

United Kingdom: Democracy under pressure?

Comparing the political participation of British youngsters and British oldsters



Paper for 'Social Structures and Political Mobilization'

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1. Introduction

‘What will get Britain’s youth voting?’. This headline decorated the front-page of the Telegraph (2014). According to the article, research from the Hansard Society had revealed that solely 12 per cent of people under the 25 were planning on voting next year. Over the past decade, a large amount of journalists and academics have claimed that the number of young people voting at general elections has declined in the United Kingdom (Kimberlee, 2002). In addition, it is not uncommon for politicians and journalists to label the British youth as ‘political apathetic’. British oldsters, in contrast, are often pictured as trustworthy voters, with a wide range of political interests (Sloam, 2007).

Figure 1. Percentage of voter turnout in the UK, 1945-2010.

Year	Percentage of voter turnout
2015	66.1%*
2010	65.77
2005	61.36
2001	59.38
1997	71.46
1992	77.83
1987	75.42
1983	72.81
1979	76.00
1974	78.94
1970	72.15
1966	75.96
1964	77.17
1959	78.71
1955	76.78
1951	81.89
1950	83.61
1945	72.55

* Source: House of Commons Research Paper, 2015

The British democracy is often said to be facing a crisis of democracy, which is mostly blamed on the decline in voter turnout at general elections (Centre for Research Into Election and Social Trends, 2014). As can be seen in figure 1, voter turnout has been declining since 1997, with an absolute low reached in 2001. In that year, turnout could not even reach the 60% (figure 1). But a lack of electoral participation is not the only problem: as figure 2 shows, the amount of non-

electoral activity is limited as well. Almost no Britain’s join a demonstration, few boycott a product and about 1/3 have signed a petition in the last year. Participation of citizens is a key element of any democracy, since any well-functioning democracy should generate the wants and needs of the people. Low participation is thus seen as a problem. Although low voter turnout does not exactly improve the legitimacy of a democracy, the real problem might be the unequal participation of the old and the young in the United Kingdom. If young people indeed stay away from any form of political participation, this could generate a great inequality. According to Lijphart, unequal political participation poses a threat for democracies, since “unequal turnout spells unequal political influence” (Lijphart, 1997, p. 1). It would mean that the democracy is no longer generating the wants and needs of all people, but solely of certain groups of people in society.

Figure 2. Non-electoral participation in the UK

	Yes	No	Total
Joined a demonstration			
Frequency	499	12894	13393
Percentage	3.73%	96.27%	100%
Signed a petition			
Frequency	4729	8637	13366
Percentage	35.38%	64.62%	100%
Boycotted a product			
Frequency	2988	10376	13364
Percentage	22.36%	77.64%	100%

Is the British democracy really in crisis because of unequal participation? Are British oldsters participating more than British youngsters, or is the political participation of British youngsters just overlooked? In order to ‘safe’ the British democracy, solving this puzzle is pressingly relevant. The resource question reads as follows: ‘To what extent does the political participation between youngsters and oldsters in the United Kingdom differ, and how can we explain these differences?’

2. Theoretical Frame

The media has often blamed British youngsters for lacking political participation because of their ‘political apathetic’ nature, but many youth-oriented interest groups have argued that this is not the case (Kimberlee, 2010; British Youth Council, 1995). This paper will look at alternative explanations to investigate whether youngsters really participate less.

According to Kimberlee (2010), young people indeed vote less than older people, but not necessarily because of voluntary reasons, but because of inconvenient lifestyles. Young people generally have a higher level of mobility: they often do not have an owner-occupied house and move around more. This could result into registration problems and make it more difficult for young people to vote. Old people, in contrast, show a lower amount of mobility, and are often tied down to one place. Younger people are also more tied to a specific time schedule, whether this involves school or work. Retirees don’t face any time crunch and can easier confirm to the time limits set on voting.

