Reasons for and impact of low voter engagement: Evidence from "MYPLACE" project research with young people aged 16-25 in two English locations
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Summary

The evidence here is presented in 4 sections:

- Context: in this section the research is described, including an explanation of the methods and locations and why we feel this evidence is important
- The role of education: looking at education in a general sense as well as specific political education as a factor in young peoples' political participation
- Trust in politics and politicians: examining the attitudes of young people towards the role and actions of political institutions and political actors
- Fringe and extreme movements: exploring the ways in which a disengagement with formal politics may be linked to an increased attraction to populist parties and movements

Context of the evidence

MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) is a major social research project, funded by the European Commission which employs a combination of survey, interview and ethnographic research to provide new empirical data that will not only measure levels of participation but capture the meanings young people attach to it, and thus examine the motivations underlying young people's participation, in both formal political processes and other forms of social and civic activity.

MYPLACE can provide a hugely rich and sophisticated dataset, covering young people's attitudes and beliefs in relation, specifically, to far-right and populist ideologies, but in practice covering issues such as class, xenophobia, racism, education and trust in democratic processes and associated social and political exclusion.

A core part of the project is measuring young people's participation using a survey delivered in 14 countries with 17098 respondents and understanding that participation using 900 in-depth follow up interviews.

In the UK, this work was carried out across two field sites in the West Midlands: one comprising two wards in a multi-cultural regional city, and the other a smaller, relatively ethnically homogenous former industrial town. Across these sites 1092 people aged 16-25 completed a detailed face-to-face questionnaire survey, providing an overview 'synopsis' of the beliefs, attitudes and values of young people in these locations towards a variety of themes, including political interest, political participation, citizenship, social networks, gender & sexuality, religion, minority groups, understanding of democracy and history & memory. These issues were then explored in 61 semi-structured follow-up interviews with survey respondents.

It is directly from this recent, empirical work that this evidence statement is drawn. In this regard we feel that it offers some clear, current and relevant insights into these issues. It must however be kept in mind that the data is collected in specific locations, and therefore cannot claim to be representative of

England as a whole. The choice of sites for fieldwork is such, however, that we believe that much of the research evidence is pertinent to national and European debates.

In the survey, respondents were asked about their voting in the last national and local elections. Among those who were eligible to vote at the last elections, if the responses "voted" and "would have voted but was unable on the day" are merged, we are left with those who were eligible to vote but chose not to.

In national elections, those choosing not to vote made up 27.8% in the larger regional city, and 43.4% in the smaller post-industrial town. In local elections, the figures were 35.2% and 44.6% respectively.

This shows that within our sample, those choosing not to vote made up a large percentage in both sites, but that young people were much less likely to have voted in the smaller town than the larger city.

The most common reason given for not voting among these groups was that they felt it was 'pointless.'

1) Education and Political Knowledge

MYPLACE survey and interview data point to the importance of the role of education in affecting the engagement of young people with formal politics. This appears to relate to levels of education in general as a socio-economic correlate of political participation, and also to a lack of specific education in politics and political systems. It is worth noting that, in addition to the numbers choosing not to vote, between 30% and 50% (the higher figure being for local elections in the smaller town) of respondents eligible to vote in each election said they "would have voted but were unable on the day." Given that polling stations in both sites were open from early to late, this may hint at a lack of awareness of, or confidence in, the voting process itself, though this was not explored in more detail.

Analysis of survey data suggests that in both research locations, the young person's own interest in politics is statistically associated with their political knowledge and their education. Young people with Bachelor/Masters or equivalent are more interested in politics than young people without a secondary education.

A lack of adequate, specific political education was seen to be important in a perceived breakdown of communication between young people in the research locations and political actors. This breakdown in communication is partially a product of the fact that young people leave school without having learned the language of politics and thus lack the ability to engage in debate; as one respondent in the in-depth interviews put it:

> "The language of politics… can be damaging, I think it stops some people from getting involved, if they don't understand the terminology, I think it can make it quite difficult, for some people, to interact with it."

Young people's engagement in politics and 'the political' is thus affected by the inaccessibility of the political to them; with references to the language and terminology of politics being off-putting and obfuscating rather than illuminating political process and debate. Many were not interested and/or did not know enough about politics to have a view. Interview data also reveals a significant gap in respondents' knowledge about the parties, party ideology, party positioning in the Left-Right political spectrum and party policies.

