

# Young people and political engagement in Wales

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## Introduction

This paper provides an overview of research on political engagement among young people and focuses on public opinion research conducted in Wales by the Commission since 2002. It has been prepared primarily to inform the work of the new Youth Voting Network in Wales but also to serve as an update, building on two recent Commission research publications:

- The Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter engagement and young people*;
- The Electoral Commission (2004) *Political engagement among young people: an update*.

The first section of this paper summarises the extensive evidence base on political engagement among young people and makes use of research conducted at a UK-wide level. The second section draws on surveys and qualitative research undertaken in Wales by the Commission since 2002. In our concluding section we draw together the findings from our research projects and consider some of the key challenges facing the political community in Wales.

### 1. Political engagement among young people

Our 2002 report, *Voter engagement among young people* (written for us by a team at the University of Manchester), identified non-registration – possibly as high as 15% in some constituencies and higher still among some age groups and communities – as one of several key obstacles to political participation. Others include:

- Alienation – the view that politics is ‘not for young people’;
- ‘Apathy’ – the lack of interest in politics;
- Knowledge – not knowing enough about politics;
- Inconvenience – e.g. voting is too time consuming.<sup>1</sup>

While these factors are not unique to young people, they seem to be more pronounced among younger age groups. Low turnout among the young in 2001 was, in part, a product of the nature of that particular election but it also reflected a growing negative attitude among the young to the process of elections and politics. This has been growing over the past decade or so – with a possible cohort effect at work – and compounded by a greater sense among the young that electoral participation is less a ‘duty’, more a ‘right’.

Since 2002, the Commission and others have conducted several research projects covering a number of issues and themes including interest in politics, political participation and electoral modernisation. These are summarised in our 2004 paper *Political engagement among young people: an update*. Among the main findings of our research has been that young people are not ‘apathetic’ towards politics but are disengaged from the political process and the politicians that are said to represent them: ‘...if we take [‘apathy’] to mean

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<sup>1</sup> The Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter engagement and young people*.

laziness or an absence of interest, then [it] only goes so far in explaining why people do not vote...the issue...is about disaffection, not simply apathy'.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, research by MORI for The Commission identified 'disaffected youth' as one of five 'personalities' present in focus group discussions. Young people were described as having:

'...strong opinions, and [they] often feel passionately about public service delivery issues that impact on their life and work. However, they do not make the connection between their personal dissatisfaction with a particular aspect of public life, and participating in the traditional political processes as a way of expressing that dissatisfaction, or seeking a solution to these problems'.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the Commission's two audits of political engagement have found a strong aspiration on the part of young people to have a say in how the country is run. In the second, 64% of 18-24 year-olds agreed that they wanted to have a say in how the country is run. But the story is different when it comes to 'politics' (and voting) and our most recent audit found only 36% of young people saying they are even fairly interested in politics, compared to 41% of 35-54 year olds. This is, in part, a function of how young people, and others, perceive politics – young people see politics as something that other people do, or as a system with which they are neither particularly engaged nor enamoured<sup>4</sup> and politics has become something of a 'dirty word'.<sup>5</sup>

Our research has also found significant 'knowledge deficits' among the young (and, indeed, among all age groups). The first and second audits of political engagement found that the youngest age group (18-24 year olds) feel less knowledgeable about politics than those in older groups: the second found just 28% of those aged 16-24 saying they feel they know at least a fair amount about politics, compared to 43% of those aged 35-54.<sup>6</sup>

An ESRC-funded study by a team at the University of Cambridge and Birkbeck College, London found that nearly half of the 1,249 teenagers questioned thought that there were only around 100 Members of Parliament and only around one in ten knew that referendums are allowed in Britain. Although one in four (24%) didn't know that the UK was a member of the European Union, this compares with just 9 per cent in 1976 who didn't know about British membership of the EEC.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, writing in 2002, MORI's Roger Mortimore pointed out that '...it is surely significant that the difference [in political knowledge] between school children and young adults is not larger. Few of those who have acquired the right to vote seem to have made a

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<sup>2</sup> B. Marshall and M. Williams (2003) *Turnout, elections and attitudes towards voting*, Paper for EPOP Conference September 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Public opinion and the 2004 elections*.

<sup>4</sup> The Electoral Commission/Hansard Society (2004) *An audit of political engagement*.

<sup>5</sup> B. Marshall 'Is politics a dirty word?' *The register* (Electoral Commission newsletter) April 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The Electoral Commission/Hansard Society (2005) *An audit of political engagement 2*.