Kimberlee (2010) also offers another explanation to theorize that young people vote less than old people in the United Kingdom specifically. According to him, different youth-oriented interested groups in the United Kingdom have argued that political parties fail to attract young people:

It can be argued that rather than young people being apathetic it is in fact the politicians and parties that are indifferent, uninterested and complacent, as they do not seem to give consideration to the extremely difficult position that young people are facing, or contemplate how young people will be affected by the proposals in the legislation they produce. (British Youth Council, 1995, p. 1)

The United Kingdom shows very few young parliament members: at the 1997 elections, only 11 MPs were under the age of 30 were elected. This number was zero during the 1992-1997 parliament. That same election, solely 4 percent of Labor candidates, 6 per cent of Conservative candidates and 10 per cent of Liberal Democrat candidates were under 30 years old (Cole, 1997). “With the parties providing so few role models, politicians and politics are inevitably going to continue to appear remote and irrelevant to the young” (Kimberlee, 2010, p. 90). Younger people

feel as if politicians do not listen to them, and they feel like their interests are seldom considered during the policy making process (White et al., 2000). Political parties, on the other hand, target older people because they are a larger demographic group in the UK, and can thus constitute more votes (Henn & Foard, 2011). If we base ourselves on the rational choice theory, people only participate in politics when they feel that they have something to gain from it (Downs, 1957). The incentive to vote might thus be higher for older people, resulting in a higher level of electoral participation than younger people.

According to Inglehart's cultural theory (1977), participation between younger and older people should be different because of value differences. The current seniors in Britain grew up in a different time than the British youngsters. When a society develops socio-economically, the values of its citizens start to change as well. Inglehart distinguishes between two values: materialist and post-materialist values. When people grow up in a period of minimal welfare or during undesirable circumstances (like war) they are inclined to favor materialist values. This means that their focus will be on issues such as economic stability, security and economic growth. This idea is underpinned by Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs-hypothesis: people's basic needs need to be fulfilled first, before they can start to think about issues that go beyond these needs. Post-materialist values go beyond these needs by focusing on non-material needs, like equal rights for all, environmental protection, self-expression, self-actualization and personal freedom (Musa, 2006).

One's basic values are mostly established in your pre-adult life and are very unlikely to shift through the course of your life. Since the current British seniors grew up in a time of lower economic development, they are expected to be less post-materialistic than the British youth. This, naturally, should establish differences in their participation behavior. The appearance of new issues in politics is often labelled as 'new politics' as oppose to 'old politics': "In new politics those citizens and political forces who give priority to self-actualization, aesthetic needs, global responsibility and full scale democratization challenge those who keep on emphasizing economic growth and physical security" (Todosijevic, 2009, p. 3). Post materialists are less interested in "conventional party politics" and show higher activity in "unconventional political participation" (p. 15). Although a preference for a political party is clearly present among post materialists, they do not identify with a party and their electoral participation can be described as "weak" at best (p. 31). Moreover, post materialists search for "elite-directing" rather than "elite-

directed” forms of participation (Blais & Rubenson, 2012). We could thus expect post-materialists to have a lower degree of electoral participation, but a higher degree of non-electoral participation.

2.4 Hypothesis

Judging from this theory, young people are expected to show a lower amount of electoral participation than older people. Younger people have a more inconvenient lifestyle that makes it more difficult to vote, feel like they can’t influence the policies of political parties and possess post materialist values that disfavor conventional party politics . However, younger people are more likely to value post materialist values and ‘new politics’, resulting in a higher amount of non-electoral participation. This reasoning has resulted in the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: British oldsters (65+ years) participate more in electoral processes than British youngsters (18-29 years).

Hypothesis 2: British youngsters (18-29 years) participate more in non-electoral processes than British oldsters (65+ years).

3. Research Design

3.1 Data

3.1.1 Dataset

All data has been retrieved from the European Social Survey and the Vermont State Data Center.

3.1.2 Case selection

Solely the data of the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands were used. For the United Kingdom, there were 13304 respondents in total. The data was divided into data from old respondents and data from young respondents, which resulted in 1914 ‘young’ respondents and 3301 ‘old’ respondents.

3.2 Operationalization

Electoral participation was investigated by looking at two components: the average voting turnout and the average amount of party memberships. The voting turnout was researched via the variable ‘voting’, which showed the average amount of voter turnout during the last election, measured in year 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012. The average amount of party memberships was researched via the variable ‘partymem’ during the same years.

