employment – will be more likely to appeal to young people and encourage them to vote. Negative campaigning is likely to put young voters off.

If parties want to show they are serious about helping young people, they need to be explicit about how they are doing so. We therefore recommend that political parties ensure that the policies for young people they are proposing are clearly identified in their manifestos. More importantly, we recommend that political parties create separate social-media-friendly summaries and infographics of the policies they have on offer that young people care about. These summaries and shareable policy proposals need to be short, use straightforward language, and be promoted widely through social media. To remain relevant, politics needs to adapt to the way that people gather and share information now. Young people in particular do this through social media – often in the form of infographics, BuzzFeed-style lists, quizzes or videos. Using these forms of information sharing and engagement to show that politics

tackles the issues they care about will be critical to reaching youth audiences in the run-up to the general election.

MP surgeries online and on campus

During an event at one of the party conferences in 2014 an MP told the audience that – given limited time – his party would always choose to campaign where older voters are, rather than go to colleges and universities – because young people cannot be counted on to vote in the same numbers. Many MPs visit the schools and colleges in their constituencies, but comments like this suggest that more needs to be done to increase their engagement with young people in the places young people are most likely to be. Indeed, our research suggests that when young people have more contact with MPs, they are more likely to have faith in them and give them the benefit of the doubt (which they definitely do not give to politicians as a whole).

All MPs hold regular surgeries where constituents can meet them to discuss grievances, local issues of concern, or to lobby them to vote a certain way in parliament; we recommend that MPs should rotate the location of these surgeries and include places where young people spend their time, such as university campuses, schools and youth clubs, in order to increase youth attendance.

The internet also has the power to shrink the distance between the public and Westminster. We recommend that MPs increase the amount of time they spend speaking to constituents through online surgeries and virtual town hall meetings. This can be advertised through social media, for example through campaign groups and youth sector organisations. An excellent example of this was the Leaders Live debates held by Bite the Ballot, where the leaders of the five major parties (the only one remaining being David Cameron) took questions from a studio audience of young people and others on social media. The debates were broadcast live on the internet and generated a significant amount of discussion on social media sites like Twitter.

Shaking up the ‘political class’

The kinds of policies on offer and how they are communicated is critical. But our research suggests that the background of MPs is also a significant consideration for younger voters and that the belief that most MPs are from privileged backgrounds is driving disillusionment

Many parties have already introduced measures to increase the number of female parliamentary candidates and ethnic minority MPs, but as well as calling for more female and ethnic minority MPs, young people in our survey also expressed a strong desire to see an increase in the number of working class candidates. At the heart of this was the desire to see MPs with a diversity of experiences in their lives, and coming from a variety of backgrounds. There is a strong belief among the young people we spoke to that most politicians (given their backgrounds and education) have no experience of what it is like to live in the ‘real world’. This is also reflected in the strong desire among our focus group participants for more MP candidates coming from and living in the local areas they are representing.

As the lives and experience of MPs before they were elected are taking on greater importance than in the past, we recommend that political parties urgently reform their selection procedures to ensure a wider breadth of experience among candidates, and to encourage people from the local area to run for office.

Recommendations for third sector organisations and social media platforms

Micro-targeting and mobilising non-voters

With youth turnout already low, third sector organisations need to prioritise mobilisation of those young people who are unlikely to vote. Social media platforms, and the data they collect, present opportunities to target sub-groups of the population with tailored messaging. While the private sector is already exploiting these opportunities to advertise products to us, political parties and third sector organisations working to mobilise voter turnout can use similar methods to achieve their objectives. We recommend that third sector organisations should

focus their efforts (including through the use of social media advertising tools) on reaching those demographic groups that our research suggests are less likely to vote or be interested in politics: these include young women, and young people of both genders not currently in education, employment or training. And they need to do this by finding out what issues they care about (which our findings highlight above), and connecting these issues to taking part in politics. Demos recently produced a free, downloadable step-by-step guide to using social media advertising for third sector organisations to undertake micro-targeting campaigns. It can be downloaded at: www.demos.co.uk/files/GOTVAnnex.pdf.

Maximising social influence

Social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter have already pioneered important innovations in the use of social media to encourage voting. Evidence from the 2010 congressional elections in the US cited above suggests that using interactive approaches that tap into ‘social influence’ – the influence of our friends and family – for example, the use of an interactive ‘I voted’ button – can have a measurable impact on voter turnout.

