

Sociology Factsheet



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Young People and Politics in Britain

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Politicians and the media claim that young people are apathetic towards politics, and the turnout among young voters appears to confirm this.

This Factsheet will look at the participation of young people in the political process – are they interested in politics or are they disillusioned by politics?

The information in this Factsheet will be useful for questions in many different areas of the sociology specifications, including:

- Politics
- Culture and Identity – young people and identity
- Stratification and differentiation – differences between age groups

Not all exam boards have politics as a topic on their specifications, but having knowledge of this may help show sociological knowledge when answering other questions.

There are two major concerns about young people and politics:

1. Lack of involvement in politics

Only 1.65% of politicians around the world are in their 20s and 11.87% are in their 30s. The average age of politicians globally is 53. Young people are not represented in politics.

Activity

Why do you think young people do not get involved in politics?

2. Reluctance to vote

Young people are less likely to vote than older people and also less likely to vote today than previous generations of young people.

The majority of young people in the UK are not registered on the electoral roll and therefore not eligible to vote. Consequently, the turnout among 18 – 24 year olds in elections is the lowest of any age group. Britain has one of the widest gaps in voter turnout between younger and older people in Europe.



Voting in General Elections

Year	% of 18 – 24 year olds who voted	% of population who voted
2001	39%	59.4%
2005	37%	61.4%
2010	44%	65.1%
2015	45%	66.1%
EU referendum	36%	72%

Activity

Summarise these statistics. What do they show about the voting behaviour of young people? What are the trends for voting behaviour in the overall population and how does this compare to the trend for the voting behaviour of 18 – 24 year olds?

Exam Hint: Explaining trends in your answers is a good way of using statistics in your answers. Always explain what the statistics are showing.

Activity

Why do you think this pattern exists? Why do you think the percentage of young voters is lower than the voting population percentage?

How Did Young People Vote in 2015?

- Young people were more likely to support Labour than the Conservatives.
- Younger voters were less likely to support UKIP or the Liberal Democrats than the electorate as a whole.
- UKIP was more popular than the Liberal democrats amongst 18 – 24-year-old age group.
- Young people were more likely to vote for the Green party than older age groups.

Activity

Do some research on the policies of the different political parties. Can you explain why young people are more likely to vote for certain parties than others?

There are several possible reasons why young people might not get involved in politics and might not vote in elections:

- Lack of understanding
- Lack of interest
- Lack of support for the democratic process
- Lack of trust in politicians
- Politicians are out of touch with young people

Activity

Which one of these do you think is the most likely reason for young people not getting involved in politics and not voting? Give a reason for your choice. Now do a survey of other students. What do they think the main reasons are? Summarise what you have found.

Lack of Understanding

In a research project funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the attitudes of young people towards politics was examined. The research was based on a nationwide online survey of 1025 18 year olds eligible to vote for the first time at the 2010 general election. This survey was conducted in May 2011, one year after the general election.

The research revealed the following results:

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
I am confident that I know enough about political parties when it comes to deciding how to vote	46%	52%	2%
I don't feel that I know enough about what is going on in politics	47%	24%	29%
It is often difficult for me to understand what is going on in government and politics	50%	19%	31%

These figures show that the young people who took part in this study did not always understand politics and did not feel confident enough in their understanding of politics to vote or enter politics as a career. It also showed that young people do not feel confident about their knowledge of politics in general or their understanding of what is going on in government and politics.

Lack of Interest

This research by ESRC showed that nearly two-thirds of young people (63%) expressed an interest in political matters. This interest, however, does not show in the voting behaviour of young people.

Activity

Why do you think this is?

Lack of Support for the Democratic Process

This research did show that young people have confidence in the democratic process.

They do seem to see the importance of elections. However, only 36% of today's young people agree that by voting they could really help to change the way that Britain is governed. 57% of the young people felt elections were good because they allowed voters to express their opinions, but felt they didn't really change anything.

Therefore, while young people seem to be in favour of elections, they lack the confidence in the actual outcomes.

Lack of Trust in Politicians

Many young people seem to be critical of the political parties and politicians.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
There is often a big difference between what a party promises it will do and what it does when it wins an election	75%	3%	22%
Political parties do more to divide the country than unite it	47%	12%	41%
Political parties are not interested in the same issues that concern young people	64%	8%	28%
The main political parties don't offer voters real choices in elections because their policies are all very similar	40%	18%	42%
In elections, political parties don't tell people about the really important problems facing the country	48%	16%	36%

Young people do not see politicians as very effective and not very interested in voters or in the issues that matter to voters. Young people think that political parties are remote and do not seek to connect with young people or with their concerns.

Young people see the political system as a relatively closed system and believe that there are few opportunities available to them to shape the way decisions are made.

These findings suggest that young people have a lack of trust in politicians.



Politicians Are out of Touch with Young People

There is a wide belief among young people that politicians are out of touch with the views and opinions of young people. Politicians should do more to directly connect with young people, in particular talking and listening to young people in schools, universities, youth groups, etc. They then need to take action to show young people that they are listening to them and are concerned about the issues they have raised.

Why Is It Important That Young People Vote?

- They have a right to vote and they should use their vote.
- Young people often complain that they are unhappy about the results of elections and want to be heard. In the EU referendum, only 36% of 18-24 year olds voted. If that had been doubled, the result could have been different. This shows the importance of young people using their vote.
- They are the future generation and will be important in deciding the direction of the country in the future.

How Can We Address This Issue of Lack of Political Involvement?

Young people need to be made more aware of the political process, and the importance of it in their lives.

Young people need to be better educated on political issues. It is not a compulsory part of the current school curriculum.

Activity

Do you think politics should be a compulsory part of the school curriculum? Have a discussion with other students.

Young people are often marginalised in society. There is a need to address this issue if more young people are to become involved in politics.

Should voting be online? Online voting would reduce barriers to voting, but would it reduce the voting of the older generation?

Activity

Do you think voting should be online? Would this encourage you to vote? Have a discussion with other students.

Exam Hint: Using sociological evidence and examples, explain age differences in patterns of voting behaviour.

In order to answer this question, you need to show accurate knowledge about the age differences that exist in voting behaviour. A requirement here is to give evidence and examples to support what you are writing. You could use statistics here to show trends and patterns in voting behaviour. You could also use evidence from the 2015 election to show how different age groups voted:

- Young people are less likely to vote than older people,
- Young people are more likely to support Labour than the Conservatives.
- Younger voters are less likely to support UKIP or the Liberal Democrats than the electorate as a whole.