Non-electoral participation was investigated by looking at three components: the amount of people that have demonstrated, signed a petition or boycotted a product in the last year. The variables for these components were named ‘demon’, ‘petit’ and ‘boycot’. An average of the results was used, measured in the years 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010 and 2012. ‘Young’ respondents were seen as having an age between 18 and 29 years. ‘Old’ respondents were seen as having an age of 65 and above; the oldest respondent in the United Kingdom was a 125 years old.

3.3 Methodology

Based on the data, numerous cross tables are presented that show the amount of participation and non-participation of the young respondents and old respondents in electoral and non-electoral processes. These results are compared in order to confirm or reject the hypothesis.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Electoral participation

Figure 3a: Average voter turnout (2001, 2005, 2010)

Did you vote at the last election?			
	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years			
Frequency	749	1160	1909
Percentage	39.24%	60.76%	100%
65+ years			
Frequency	2819	468	3287
Percentage	85.76%	14.24%	100%
Total			
Frequency	3568	1628	5196
Percentage	68.67%	31.33%	100%

Figure 3b: Average party membership (2002-2012)

Party membership			
	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years			
Frequency	12	1611	1623
Percentage	0.74%	99.26%	100%
65+ years			
Frequency	166	2471	2637
Percentage	6.3%	93.7%	100%
Total			
Frequency	178	4082	4260
Percentage	4.18%	95.82%	100%

In figure 3a, we see that the voter turnout of young people is less than half the turnout of people above 65. It is unlikely that such a large difference in voter turnout is solely caused by lack of time or registration problems of the youth. It is likelier that the older-aged-oriented political parties in the United Kingdom also play a role. This is confirmed by figure 3b, which shows that a party membership is more than eight times more common under people above 65 than among people under 29. This illustrates that young people indeed feel less engaged to a political party

than older people, and are less active in conventional politics. This could result in younger people being less influential in political parties, consequently lowering their incentive to vote. Both figures together clearly show that electoral participation is considerably lower among young Britain’s and both results are in line with the expectation that post materialists are less inclined to participate in conventional party politics. Older people vote a lot more than young people, but also more than the average turn out in the United Kingdom.

Figure 4: Voter turnout per election (2001, 2005, 2010)

Did you vote at the last election?	18-29 years			65+ years		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
2010 (measured in 2012)						
Frequency	104	183	287	577	80	657
Percentage	36.24%	63.76%	100%	87.82%	12.18%	100%
2005 (measured in 2006)						
Frequency	141	200	340	497	88	585
Percentage	41.47%	58.53%	100%	84.96%	15.04%	100%
2001 (measured in 2002)						
Frequency	129	156	285	383	82	465
Percentage	45.26%	54.74%	100%	82.37%	17.63%	100%
Total						
Frequency	374	539	912	1457	250	1707
Percentage	41%	59%	100%	85.35%	14.65%	100%

Interestingly enough, when we look at figure 4, the ‘age gap’ in voter turnout has increased over the last decade. The last three elections, voter turnout of young people has decreased, whilst the voter turnout of older people has increased. When we only look at voter turnout, the problem is thus getting worse. Again, it is hard to account this purely to the fact of lifestyle differences: problems that the youth might have with voting registration are unlikely to increase this much over the years. The cultural theory of Inglehart could possibly explain these results, since the economic crisis of 2008 might have increased materialism under youngsters. However, this cannot explain the rise in voter turnout of older citizens. These results could also indicate that youngsters feel increasingly alienated from political parties. Political parties might not give youngsters enough incentives to vote.

4.2 Non-electoral participation

Figure 5a: Demonstrating (2002-2012), 18-29 years and 65+ years

Did you demonstrate in the last 12 months?	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years			
Frequency	75	1837	1912
Percentage	3.92%	96.08%	100%
65+ years			
Frequency	70	3229	3299
Percentage	3.03%	96.97%	100%
Total			
Frequency	145	5066	5211
Percentage	2.78%	97.22%	100%

Figure 5b: Signing petitions (2002-2012), 18-29 years and 65+ years

Did you sign a petition in the last 12 months?	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years			
Frequency	612	1296	1908
Percentage	32.08%	67.92%	100%
65+ years			
Frequency	972	2318	3290
Percentage	29.54%	70.46%	100%
Total			
Frequency	1584	3614	5198
Percentage	30.47%	69.53%	100%

