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## Apathetic or Uninformed?: Political Participation Among Young Voters

*This paper explores the relationship between young voters and the political process, specifically focusing on the extent to which the British youth are apathetic and the factors contributing to the decline in young voter turnout and disengagement. The research employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, leading to the emergence of two global themes. Firstly, young voters demonstrated the trajectory of distancing themselves from politics, identifying the primary barriers to entry as a perceived lack of political understanding and a negative view of politics. Secondly, participants proposed possible solutions to overcome these barriers, recommending the continuance and improvement of Citizenship as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, political actors and parties communicating with young voters on their level, a focus on building trust in politicians, and the introduction of online voting. Both themes are interrogated in-depth, resulting in the conclusion that young voters are neither apathetic nor ambivalent to the political process as academic and media narratives have argued, thus opening the door for political parties to increase the engagement and participation of young voters in the democratic society.*

Keywords: Politics, apathy, turnout, young voters



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### INTRODUCTION

“Any political system in which a large section of the population is either unwilling or unable to participate is not satisfactorily representative,” (Loader 2007, p.35).

Research indicates the extent of young voter (typically defined as 18-25) non-participation is higher than ever before (Braverman 2002; King 2002; Kimberlee 2002; Russell et al 2002; O’Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Drummond 2006; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007; Stoker 2012). This declining turnout is of particular concern as studies have found voting to be a habit-forming activity (Catt 2005; Vowles 2006; Loader 2007),

reinforcing the need to address the issue at a young age to avoid non-participation becoming a lifelong habit. Furthermore, scholars have postulated that current levels of disengagement may lead to a downward cycle developing, in which political candidates and parties neglect young voters due to previously low voting turnout, instead focusing their attention primarily on those likely to vote, resulting in further alienation and poor representation of the younger generation (Russell 2004; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007).

This paper seeks to contribute to existing knowledge surrounding the relationship between young people and the political process (Kimberlee 2002; Russell et al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Livingstone and Helsper 2005; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007). More specifically, the research aims to explore the extent to which young voters are truly apathetic, or if in fact there is another explanation for them becoming seemingly disengaged from politics (White et al 2000; Coleman 2001; Edwards et al 2001; Drummond 2006; Loader 2007). Apathy is defined in this context as being ambivalent towards politics (Russell et al 2002), a notion widely perpetuated by the British media (Leonard and Katawala 1997; White 1998; Phillips 2000 cited Kimberlee 2002). O'Toole et al (2003) contend that in order to fully understand the complexities of youth disengagement, the conceptions and experiences of young voters must be investigated. Consequently, this paper aims to give a voice to young voters, making them the sole focus of the research, and seeking to help them identify the primary forces driving their disengagement in the political process and the conditions they feel are necessary to overcome them. The primary barriers to entry identified by young voters within this research are a perceived lack of political understanding and a negative view of politics; with the potential solutions being the continuance and improvement of Citizenship as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, political actors and parties communicating with young voters on their level, a focus on building trust in politicians, and the introduction of online voting.

The paper is divided into four sections; firstly, existing literature surrounding youth participation is reviewed, narrowing to focus on notions of apathy, and designed to underpin the emphasis of the study. Methodological issues are dealt with in the following section, which reviews the mixed methods approach, and outlines the target population and sampling method. Discussion here also details the quantitative and qualitative techniques employed; the questionnaire which obtained 109 responses, the short-depth interviews conducted with 10 participants and the triad focus group conducted with three. The subsequent section identifies and interprets findings of the research, outlining the emergent global themes of barriers to entry and possible solutions, the implications of which are discussed in the concluding section.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Youth Participation

"The issue of youth participation in democracy has come to the fore in Britain in recent years, both in academia and in the world of public policy," (Sloam 2007, p.548), with the extent of young voter non-participation being greater than ever (Park 1999; Park 2000; Braverman 2002; Kimberlee 2002; King 2002; Russell et al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Drummond 2006; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007; Stoker 2012). Academics have postulated that declining engagement among young voters poses specific challenges to the UK political system (Loader 2007; Sloam 2007). Loader (2007) contends that the legitimacy of the system is questioned when a large section of the electorate does not participate, as a democratically elected government should be representative of the entire voting population. This contention is furthered with

arguments that the mandate of the elected government is liable to diminishment if their position is supported by an increasingly small segment of the electorate (Hertz 2001; Loader 2007).

