Convenors of the UK Political Studies Association Specialist Group on Young People’s Politics – written evidence (CCE0087)

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Section 1: Introduction
1. One of the most pressing issues of concern in British democracy is the lack of public engagement in representative politics and democratic governance, which some have viewed as a crisis in citizenship (Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). The evidence presented here focuses on trends in the civic and political engagement of younger citizens. Young people are the ones who react most to the changing social, economic and political environment, and so offer us a glimpse of the future of our democracy.

2. On the one hand, younger citizens are interested in politics and engage in many forms of civic and political action (Norris 2003; Sloam 2016). On the other hand, they have low levels of knowledge about politics, low levels of trust in politicians and political parties, have little contact with politicians or government officials, and are reluctant to participate in representative democracy.

3. This submission concentrates on questions 1, 4, 5, 7 and 9 of the Committee’s call for evidence: the civic and political engagement of young people; the current laws on the political franchise; the role of government, political institutions, schools and universities in promoting democratic engagement; and the particular barriers faced by different groups of young people (according to socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity) in participating in the British political system.

4. It makes specific recommendations about how interactions between young people and politicians and public officials might be intensified, and how educational interventions (through schools and higher education institutions) could better promote civic and political literacy. Together these proposals would increase young people’s internal efficacy (confidence in their ability to participate in democratic politics) and their external efficacy (belief that they can make a difference) (Kisby and Sloam 2009, 2012).

Section 2: Youth Civic and Political Engagement in Comparative Perspective
1. Young people have become increasingly disenchanted with electoral politics. This is particularly the case in the UK, where younger citizens are much less likely to vote in general elections than older generations, previous generations of young people, and their peers elsewhere in Europe. Around 63% of 18 to 24-year-olds voted in the 1992 general election, but this figure fell to about 40% between 2001 and 2015. In other large European democracies, youth turnout in national elections ranges between 59% and 82% (Figure 1) (Sloam 2016).

2. Young people in the UK are interested in politics – as interested as their peers elsewhere in Europe – but are put off by the political system. They have developed new conceptions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘politics’ (Marsh et. al 2007), and have turned to alternative, issue-based modes of civic and political engagement (Norris 2003): from voting, to ethical shopping, to online petitions, to demonstrations, to poetry slams. These non-electoral forms of participation have been facilitated by new technologies, which have reduced the costs and increased the speed of political communication (Bimber et al. 2005). The challenge for politicians and government officials is to adapt to these changes in young people’s politics.
The 2017 UK General Election

3. **The increased youth turnout in 2017 can be seen as something of a success story.** According to IpsosMori data, the participation of 18 to 24-year-olds rose 21 points to 64% – from 43% in 2015 and a low of 37% in 2005. Figure 2 illustrates that youth turnout returned – for this election at least – to the levels of the early 1990s. 2017 was a youth surge rather than a general increase in electoral participation. So, the difference between the participation of 18 to 24-year-olds and all citizens shrank from 23 points in 2015 to five points in 2017.

4. However, it should be noted that **youth turnout remains well below (by nine points) the turnout rates of 55 to 64-year-olds and over 65s (both 73% in 2017).**

5. **There are important intra-generational differences in voting patterns.** Figure 3 displays turnout levels for 18-24-year-olds by social grade, student status, gender and ethnicity. It is immediately apparent that social grade has a significant bearing upon electoral participation. 68% of 18-24-year-olds of a high social grade voted, compared to 50% of those of a low social grade. As expected, full-time students were also more likely to turn out to vote than the average young person (at a rate of 67%). So, we might say there is no turnout gap between young people of high social grade or in full-time education and the average UK citizen. **The problem, more precisely defined, involves the non-participation of young people from deprived backgrounds or of low socio-economic status.**
6. The unexpected gap in participation between young women and young men (66% to 62%) is statistically small and may be explained by the strong support of young women for the Labour Party in 2017. The lower than average participation of young Black and Minority Ethnic (BMEs) citizens (at 59%) is a cause for concern, but the results are hard to interpret without separating BMEs into distinct ethnic groups.

7. The higher youth turnout in 2017 also reflected strong support for the Labour Party (62% of 18 to 24-year-olds), which mobilised young people by addressing the issues they cared about with concrete policy proposals, e.g. on housing, the NHS and higher education. The engagement of young people also reflected disillusionment and anger with the negative impact of public policy on younger generations after the financial crisis.

8. Despite the unprecedented levels of youth support for Labour in 2017, this state of affairs is not inevitable. In 2010, the proportions of 18 to 24-year-olds voting Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat were almost identical (around 30% apiece). So there is no ideological reason why political parties other than Labour cannot (successfully) tailor their policies to appeal to younger generations.

**Systemic Barriers to Youth Participation**

9. In the UK, the first-past-the-post electoral system is problematic with regard to youth participation. Young people in the UK have less viable parties to vote for, and many constituencies can be seen as ‘dead rubbers’ where only one party and candidate have a realistic chance of winning. In other countries, with proportional systems of representation, turnout rates tend to be much higher, and resources for party campaigning are spread more evenly across the country.

10. Another factor that inhibits higher turnout amongst young people is the prioritization of older generations in public policy in recent years, e.g. the triple lock on pensions, the trebling of university tuition fees. If young people already feel detached from mainstream electoral politics, this is likely to make them even less likely to vote. If this happens, politicians are even more likely to ignore them. And so the vicious circle continues.

11. In Germany, by contrast, public policy succeeded in shielding young people from the worst effects of the financial crisis, e.g. youth unemployment actually fell during this period.