Figure 5c: Boycotting a product (2002-2012), 18-29 years and 65+ years

Did you boycott a product in the last 12 months?	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years			
Frequency	269	1639	1908
Percentage	14.1%	85.9%	100%
65+ years			
Frequency	710	2580	3290
Percentage	21.58%	78.42%	100%
Total			
Frequency	979	4219	5198
Percentage	18.83%	81.17%	100%

Figure 5a until figure 5c show the three different components that were used to measure non-electoral participation. The results are various: young people indeed score higher on non-electoral participation when it involves demonstrating and signing petitions, although the differences are small. Boycotting a product, however, is done more frequently by older respondents. This last result is in contradiction with Ingleharts cultural theory. We would expect post materialists (youngsters) to participate more non-electorally than materialists. However, these results are weak at best, and in the case of ‘boycotting a product’ contradictory. When we compare these results with the average non-electoral participation in the United Kingdom (figure 2), we see that both youngsters and oldsters score lower on non-electoral participation. Again, we would not expected this for the first group, since people between the age of 18-29 are most likely to value post materialist values and thus should participate more non-electorally.

4.3 Comparing political participation between the UK, France and the Netherlands

Figure 6: Voter Turnout in the UK, France and the Netherlands (2002-2010)

UK		France		The Netherlands	
Year	Percentage of voter turnout	Year	Percentage of voter turnout	Year	Percentage of voter turnout
2010	65.77	2012	46.08	2012	74.56
2005	61.36	2007	43.43	2010	75.40
2001	59.38	2002	47.25	2006	80.35
1997	71.46	1997	59.86	2003	80.04
1992	77.83	1993	61.29	2002	79.06

What does participation look like in countries similar to the UK? As can be seen in figure 6, the democracies of France and the Netherlands are also suffering from a lower voter turnout than a decade ago. However, large differences can be detected. France shows a percentage of voter turnout that is much lower than in the UK, whilst the Netherlands shows a percentage of voter turnout that is much higher than in the UK. Figure 7a shows the average voter turnout per group. In France, older citizens vote considerably more than the average turnout, but youngsters aren’t that far below the average turn out. The Netherlands also shows an ‘age gap’, but not one that is as extensive as in the United Kingdom. In the UK, the ‘age gap’ between the turnout of

youngsters and oldsters is the largest and the turnout of youngsters in the UK deviates most from the average turnout in the country. Although an ‘age gap’ is present in all three countries, the problem seems the largest in the UK.

Figure 7a: Average voter turnout (2002-2012) in the UK, France and Netherlands

	UK			France			The Netherlands		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
Did you vote last election?									
18-29 years	749 39.24%	1160 60.76%	1909 100%	563 43%	746 57%	1309 100%	961 68.4%	444 31.6%	1405 100%
65+ years	2819 85.76%	468 14.24%	3287 100%	1575 84.25%	295 15.75%	1870 100%	2170 87.04%	323 12.96%	2493 100%
Total	3568 68.67%	1628 31.33%	5196 100%	2138 67.25%	1041 32.75%	3179 100%	3131 80.32%	767 19.67%	3898 100%

Figure 7b: Average product boycotts (2002-2012) in the UK, France and Netherlands

	UK			France			Netherlands		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
18-29 years	269 14.1%	1639 85.9%	1908 100%	337 24.58%	1034 75.42%	1371 100%	138 10.88%	1268 89.12%	1406 100%
65+ years	710 21.58%	2580 78.42%	3290 100%	388 20.31%	1522 79.69%	1910 100%	150 6.47%	2170 93.53%	2320 100%
Total	979 18.83%	4219 81.17%	5198 100%	725 22.1%	2556 77.9%	3281 100%	288 7.77%	3438 92.23%	3726 100%

Lastly, figure 7b offers an overview of the different levels of boycotting products, a non-electoral component of political participation. France shows a minimal age gap, but the Netherlands and the United Kingdom show a clear difference between 18-29 year olds and people above the 65.