Research has highlighted that the majority of first-time voters do not participate at their first electoral opportunity (Kimberlee 2002), a decision that may be perpetuated throughout their lives based on studies which have demonstrated that voting is a habit-forming activity (Catt 2005; Vowles 2006; Loader 2007). This indicates that current levels of youth non-participation may present long-term consequences for the democratic system. Despite the resultant significance of declining young voter turnout, research has failed to identify a clear explanation for the downturn (Kimberlee 2002). In addition to an explanation for declining voter turnout, Sloam (2007, p.553) emphasises the need for research to go beyond elections, noting that "while voting remains the most important mode of political activity, there is further significant involvement beyond the ballot box." O'Toole et al (2003) furthered this, arguing that often concern is focused solely on the crisis of electoral participation, overlooking the failure of politics to engage with young voters. Consequently, this paper aims to investigate both decreased involvement in the election process and the disengagement of young voters from politics in the broader sense.

#### Notions of Apathy

The lack of youth participation in the political process has increasingly been attributed to a sense of apathy among young voters (Denver, 1997; Pirie and Worcester 1998; King 2002; Schaupp and Carter 2005; Kaid et al 2007; Marsh et al 2007; Nickerson 2008). Russell et al (2002) draw a distinction between alienation and apathy, contending that alienation is tantamount to exclusion, whereas apathy implies ambivalence and often contentment. Phelps (2010, p.49) argues that there is justification for calling young people apathetic, stating that they are "disinterested in politics and politicians as traditionally conceived, and disengaged from the political process despite there being more opportunities to participate now than there has ever been."

Youth-interest groups have opposed this, arguing that the disengagement of young voters is a consequence of political parties' failure to attract young people (Kimberlee, 2002). This is supported by Cloonan and Street (1997), who contend that appealing to disenchanted youth is one of the primary challenges faced by political parties and one they are finding difficult to overcome. Sloam (2007) asserts that the negative view of political institutions and actors is a primary disincentive for youth participation. In addition, declining trust in traditional political institutions has been identified as an integral part of negative political perceptions held by young voters (Moore and Longhurst 2005). Subsequently, Kimberlee (2002) concludes that it is conceivable that young people are not failing to vote because they are apathetic, but due to the failings of politicians. Scholars have furthered this, postulating that apathy is "too crude an instrument with which to conduct the autopsy [of youth disengagement]," (Russell, 2004 p.352). Henn et al (2002) assert that contrary to previous research, young people are interested in politics and committed to the democratic process. Their 2002 study found that youth disengagement is "less to do with apathy, and more to do with their engaged scepticism about 'formal' politics in Britain," (ibid p.167).

Russell et al (2002) offer an alternative to apathy, asserting that young voters are simply less resourced in political information and thus, less able to make informed decisions. Their study countered notions of apathy, finding that young people reported a willingness to be better informed about politics; consequently, they argue that education should be a prerequisite for reviving democracy (ibid). It is evident that an increased

understanding of politics may have positive implications for democracy, with academics postulating that uninformed voting is tantamount to non-participation, as both ultimately damage the representativeness of the government (Brennan 2011; Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012). Sloam (2007) reinforced the importance of political education, contending that whilst young voters are interested in politics, their interest is not matched by an understanding of the process. He continued to assert that this lack of understanding acts as a barrier to participation increasing feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, and hindering debate (ibid). This correlates with the concept of social desirability, whereby individuals avoid behaviours that may be perceived as undesirable by society (Liebrand et al 1992; Martin and Tesser 1992; Rubin and Babbie 2011), such as not wanting to appear unintelligent by discussing a topic about which they have little perceived knowledge. Whilst academics have postulated that young people possess lower levels of political information resources, impacting upon their engagement in the political process (Russell et al 2002; Sloam 2007), questions still remain about young voters' own conceptions of this phenomenon (O'Toole et al 2003). Subsequently, this research will investigate how young voters believe their levels of political understanding have impacted their involvement in the political process.