This should not necessarily be taken as meaning that a better informed and educated population necessarily leads to greater voter participation. Many respondents who explicitly defined themselves as non-political simultaneously state that they would definitely vote, articulate strong opinions about the government or say they consciously avoid talking about politics because it is divisive (not because they are not interested in it). This position would appear, therefore, to be an active identity rather than necessarily reflecting a lack of knowledge or interest. In this context we must remember that not voting is not necessarily a passive product of disinterest and lack of information, but may be an active and reasoned reaction to perceived flaws and inadequacies in aspects of the political process and institutions. This is explored in more depth in subsequent sections.

2) Trust in Politicians and Political Institutions

Several themes emerge from the data that confirm that young people in the chosen locations are at best ambivalent about the way in which the democratic system works today. There was also dissatisfaction with politicians who are referred to in interviews as out of touch, privileged (rich, posh), out for themselves (corrupt, interested in their own wealth and career), hypocritical or not keeping their promises, and 'not listening to people like us'.

The picture that emerges is one of deep disenchantment among young people with the three main political parties. Across the MYPLACE project's work, the vast majority of attitudes expressed towards politicians are negative. These negative statements can be grouped as follows: deceit; distance; weakness; and self-presentation.

In the survey data 43% in one research location (the larger regional city) and 47% in the other location (the smaller post-industrial town) state that they disagree (disagree and strongly disagree on a five point Likert scale) with the statement that "Politicians are interested in young people like me"

In another survey question, respondents were asked to rate thirteen institutions in terms of how much they trust them; the army was the most trusted institution, followed by the police and the courts. The media and political parties scored the lowest levels of trust, followed by The Prime Minister and Parliament.

Many interview respondents regarded politicians as deceitful ('liars', 'hypocrites') in that they tell people what they want to hear in order to get elected but then 'go back on their promises'. The sense that politicians 'go back on promises' should be read in the context of the current novelty of a coalition government in the UK. Traditionally UK politics (based on a first past the post system) provides the opportunity for the winning party to implement its manifesto to the best of its ability. A coalition government inevitably requires compromise from constituent parties on manifesto policies and thus generates a sense that they have not fulfilled promises.

Respondents to in-depth interviews often suggested that politicians are 'out of touch' with ordinary people, a view corroborated by early analysis of findings from ethnographic work with young activist groups including the English Defence League and 'Occupy' movements. Their statements both explicitly and implicitly suggest that politicians come from 'privileged' backgrounds and do not understand 'the average person'. They also suggest that politicians 'don't listen' to ordinary people and their wishes. Indeed one of the most frequent criticisms of politicians was that they were 'out for themselves'.

> *"But our government don't listen to us, do you know what I mean? At the moment all they care about is giving the rich tax breaks and taking, hitting all the poor people."*

Most associations with corruption relate to politicians' misuse of expenses. This should be seen in the context of a series of high profile scandals and a fundamental reform of the system of expenses claims in the UK which have embedded the notion that politicians exploit the privilege of office. There is some suggestion that the whole political system is associated in respondents' minds with corruption; i.e. that which comes to mind immediately when they hear the word 'politics' or 'the political' is 'corruption'.

Social class was also a recurring issue identified in the data. A view of career politicians as being (or coming from) 'a class apart' has been strengthened by widespread discussion of the coalition government being heavily dominated by those from top public schools (Eton) and elite universities (Oxbridge). This gives rise to a sense that politics needs 'somebody that's more for us'.

> *"RESPONDENT: Because I don't, I haven't got the right blood, my blood ain't blue, do you know what I mean? And that, that, I think that's something they need to sort out 'cause I reckon if you could get somebody in there who's been to a council estate.*
> *INTERVIEWER: Yeah.*
> *RESPONDENT: That's lived with nothing, do you know what I mean? I reckon a party would go a long way, because they know what sort of things are really affect the poor, do you know what I mean?"*

This is reflective of a wider emergent theme in the data concerning a sense of drift and disconnect between an elite group of politicians and ordinary people and the loss of voice this entails.

Survey data shows that young people with parents from higher classes (parental class was a derived variable using a combination of occupational and educational levels of the respondents' mother and father) report having significantly greater trust in political institutions.

There are some positive statements about politicians. These are mostly expressed in relation to individual politicians rather than generically applied. Local politicians come out best and this is linked to an ability to see a direct response to approaches made to them. Positive features include the ability to 'admit they are wrong', being strong or having 'passion' and being 'normal people' or being able to talk to ordinary people.

3) The Risk of Increased Attraction to Fringe and Extreme Movements

One of the central aims of the MYPLACE research is to explore young peoples' receptivity to populist or extreme ideologies, the most visible of which are 'far-right' movements in the UK today - the British National Party (BNP) and the English Defence League (EDL). The MYPLACE research elicited more references to the EDL in interview narratives than might be expected; this is at least partially a result of the use of a visual stimulus during the interview depicting an EDL march in one of the two fieldwork sites. This tool, however, successfully elicited reflections by young people on such fringe movements however, from which two key themes emerged: the attraction of such movements due to their expression of the kind of passion missing from most formal politics; and a clear dissociation from the violence and racism that many respondents associate with the extreme right.