Given these findings, we recommend that social media platforms fully commit to the use of these initiatives, and brainstorm further innovations. The ‘I voted’ button was effective because it was interactive, and it showed the friends and family in a network who voted. Seeing what your friends do – and not wanting to be seen as someone who isn’t taking part – can influence behaviour around voting. But there may be even more effective ways of drawing on the power of ‘social influence’. These would need to strike a balance between being noticeable (and showing clear in and out positions), and not too obtrusive and thus ends up putting people off. For example, changing the colour of a user’s profile (if they were to click the ‘I voted’ button) might be a way of further drawing on the importance of ‘social influence’ but that would be subtle enough not to put too many people off doing so.

MPs on social media

Many MPs already have pages on Facebook or Twitter profiles, but use these platforms with varying levels of effectiveness. Some more internet-savvy politicians use their social media in order to interact with the public, allowing social media users to see casework in action. Research suggests that the most effective MPs use social media to engage in two-way conversations with constituents, and to show their followers a more ‘human’ face to their work and personality.

We recommend that politicians should prioritise their social media engagement as a core part of their work, and not simply as a public relations add-on. One way of doing this could be to link social media pages with websites such as TheyWorkForYou, allowing constituents to easily identify how their MP voted on certain issues. This would also allow voters to ask questions about their MP’s decisions, and it would provide a space for MPs to offer reasons for taking certain positions. Combining elements of these two styles on widely used social media sites could help to inform and engage young people in the political process, and help politicians put social media at the heart of the way that they engage with the public and explain the decisions they make and the policies they stand for.

Nudges to vote

There are a number of reasons why people do not vote, including the influence of family and friends, and many – particularly young people – forget to do so on the day. The influence of parents could well be part of the explanation for high turnout among 16–17-year-olds at the Scottish referendum, compared with those just a few years older. Our research suggests a number of ways to help lower the barriers to voting. Two out of five respondents (38 per cent) to our survey said they would be more likely to vote if they had someone to go to the polling station with them on election day. Similar numbers of young people (39 per cent) said they would be more likely to vote if they received a text message reminder on election day. One in four said they would be more likely to vote if they knew via social media that their friends and family had voted.

We recommend that third sector organisations working on voter mobilisation, or which work more generally with young people, should design their strategies with these insights in mind, for example, encouraging young people to recruit friends to vote together on election day, and advertising the fact that they voted on social media.

Recommendations for political system reform

Setting a good example

Most MPs work very hard for their constituents; one study found the 2010 intake of MPs work an average of 69 hours per week.⁷⁸ However, public perceptions of MPs are tainted by scandals, and the unruly behaviour often exhibited at PMQs. Many young people dislike the shouting, jeering and abuse, and feel it shows that MPs don't take their jobs and the country's concerns seriously. While Demos believes that PMQs plays an important role in publicly holding the executive branch of government to account, reforms should be considered: our research shows that young people want to see positive platforms presented at PMQs and do not like watching negative mudslinging. We recommend that MPs should develop a robust code of conduct for PMQs that proscribes and prohibits the worst offences.

Same-day registration

The 2015 election will be the first in which voters have registered as individuals, rather than by household, and the first in which they are able to do so online. Allowing online registration is a useful practical change in policy that could help to increase youth registration. However, students living in halls are now no longer automatically registered by their university or college, and this could diminish student rates of electoral registration. In order to reduce the impact of this policy change on young people, electoral registration officers should run registration drives in schools, colleges and universities. In the run-up to the Scottish referendum, electoral registration officers from a number of local authorities visited schools to register eligible

people, and many councils ran referendum activities, including debates, hustings and mock referendums.⁷⁹ Activities in schools may well have been a factor in the high turnout among 16–17-year-olds in the Scottish referendum compared with 18–24-year-olds. Demos is a long-time supporter of votes at 16, and the experience in Scotland provides further support for this cause.

In future elections the government should allow voters to register on the day of the election. Voters currently have to register at least 12 days before the election,⁸⁰ and research shows that in the last US presidential election, states that allowed voters to register on election day had higher turnout rates than other states.⁸¹ There are many challenges to be overcome, however. Toby S James from the University of East Anglia argues that there must be new, centralised technology to check an individual is not registered in two places, increased staffing to verify details on the day, and a delay before announcing results while the details of election-day registrants are verified. He suggests that voters who register on the day of the election could be issued with a provisional ballot that could be counted later, once validated, if the election result is close.⁸² While there is no doubt same-day registration would provide a large logistical challenge, the potential benefits are enormous, and worth the investment in the long term.

Log in and vote

Online voting offers huge potential for increasing turnout: it is a hugely popular idea with young people, and 65 per cent of those not currently certain to vote said they would be more likely to do so if they were able to vote online. However, it is not something that should be introduced as a knee-jerk reaction to low turnout, nor should it be seen as the single answer to the problem. Serious security concerns remain: pilots in the US have not been successful, and there is no clear way to replicate the level of transparency in the current method of counting votes. Nonetheless, given the potential benefits of online voting, the government should establish a commission on online voting to allow for careful consideration of the various options available

for such a system, introduce pilots in local council elections, and evaluate the results.