In line with arguments of increased feelings of powerlessness, previous research indicates young voters share a recurring sense of weak political efficacy (Roberts and Sachdev 1996; Pirie and Worcester 1998; O'Toole et al 2003; Sloam 2007), believing they are marginalised from mainstream politics as a result of their age and that "politics is something that is done to them, not something they can influence," (O'Toole et al 2003, p.359). This counteracts the democratic principle of 'one man one vote' (Balinski and Young 2001; Savigny 2008 cited Lees-Marshment 2009), whereby "no man should have a greater voice than another," (Balinski and Young 2001). Sloam (2007) underpinned this notion, asserting that the younger generation feel powerless in relation to the political system. Roberts and Sachdev (1996) developed this, arguing that an additional reason for the perceived lack of power among young voters is the unrepresentative demographics within political parties (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Rudig et al 1995; Braverman 2002; Kimberlee 2002; Grant 2003; Wilson and Barker 2003; Loader 2007). They postulate that "political parties face a real problem in attracting young people because they have grown increasingly wary of giving youth a voice within their own structures," (Roberts and Sachdev 1996, p.119).

A further implication of this is an increase in partisan dealignment (Crewe et al 1977), with research indicating that just over 1% of the British population are currently members of a political party (Wheeler 2011). It has been suggested that this downturn in partisan attachment can be attributed to the individualistic age that the electorate find themselves in (ibid), no longer needing a political party to represent their needs when they can do it themselves via social media. Clarke et al (2001) furthered debates around partisan dealignment, postulating that loosening party identification may be a root cause of youth disengagement, leading to a reduction in young voters' sense of civic duty. The present study will investigate current levels of partisan attachment among young voters and the effect this has had on their role as active citizens. There has also been much discussion over the 'dumbing down' of political news coverage (Fiske 1995; Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2002; Lloyd 2004; Russell 2004; Stoker 2006; Stoker 2012), with arguments that young voters are less likely to understand the underlying complexities of the political process when it is delivered in a simplistic framework, resulting in increased cynicism (Stoker 2012). Fiske (1995 p.63), however, counteracted this notion, proposing that seemingly 'lower-brow' media coverage is "low only because its taste patterns appeal to disempowered and subordinated social formations, and so

dissolves the structured relationship between politics and serious, informational media encouraging more social formations to participate in the political process." In line with this, it can be argued that the 'dumbing down' of news coverage may be beneficial for youth engagement as it allows young voters to be part of a discussion they may once have been excluded from. This research will consider the impact of so called 'low-brow' media on the attitudes and behaviours of young voters to establish whether they are inciting cynicism or encouraging participation.

Scholars have also postulated that media portrayals of young voters as apathetic may be causing a self-fulfilling prophecy (Russell 2004). Kimberlee (2002) argues that the apathy of the British youth has been "the headline story," in the majority of news coverage surrounding the turnout and engagement of young voters in the mainstream media (Russell 2004; Fahmy 2006; Sloam 2007). Academics have highlighted the potentially damaging consequences of this, with Russell (2004) postulating that if young voters learn from the media that politics is not for them, their disengagement may be reinforced. He furthers this, contending that by categorising politics as dull and not for young people, the media risks "stigmatising those who do not agree with the hegemonic view," (ibid, p.353). Consequently, Russell (2004) argues for an embargo on the use of the word apathy in articles surrounding young people and politics. Stoker (2012) broadens concerns over media influence, asserting that British popular culture is deeply 'anti' politics and politicians, and that negative attitudes towards politics are fuelled by the media. Mortimore (1995) furthered this, postulating that it is as a result of the feedback loop driven by the media that confidence in democratic politics has been undermined. Academics have argued that agenda-setting has played a key role in this (Druckman 2001; Jamieson and Valdman 2003; Lakoff 2004; Pinkleton et al 2009; Davis 2010; Smith 2010), whereby the press purposively direct voters' attention, guiding their processing of information and resulting in the domination of public understanding (Jamieson and Valdman 2003). Other scholars have, however, questioned the true effects of agenda-setting on the electorate, instead supporting the concept of the rational voter, which argues that voters are able to rationally infer the true position of candidates (Haan 2004). Consequently, this research will consider the effect of agenda-setting on young voters against opposing arguments of rationality.