5. Conclusion

According to Inglehart, the socioeconomic conditions of your pre-adult life decide whether you are inclined to favor materialist or post materialist values. Since British youngsters have experienced a higher level of socioeconomic welfare than British oldsters, it is expected that they favor post materialist values, whereas British oldsters favor materialists values. This effects the level of political participation between the two groups, since post materialists are likelier to favor non-electoral participation and materialists favor electoral participation.

Judging from this theory, the first hypothesis read: ‘British oldsters (65+ years) participate more in electoral processes than British youngsters (18-29 years).’ The data from this research shows that British oldsters indeed participate more on two electoral processes: voting, and being a member of a political party. This underpins the notion that materialist participate more in conventional party politics than post materialist. In addition, these results can also be explained via the rational choice theory. British political parties are barely focused on the interests of younger people and are often represented by older people, lowering the incentives for younger people to vote. Thirdly, the lifestyle of youngsters, which makes them busy and more mobile, increases the problems they face with registration. Some youngsters might not be able to vote because of such problems, although they want to.

Post materialist prefer to participate non-electorally, thus the second hypothesis read: ‘British youngsters (18-29 years) participate more in non-electoral processes than British oldsters (65+ years)’. This hypothesis cannot be confirmed via the results of this paper. The difference between the participation of young and old people are relatively small. British youngsters indeed participate more on two out of the three non-electoral activities (demonstrating and signing petitions), although the differences with older people are small. British youth showed a lower percentage of participation when it comes to boycotting products. These results contradict Inglehart’s cultural theory, and show that post materialist or materialist values have little influence on non-electoral participation in the United Kingdom.

The fact that young people participate almost equally with older people when it comes to non-electoral participation, makes it unjustified to call youngsters ‘political apathetic’ whilst describing older citizens as trustworthy, political citizens. Further research is needed to explain

why the levels of electoral participation show a large age gap, whilst levels of non-electoral participation do not.

6. Discussion

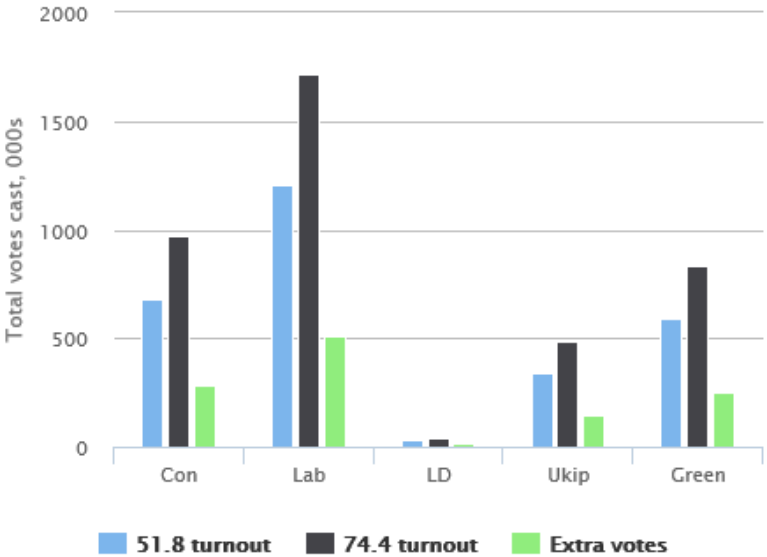
Voter turnout in the United Kingdom has been low since 1997. Is the United Kingdom facing a crisis of democracy? Although voter turnout has been low for the last three elections, it has also been increasing. The Centre for Research Into Election and Social Trends (2004) remains positive about the overall political participation in the United Kingdom:

People do not seem more disengaged from the political system. Participation outside the ballot box has increased somewhat over the last fifteen or so years. Levels of political interest have not fallen, and people remain confident in their own ability to engage with the political process and to believe in the importance of voting at elections. (p. 22)

However, although voter turnout has been on the rise again, the gap between the turnout of young and old people is getting larger. The last three elections, young people have constantly voted less, whilst the turnout of older citizens has increased. This paper focused on the extent of unequal participation between young and old citizens in the United Kingdom. The conclusion stated that unequal participation between these groups is very much present. One question remains: to what extent does this unequal participation pose a threat for the British democracy?