The sense of disengagement from politics outlined above is also evident in respondents' evaluations, often of individual politicians, along a spectrum of 'weak' to 'strong' or 'cowardly' to 'prepared to fight'. It also explains some of the attraction of the BNP and EDL who are sometimes seen as understanding the experiences and fears of 'people like us'. Respondents talked about their attraction to extreme and populist parties and movements in terms of their passion, their willingness to 'do something' and their concern with 'real' issues. This is also reflected in a sense that 'political correctness' leads to silencing of some of these real issues. Data from qualitative interviews also suggests that UKIP are beneficiaries of a loss of trust in mainstream parties, in particular from the sense that mainstream parties lack conviction.

> *"RESPONDENT: Don't matter who gets in, the only people I can see allowing us to get a referendum is UKIP.*
> *INTERVIEWER: Is UKIP?*
> *RESPONDENT: Do you know what I mean, Lib Dems'll never do it 'cause they'll never, ever get in, I don't think, they won't get in for at least another twenty years.*
> *INTERVIEWER: No.*
> *RESPONDENT: Conservatives, they ain't getting in for another ten years. Labour? They won't do it.*
> *INTERVIEWER: No.*
> *RESPONDENT: Do you know what I mean?*
> *INTERVIEWER: No.*
> *RESPONDENT: BNP's next to gone. Do you know what I mean?*
> *INTERVIEWER: Yeah.*
> *RESPONDENT: So, it's down to UKIP really."*

While very few respondents had voted BNP, some suggested that they would be likely to if they felt the party had a realistic chance of electoral success, with their greater conviction and "strong views" being cited as an attraction:

> *"INTERVIEWER: So would you, if they, if there was a realistic chance that the BNP would be elected would you then, would you be persuaded to vote then?*
> *RESPONDENT: Yeah, I would.*
> *INTERVIEWER: Would you?*
> *RESPONDENT: Yeah, if I knew that they were gonna make the changes that they are saying they are going to make and I knew that there was at least ten per cent more chance that they were going to be elected or UKIP were going to be elected to do those sort of things that I believe in then yes, I'd vote.*
> *INTERVIEWER: So would you trust them more to do what they say they're gonna do than you would the parties?*
> *RESPONDENT: Yeah, 'cause their views are a hell of a lot stronger than most.*
> *INTERVIEWER: Okay, so why does that make them more likely to do it?*
> *RESPONDENT: Because you can see that, like when people say, 'Ahh, ahh, I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna help do this, I'm gonna, I'm gonna improve the National Health Service and stuff,' and, no, no, you're not gonna do that because you can go, you go to the hospital and it's shit, I mean I've just had a caesarean section and they've not exactly done a great job of my, on my stitches, but there's nothing I can do about it, well there is, I suppose, but, so it's not going to affect me. Do you know what I mean?*
> *INTERVIEWER: I'm just interested in the fact that you trust them more to do it and it's because they've got…*
> *RESPONDENT: Stronger views."*

Stemming from this is an important theme, in that protest about 'real things' needs to take place on the streets because such issues are excluded from mainstream political discourse. In the opinion of some respondents, this exclusion takes place because of the class division in politics; those issues that do not affect the privileged elite occupying the political space are not given air time. The media are also seen as being complicit in this silencing of certain issues. This is well illustrated by a quote from a respondent in the ethnographic case study with young activists with the EDL, who perceived UKIP as victims of this silencing, and thus believes formal politics to be closed to supporters of the EDL:

> *"RESPONDENT: Do you know to be honest with you… I've never really thought about that. My personal opinion is that somebody from the English Defence League won't get voted high or very far in politics because they just won't be allowed to. They'll be shunned off. They'll have a national newspaper find something about them even if it hasn't happened to try and break the EDL down. It's like they did with Nick Griffin, like they are trying to do with UKIP at the minute because they just won Rotherham or whatever it was, well come second in Rotherham."*

Many respondents, particularly in the smaller post-industrial town, feel stigmatised because they are poor, because they are young and because they are working class. There is a strong feeling that the government and society in general looks down on them rather than valuing them. This is reinforced by the elite composition of government, its remoteness and a perceived lack of understanding of how ordinary people live. It is difficult to engage politically when the main political parties are so removed from them in terms of life experiences. This is fertile space that the BNP, EDL and UKIP can move into – they talk the same language and appear to understand the problems faced by ordinary people.