None of the above

Talk of disillusionment with politics dominates television news and radio programmes, and was apparent throughout our research. While we can measure levels of disillusionment through surveys of trust, and looking at voting turnout rates as a proxy, more needs to be done to allow us to consider and measure the levels of disillusionment that exist in different communities across the UK. Many non-voter participants in our focus groups said they would change their mind if there was a ‘none of the above’ option on the ballot. Demos recommends the inclusion of a ‘none of the above’ option as standard practice on all voting ballots, as this would allow us to measure different levels of disillusionment across the country. Moreover, mechanisms could be designed to trigger another election, or a new selection process, for example, if the ‘none of the above’ vote reached a certain threshold. Research shows that voting behaviour is habit-forming. If you vote once, you are more likely to vote more often throughout your life. Providing a clear protest vote option in the form of a ‘none of the above’ option could draw in large numbers of young people to the voting booth who would otherwise never vote.

Post-election constitutional convention

Finally, the devolution debate has provided a once in a generation opportunity to discuss basic questions about our democratic institutions in the form of a post-election constitutional convention. Given the problems of youth disillusionment presented in this report, this debate cannot be limited to the precise powers of local and devolved governments. Instead, it should incorporate questions about our electoral system, funding of political parties, the structure of parliament, elements of direct democracy, digital democracy, and the role of each of our democratic institutions. With disillusionment with the system

running so high at the moment, we believe that such a wide-ranging, public debate is strongly needed. But it is critical that a post-election constitutional convention should be designed to ensure a strong voice for all sections of the public, and particularly the next generation of voters and citizens.

Conclusion: future politics

Politics needs to reform or it will lose the next generation. In a globalised and interconnected world, governments are less powerful than they used to be. There is little that the British government can do to halt larger changes in the global economy and labour market. As new technologies continue to emerge and threaten new jobs and industries, feelings of powerlessness will affect swathes of the population. Young people intuitively sense this diminishing power of government, and the associated declining relevance of political parties, turning instead to other actors and means to have positive impact on social problems: new businesses, new social enterprises, new social media, and direct social action. Lower voter turnout may evolve to be the new norm as the modern world becomes more complex and governments lose the ability to control economic shifts. But nonetheless, it is essential that every effort is made to convince young people here and now about the importance of voting. Our report shows the kinds of policies that could mobilise young voters, the longer-term reforms they want to see, and a variety of techniques that can nudge them into voting. The political system needs to show that it is flexible and responsive to the demands of the people, especially the next generation of voters, now more than ever.

Technical appendix

The research in this report is based on a desk-based review of existing evidence, a survey of 1,000 18–25-year-olds, and two focus groups of 12 and 13 young people.

Demos researchers designed the survey questions, with input from vInspired. Where possible, we included questions from other questionnaires (such as the British Social Attitudes survey and the European Values Study) in order to enable comparisons with other surveys. The full list of survey questions is given below. We commissioned Populus Data Solutions to run an online survey between 28 August and 7 September 2014. The fieldwork produced a nationally representative sample of 1,004 UK 18–25-year-olds, of whom 492 were men and 512 women; 404 of the sample were students, 446 were in work, and 133 were NEET.

Results from Populus enabled a breakdown by sex, age, region, and whether respondents were in education, work, or neither. Further analysis of the raw data allowed us to compare respondents by their likelihood to vote. The full list of substantive (non-demographic) questions, and list of possible responses, is set out below.

Our statistical analysis consisted mainly of reporting raw percentage responses, but also running cross-tabs to analyse the responses of specific groups, such as those not already certain to vote.

We also ran two focus groups of 18–25-year-olds, with 13 in the first group and 12 in the second. We ran a warm-up exercise asking participants if they intended to vote, if they regularly volunteered, and the basic belief and policy questions from our survey. We then asked them for their views on politics, voting and social media, and about issues of concern and political changes in more detail than the survey allowed.

Survey questions

- 1 How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics?

A great deal, quite a lot, some, not very much, none at all

- 2 Will you vote in the next general election in May 2015?

Yes, probably, probably not, no, I don't know

- 3 If the general election was today, do you know who you'd vote for? Yes, no, don't know

Belief statements: answers on a scale from -5 to +5, with -5 agreeing most strongly with the first statement, and +5 agreeing most strongly with the second statement.

- 4 Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

'Individuals should take more responsibility for themselves'; 'The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for'

- 5 Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

'People who are unemployed should have to take any job available or lose their benefits'; 'People who are unemployed should have the right to refuse a job they do not want'

- 6 Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

'Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside of our control'; 'Everyone has it in their own power to succeed'

- 7 Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

'The government should do more to help needy Britons, even if it means going deeper into debt'; 'The government today cannot afford to do much more to help the needy'

- 8 Which of the following statements do you agree with the most?