<sup>7</sup> D. Halpern, D. Hargreaves and Z. Morris (2004) *Social capital, participation and the causal role of socialisation*.

successful effort to acquire the knowledge to go with it, if they had not already picked this up at an earlier age...'<sup>8</sup>

The importance of the school years and parental and peer group influence in building political awareness and knowledge was further highlighted by the 2003 MORI/Nestlé Family Monitor study:

'Opinions formed in childhood are unlikely to remain unchanged through adult life, but they define the starting point as young adults first gain the franchise. If, for example, they reach the age of 18 with the conviction that political parties are worthless and that politicians are out-of-touch with the problems of the real world, they will be less receptive to what politicians and parties have to say, which in turn will make it harder to change their attitudes on other matters'.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, findings from the latest British Social Attitudes Survey challenge the commonly held view that political interest increases with age, especially among those groups of young people who already receive little political stimulation at home or at school and who receive little encouragement to take a real interest in politics by those working within it.<sup>10</sup>

Lower political knowledge and interest is both cause and effect of a lower electoral engagement and propensity to vote among the young. Our second audit found 28% of 18-24 year olds 'absolutely certain' to vote at the next general election, compared to 55% of those aged 35-54. While young people in the UK being less likely to vote at elections than older citizens is not an uncommon pattern across the democratic world, alarmingly, Mark Wattenberg has found that the 'new generation gap' in turnout is greater in the UK than among several other industrialised democracies.<sup>11</sup>

Wattenberg's analysis has led him to conclude that lower turnout among the young is, in part, caused by a lack of representation with 'young people's opinions on the issues...not being faithfully represented through the political process.' He disputes the theory that young people are satisfied with the way democracy is working and don't therefore participate – in fact, young people report significantly higher rates of satisfaction with how democracy is working compared with senior citizens in only two countries, New Zealand and the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> MORI Poll digest commentary column: <http://www.mori.com/digest/2002/c020906.shtml>.

<sup>9</sup> Nestlé Family Monitor (2003) *Young People's Attitudes towards Politics*, Nestlé.

<sup>10</sup> The National Centre for Social Research 4th edition (2004/05) Alison Park, 'Has modern politics disenchanted the young' in *British Social Attitudes – the 21st report*.

<sup>11</sup> M. Wattenberg (2003) 'Electoral Turnout: The New Generation Gap' in *British Elections & Parties Review* Vol.13, MPG Books Ltd.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

## 2. The picture in Wales

Having summarised findings from research conducted by the Commission and others across the UK, we now turn to look specifically at findings from Electoral Commission research projects conducted in Wales in advance of, and after, elections in 2003 and 2004.

### Electoral engagement and participation

As across the UK, young people have been less likely to turn out and vote in recent elections in Wales. As shown in Table 1 below, this was evident in the National Assembly for Wales elections in 2003, and the European Parliamentary elections in June 2004. It is estimated that as few as one in six, 16%, 18-24 year olds voted in the 2003 National Assembly for Wales elections, (reflecting, of course, lower turnout among all adults). This figure compares to an estimated 56% of 55+ year olds in 2003 and an overall turnout of 38%.

**Table 1: Estimated turnout among 18-24 year olds at selected elections in Wales**<sup>13</sup>

<b>Election</b>	<b>% Estimated turnout of 18-24 year olds in Wales</b>	<b>% Estimated turnout of 55+ year olds in Wales</b>
National Assembly for Wales 2003 (NOP)	16	56
European Parliament 2004 (ICM)	28	73

Both surveys undertaken by the Commission after the National Assembly for Wales elections 2003 (NOP) and the European Parliamentary and local elections in June 2004 (ICM) asked young people in Wales to explain why they did and why they did not vote. The most frequent reasons given by young people for not voting were circumstantial (as opposed to deliberate)<sup>14</sup> with 'circumstances on the day' preventing people from doing so – 19% said this was why they did not vote in June 2004 – and 'a lack of time' or 'being too busy' – 21% said this was why they did not vote in the Assembly elections and 15% said this in June 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Given the UK's secret ballot, turnout figures for different socio-demographic groups are estimates based on surveys of the public. It is common that there is an 'over-claim' in such surveys with higher proportions of survey respondents reporting having voted than the proportion of the electorate who actually did vote. Reported turnout in the NOP survey was weighted to actual turnout at the aggregate level.

<sup>14</sup> See R. Johnston and C. Pattie (2002) *Voters and non-voters in 2001*, paper presented at The Electoral Commission/Constitution Unit 'Turnout' conference, June 2002. It should be recognised that labelling reasons for non-voting in such a way is difficult, not least because a sense of that voting is a civic duty, and other factors, may cause some survey respondents to cite 'circumstantial' rather than 'deliberate' reasons for their abstention.

The NOP/Commission survey after the Assembly elections in 2003 found nearly half (47%) of young voters in Wales saying that they voted because they ‘wanted to have their say’ and nearly one fifth (18%) voted because it was their ‘right to vote’. Similarly, the ICM/Commission post-election survey in June 2004 found these to be the most common reasons – just over a third (34%) of young voters in Wales said it was their ‘right to vote’ and a quarter (26%) ‘wanted to have their say’.