12. In the UK, there is also the additional issue of voter registration. With the introduction of Individual Voter Registration in 2014, over a million citizens (disproportionately young people) fell off the electoral roll.
Section 3: Pathways to Youth Civic and Political Engagement

Political Contact

1. In the existing body of research, one of the most interesting comparative findings is that young people in the UK have the lowest level of contact with politicians and government officials out of all established European democracies (Sloam 2013). This is problematic in that the existing literature also highlights the effectiveness of such direct engagement between citizens and political activists, politicians and government officials (Green and Gerber 2004).

2. Recommendations:
   i. Each UK MP should commit to holding at least one interactive session (discussions over concrete issues) in each school (primary and secondary) in their constituency over the course of a five-year parliament.
   ii. Each local councillor should commit to holding at least one interactive session (discussions over concrete issues) in each school in their ward over each term in office.
   iii. The work of school councils should feed into these sessions and be monitored by Ofsted.

1) Political Youth Organisations

3. Political youth organisations, such as political parties’ youth factions and the British Youth Council, are important pathways for young people to channel their political interest and learn the important civic and political skills they need to participate actively throughout their lives. For those young people under the legal voting age, it may also be the only way to express their political preferences and interests. However, recent research on the members of these groups shows some worrying results (Rainsford, forthcoming).

   First, the members of party youth factions come from similar socio-demographic backgrounds. Unless the youth factions become more diverse we are likely to see a continuation of a non-diverse group of elected politicians at all levels. The political youth organisations themselves are therefore potential barriers for certain groups of young people to engage politically.

   Second, parties’ youth factions are less likely, in comparison to other organisations, to use their members for recruitment. The decline in their membership may thus have less to do with the changing attitudes of young people and more to do with their recruitment strategies.

   Finally, even though the BYC has close links with Parliament, their members do not trust actors in the political system. This is concerning because these young people are engaging with politics, and many will have some experience of meeting politicians, but they still do not trust them.

4. Recommendations:
   i. Political parties’ youth factions and the BYC should reflect on their recruitment and engagement practices to recruit and retain a more diverse membership.
   ii. Political parties’ youth factions should use their members to actively recruit new members.
   iii. MPs and councillors should reach out to the BYC and their local youth councils or parliaments to build up a working relationship on important issues.

Political Literacy

5. Another problem that hinders youth participation in democracy is lack of civic and political knowledge. It is well known that citizens who know more about democracy and how it works are more likely to become engaged (Galston 2001). Yet levels of knowledge about politics and democracy in the UK are relatively low. This situation is made all the more problematic by the proliferation of news sources (online or through the social media) and the deliberate use of ‘false news’ by populists and even foreign powers. The EU referendum was a clear case where false or exaggerated arguments were used (unscrupulously) on both sides of the debate.
6. **Citizenship education** (which we strongly support) was introduced into all English secondary schools in 2002 through its inclusion as a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum. It was introduced as a means of promoting active and responsible citizenship, with ‘political literacy’ one of its three core strands (Kisby 2012). A clear aim of citizenship lessons was to increase levels of civic engagement and the evidence clearly suggests some success in this regard (see e.g. Keating et al. 2010; Whiteley 2014). Following a consultation exercise, a new slimmed-down citizenship curriculum has been taught in schools in England since September 2014. This represented a significant change, with a **shift away from a focus on understanding political concepts and civic and political participation** towards constitutional history and financial literacy, and an even greater emphasis on voluntary work (Kisby 2017).

7. In addition, although citizenship remained a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum, Academies and Free Schools have been given the freedom to opt out of following the National Curriculum. At the same time, the development of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and the focus on the EBacc subjects (English, mathematics, history, geography, the sciences, languages) has had the effect of undermining the National Curriculum and non-EBacc subjects, such as citizenship (Kisby 2017). In our view, **all young people should receive citizenship lessons, irrespective of the kind of school they attend**.

8. Preventing people from voting until they are 18 means that many citizens do not get a chance to participate in general elections until they are into their 20s. In our view, political literacy would be enhanced by lowering the voting age to 16, as it would provide an opportunity to refocus citizenship education on electoral politics. **If young people were allowed to vote while still at school, it would also increase the likelihood of them participating in electoral politics in later life**. As voting is habit-forming (Gerber et al. 2003), this would have a positive, long-term effect on electoral turnout. **Lowering the voting age would also mean that ‘youth’ issues and the views of young people would be more likely to be included in the policy-making process** (Briggs 2016).

9. **Recommendations:**

   i. Ensure that all schools provide citizenship lessons to secondary school pupils.

   ii. Provide the resources needed to train significantly more specialist staff to deliver citizenship lessons.

   iii. Strengthen citizenship education in schools by increasing the time that schools devote to the subject in general, and the teaching of political literacy in particular.

   iv. Strengthen the role of Ofsted in inspecting citizenship education by providing distinct measures (including level of teacher training) that have (or need to be) reached.

   v. Provide resources to existing organisations, such as the Association for Citizenship Teaching, to establish a national network to monitor these changes.

   vi. Mandate that universities and HE colleges, as part of their widening participation and community engagement commitments, hold democracy days in local schools (and provide support to citizenship teachers) as a means of promoting civic and political literacy.

   vii. Lower the voting age to 16 for all elections.

**References**


European Social Survey Rounds 1 to 6 (2002-2016) Data file editions 2.3., 3.3., 3.5., 3.6., 4.4. and 6.5,