‘Our country has made the changes needed to give ethnic minorities equal rights with white people’; ‘Our country needs to continue making changes to give ethnic minorities equal rights with white people’

- 9 To what extent do you feel concerned about the following issues?

Extremely concerned, very concerned, somewhat concerned, slightly concerned, not concerned

- a The state of the public finances in Britain
 - b Tax avoidance
 - c The future of the NHS
 - d Care for the elderly
 - e Tuition fees for university
 - f Leisure facilities/community spaces
 - g Transportation
 - h Environmental issues (e.g. climate change/the environment)
 - i The gap between rich and poor in the UK
 - j Unemployment/access to work
 - k Living costs
 - l Crime and anti-social behaviour
 - m Online privacy
 - n Affordable housing
 - o Welfare and benefits
 - p Britain’s relationship with the EU
 - q Discrimination in British society (gender, age, race, sexuality)
 - r Conflicts in foreign countries
 - s Immigration
 - t Threat from extremism
- 10 We are interested in the extent to which different policy proposals would make you more likely to vote in the next general election. From the list below, please select up to three proposals that would make you more likely to vote for a

political party. If none would make you more likely to vote, then please select 'none of the above'

- a Guaranteeing jobs/apprenticeships for long-term unemployed young people
 - b Reducing the cost of higher education (e.g. through bursary schemes)
 - c Raising the national minimum wage for young people
 - d Reducing transportation costs for young people
 - e Increasing spending on mental health provision for young people
 - f Improving careers advice in schools
 - g Retaining housing benefit for under-25s
 - h Ensuring that sport and leisure facilities are affordable and accessible for all young people
 - i Enforcing minimum wage payments for interns (even if it could lead to fewer work experience opportunities)
 - j Reinstating Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)
 - k Strengthening citizenship education and teaching of politics in school
 - l Investing in youth clubs and youth services
 - m Lowering the voting age to 16
 - n Banning the Mosquito (the device that emits high pitch noises that only people under 25 can hear, used to disperse people)
 - o None of the above would make me more likely to vote
- 11 To what extent would the following motivate you to vote?
- To a great extent, to some extent, not much, not much at all, not sure*
- a A policy or set of policies that you strongly disagree with
 - b A policy or set of policies that you strongly agree with
 - c A sense of duty

- 12 To what extent would the following things make you more likely to vote?

Definitely more likely to vote, probably more likely to vote, neither more nor less likely to vote, probably less likely to vote, definitely less likely to vote

- a If politicians were more active on social media
 - b If I had clearer information about what the parties stand for
 - c If there was a clear difference between what different political parties stand for
 - d If there were more MPs under the age of 35
 - e If there were more women MPs
 - f If there were more ethnic minority MPs
 - g If there were more MPs from a working class background
 - h If the candidate was from my local area
 - i If politicians set a better example in debates and discussions
 - j If I felt that voting would make a difference to my life
 - k If I felt that voting would make a difference to the issues I care about
- 13 To what extent would the following things make you more likely to vote?

Definitely more likely to vote, probably more likely to vote, neither more nor less likely to vote, probably less likely to vote, definitely less likely to vote

- a If I received a text message reminder on election day
- b If I knew via social media that my friends and family had voted
- c If celebrities and musicians who I admire told me that I should vote
- d If I had someone to go with to the polling station on the day
- e If I could vote online

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The next election is set to be the closest and most unpredictable in living memory. The British political system is being shaken up in a way not seen for at least 70 years, with the Conservative and Labour parties no longer the dominant electoral forces they once were. It is in this context that young people could find themselves becoming a significant electoral force. The Scottish Referendum demonstrated the impact that the youth vote can have: yet young people still need to be convinced of the importance of voting. They remain less likely to vote than older generations, and many are disengaged from traditional politics completely.

Based on a representative survey and focus groups, this report presents a detailed look at 18 to 25-year-olds ahead of the general election: whether they plan to vote, what issues are they concerned about, and what policies would make them more likely to vote. It also looks at what larger reforms young people want to see, and what tools can be used to nudge them towards the voting booth.

The research finds over half of young people say they will vote in 2015, and a further quarter say they will probably vote. The task for political parties and third sector organisations is to turn this intention into action. The research shows that young people want clear policies that tackle unemployment, affordable housing, living costs, the cost of education and mental health. They also want to see more diversity among MPs, better behaviour and better use of social media to communicate policies to young people. The youth vote is there to be won: this report calls on all parties to realise this potential and reap the rewards come May 2015.

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