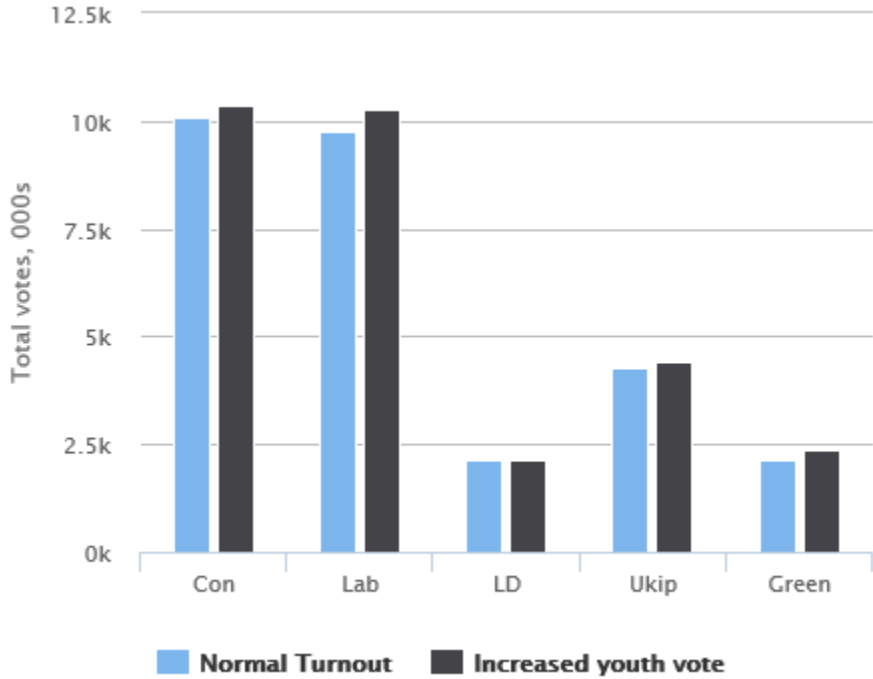
Unequal participation between the young and old is mostly present on the electoral level. Young people vote considerably less and hold fewer party memberships than older-aged persons. An 'age gap' in voter turnout is also present in France and the Netherlands, but it is the biggest in the UK. As a consequence, the political landscape changes. Figure 8 and figure 9 show that the elections of 2010 could have had different results if young people (18-24 years) voted as often as pensioners. Electoral participation establishes political influence. With a lower amount of electoral participation, young people hold a lower amount of political influence. Both figures show that more electoral participation of the youth could significantly change the balance between the Liberal democrats (LD) and the Greens, with the Greens being in favor. In addition, young people do not 'compensate' for their low turnout on the non-electoral level: rates of non-electoral participation under youngsters is also lower than the British average. Younger people are only slightly more likely to demonstrate.

Figure 8: Turnout if young people voted as often as pensioners



Source: Kirkup, 2015

Figure 9: Normal and adjusted 2010 election results



Source: Kirkup, 2015

Although cliché to say, young people are the citizens of the future. The fact that their electoral participation is very low and declining, shows that the British democracy in its current form might be terminal. The 'age gap' is less of a problem in countries like France and the Netherlands. As been stated before, democracies depend upon the participation of its citizens. If a democracy is for all people, it should also be supported by all people. The low degrees of political participation by youngsters can have far-reaching consequences for the legitimacy of the British democracy: can policy-making still be justified when such a large part of society (the young) had no influence on it? In my opinion, it cannot. According to this research paper, solely 36.24% of the youngsters voted during the elections of 2010, as oppose to 87.82% of the oldsters. This large gap creates a large gap in political influence, which makes the British democracy less legitimate.

The most pressing matter for British democracy right now should be to get youngsters voting. Luckily, there are multiple ways to achieve this. Firstly, solutions should be found for the registration problems of young people, e.g. it should be made easier to reregister when you have moved to a different district. Secondly, political parties should engage more with younger people. They should address young people specifically to vote; give attention to the political interests of youngsters and attract more young candidates for parliament. Young people have to feel connected with the political system of the United Kingdom, so educating them about politics early on in school could be helpful as well.

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