On our behalf, NOP asked all young people whether different methods of voting would have made them more or less likely to have voted in the Welsh Assembly elections. Significant proportions identified voting by the telephone or by mobile phone (50%) and voting by post (41%) as methods to make them more likely to vote and a third said that voting via the internet would also encourage them to vote. However, while the electoral pilot schemes held in England and Wales since 2000, especially all-postal schemes, have delivered real improvements to turnout by making the process of voting more convenient, the potential impact of such initiatives should not be over-estimated.<sup>15</sup>

As we explained in *Political engagement among young people: an update*, lower turnout among the young is partly the product of dissatisfaction with the electoral and political process but may also be related to different attitudes towards voting. Our survey with ICM in 2004 found young people in Wales more likely than their older counterparts to say that ‘it’s not really worth voting’ (14% compared to 10% of all adults) and that people should ‘only vote if they care who wins’ (34% against 18%). Older people by comparison were more likely to agree that it is their ‘duty to vote’ – shown in Table 2 below:

**Table 2: Attitudes towards voting in Wales**

<b>Q Which one of these statements comes closest to your views about elections?</b>		
	% all adults	% 18-24
It’s not really worth voting	10	14
People should only vote if they care who wins	18	34
It’s everyone’s duty to vote	70	50
Don’t know	3	2

Source: ICM/The Electoral Commission

Base: 1,000 adults 18+ in Wales, including 98 adults aged 18-24, June 2004.

At the same time, we have found some specific factors, which help to explain lower turnout among younger people in Wales at particular elections. The Commission/NOP survey after the 2003 Assembly elections found young people less informed about the Assembly and its powers, its voting system and its record. For example, about half of those aged over 45 knew a great

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see B. Marshall and M. Williams (2003) *Turnout, attitudes to voting and the 2003 elections*, paper for the EPOP Conference, September 2003.

deal or a fair amount about the powers of the Assembly compared with only one in six of those under-25. Young people in Wales were also less likely to think it matters who wins National Assembly for Wales elections than the adult population as a whole.

## The bigger picture: political disengagement

Our research suggests the need to understand young people's electoral participation in the context of their wider views of politics, the political process and politicians. As shown previously in this paper, past Commission research has shown young people to be the least likely group to say that they are interested in what is going on in politics. Young people in Wales are no different – in 2003 we found 43% of 18-24 year olds very or fairly interested in politics compared to 68% of those aged 65+. In 2004, and using a slightly different question, we found 28% of 18-24s interested in politics 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' compared to 48% of 55+ year olds. Lower interest in politics also extends among the young to lower interest in what is going on in our political institutions – including the European Parliament, local councils and the House of Commons.

Qualitative research for the Commission by NOP in 2002 suggested that low levels of interest in politics were common among young people in Wales as were relatively low political awareness and knowledge. Young people were the most likely to profess knowing little or nothing about politics, although this may in part be attributed to their low consumption of media with a political content as well as a feeling that political participation is 'uncool'<sup>16</sup>:

'It's a bit uncool to vote. If somebody says I am not going, you say, well I'm not going either.'

'I only know a couple of people my age who voted, but they are the next Tony Blairs, the sad ones.'

'[Politics has] lost its cool appeal. Things have changed too much. There's an age gap...they are 50+ and being 20 you don't really connect.'

Young focus group participants, Wales, 2002

Our 2002 research found that politicians were seen by young people in Wales to be very distant and 'removed', appearing to have different cultural values and different outlooks on life. Young people reported having little belief in politicians, leading them to question whether their vote was likely to make any difference. Such sentiments have been recognised by First Minister Rhodri Morgan, speaking in the chamber of the Welsh Assembly:

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<sup>16</sup> The Electoral Commission (2003) *Wales votes?*



‘What has been clear to me...is that young people do care very much about politics. What they say quite clearly is that they have no faith in politicians.’<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Looking ahead – what needs to happen?

The findings from the Commission’s audit of political engagement series, allied to the research described above, suggest a serious and urgent need to re-build the relevance of ‘politics’, both as a concept and as an activity worth taking part in. As we observed in *Political engagement among young people: an update*:

‘The challenge is to ‘reclaim’ politics by addressing young people’s distaste for the Politics of Westminster and political parties and leveraging their interest in the politics of issues, public service delivery and what is happening in local communities.’<sup>18</sup>

Our 2002 report identified a number of challenges common to any strategies, particularly communication strategies, designed to address disengagement among young people:

- How best to connect with young people without being viewed as patronising and given that cynical young voters easily filter out crude marketing techniques;
- How best to connect with young people’s views of citizenship which revolves around social services, education, unemployment and the treatment of others instead of political institutions and norms (a preference for ‘cause-orientated’ politics, rather than ‘campaign-orientated’ politics);
- Many previous plans to engage young voters ‘...have been poorly conceived, often suffering from a strategic weakness – being tarred with the same brush as the ‘party politics’ that seemingly repel some young voters in the first place’.<sup>19</sup>

The report and the above findings informed the ‘Yvote?/Ynot?’ project run by the Children and Young People’s Unit (CYPU) in 2002 which also sought to understand why young people appear to be disengaged by our democratic institutions and processes. The project used findings from consultation and research among young people (including a BMRB survey) to better understand their perceptions of politics and what they wanted to see change. This informed the report – *Young people and politics* – and the development of a ‘Young Person’s Agenda for Democracy’, the progress of which is reviewed periodically by the Youth Voting Network.<sup>20</sup>

More recently, the Welsh Affairs Select Committee considered similar themes and its 2004 report into young people and participation in Wales

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<sup>17</sup> Reported by icWales: [www.icwales.co.uk](http://www.icwales.co.uk).

<sup>18</sup> The Electoral Commission (2004) *Political engagement among young people: an update*.

<sup>19</sup> The Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter engagement among young people*, see pp8.

<sup>20</sup> See Youth Voting Network (2003) *A young person’s agenda for democracy – one year on*.

recommended that politicians find new ways of engaging with young people.<sup>21</sup> The Committee advised politicians to embrace new forms of communication, including email and the internet, with far greater enthusiasm. At the same time, elected representatives were advised to retain face-to-face meetings at schools, youth clubs and youth forums across the Members' constituencies.

In recent years, the Welsh Assembly has introduced a number of initiatives designed to engage and involve young people in Wales in politics and the work of the Assembly:

- A 'Children and Young People' framework to help promote strategic partnerships in the 22 Welsh local authorities – resulting in many local authorities now looking to engage young people in their decision-making;
- 'Llais Ifanc'/'Young Voice' was set up to ensure dialogue with young people and to involve them in decision making in Wales and in the work of the Assembly; and
- A website, *Funky Dragon*, gives young people in Wales the chance to put their opinions across to politicians.

For its part, The Electoral Commission has also set up initiatives to engage young people in the political and electoral process:

- **Public awareness campaigns** such as our 2004 campaign 'If you don't do politics, there's not much you do do',<sup>22</sup> which sought to rebuild the relevance of 'politics.' We have also run campaigns focussed specifically at young people such as our 2002-3 'Votes are power' campaign.
- An **Outreach programme** designed to raise people's awareness of democratic processes in the UK and encourage them to get involved. Its initial focus is 16-24 year olds and, more specifically, those shown by research to have lower levels of political engagement and a lower propensity to participate.<sup>23</sup> We have conducted many activities in Wales including a number of one-day youth workshops, which enabled young people to ask Assembly members questions on issues such as lowering the voting age and the powers of the Assembly.
- We have a **New Initiatives Fund**<sup>24</sup> which is being used to identify possible solutions to build awareness, engagement and participation (a significant proportion of the projects to date have had young people as the specific target).
- Using research and our practical experiences **to help others** – including politicians, the media, academics and researchers – better understand the nature of political engagement among young people with a view to facilitating the development of strategies and policies in response.

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<sup>21</sup> Welsh Affairs Select Committee (2004) *The Empowerment of Children and Young People in Wales*.

<sup>22</sup> For more on the campaign, its genesis and its outcomes see B.Marshall and B.Lloyd (2004) *Making the case for politics* available to download from the Commission's website.

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/outreach.cfm>.

<sup>24</sup> For more information, see [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/newinitiativesfund.cfm](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/your-vote/newinitiativesfund.cfm).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have summarised the main findings from our 2002 report, *Voter engagement and young people*, and from subsequent UK-wide research conducted by the Commission and others. We have also briefly reviewed several Commission research projects, which have provided several insights into the extent and nature of electoral and political engagement among young people in Wales.

The research outlined in this paper has been useful in its own right, but it has also proved invaluable to us as we have developed our own public awareness campaigns and outreach activities specifically targeted at young people. This evidence base will be supplemented by several forthcoming Commission research projects and additional research by the academic and social research communities – for example, in the next few months we will publish research on the extent and nature of non-registration in Wales, Scotland and England and we will also use public opinion research to review young people's behaviour at, and their perceptions of, the forthcoming general election.

For the most part, we have found a similar picture of engagement among young people in Wales as occurs in other parts of the UK (and, indeed, a not dissimilar picture among different age groups). There are several common themes, in particular, that 'apathy' is not the problem, that the challenge is to make politics more relevant and responsive to young people and that disengagement must be tackled on many different fronts. While the picture is a fairly gloomy one, our research has also identified several positives. These can, and must, be built upon in the years to come.