### Summary and Conclusions

Having reviewed existing literature surrounding youth participation and notions of apathy, the aim of this research is to investigate the lack of political participation among young voters and the extent to which apathy is to blame. The focus of the research is due to the need for a clear explanation for the disengagement of young voters, wider than arguments of apathy (Kimberlee 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Sloam 2007). Whilst existing literature has identified several suggestions to explain the decline in youth participation that go beyond apathy (Roberts and Sachdev 1996; Clarke et al 2001; Henn et al 2002; Kimberlee 2002; Russell et al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Sloam 2007), there is still a gap in knowledge surrounding young people's own conceptions of political barriers to entry (O'Toole et al 2003). Furthermore, much of the current research was conducted over a decade ago and consequently there is a need for a contemporary review of previous findings. Subsequently, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the research and help achieve the overall aim of the study:

**R<sup>1</sup>:** What are the primary drivers causing young voters to disengage from the political process?

**R<sup>2</sup>:** To what extent are young voters apathetic towards the political process?

**R<sup>3</sup>:** How can political parties better communicate with young voters in order to mobilise them and combat the decline in voter turnout?

## METHODS

To explore the extent of young voter apathy and the barriers preventing engagement in the political process, a mixed methods approach was applied, allowing the researcher to gain a greater depth of understanding (Johnson et al 2007; Sloam 2007). Qualitative techniques suit research into perceptions and opinions, due to their focus on participant experiences and expression (Jankowicz 2005). Consequently, they were useful in demonstrating a deeper insight into young voter attitudes towards politics. The investigation also incorporated quantitative techniques, emphasising quantification in the collection and analysis of the data (Bryman 2004) to increase the reliability of findings. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) underline the benefits of mixed methods, arguing that numbers give precision to narratives, and narratives give meaning to numbers. The researcher employed concurrent analysis throughout the data collection, drawing upon the principle of spiral methodology, whereby each element of the research could be adapted and refined based on experience gained in earlier cycles (Kumiega and Van Vliet 2008; Blessing and Chakrabarti 2009).

Participants were taken from the target population of 18-25 year-olds with the right to vote in the UK, based on the premise that all participants will be eligible to vote in the next UK general election (2015). The younger generation were the focus of this research due to concerns that young voter non-participation is higher than ever (Braverman 2002; Kimberlee 2002; King 2002; Russell et al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Drummond 2006; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007) and arguments that voting is a habit-forming activity (Catt 2005; Vowles 2006; Loader 2007). A small-scale pilot study was conducted using members of the target sample known to the researcher to focus the research and develop methodologies (Prescott and Soeken 1989 cited Burns and Grove 2003). The researcher conducted three informal, unstructured pilot interviews, allowing participants to lead the dialogue and thus provide guidance on areas of particular salience. The outcomes of these preliminary interviews were used to inform the design of the questionnaire, which was also piloted to highlight design inconsistencies and areas for improvement.

### Quantitative Research

Following the pilot study, the first stage of data collection was the online questionnaire, used to survey a cross-section of the target population to investigate their previous political behaviour, and general attitudes and perceptions surrounding the political process and politicians. Respondents were sourced through social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, as research indicates the majority of the target population are 'digital natives' and frequent consumers of social media (Boyle and Sandford 2008). The snowball technique was applied, with respondents being encouraged to share the survey with other members of the target group to widen the sample (Bryman and Bell 2007; Cohen et al 2007; Babbie 2011; Babbie 2013). The researcher aimed to collect data from 100 respondents, as this was deemed the minimum level appropriate to provide significant and reliable findings (Rudestam and Newton 2007). The survey received 109 responses; of these, 57% were female and 43% were male, with 43% falling into the younger age bracket 18-21 years-old and 57% being 22-25 years-old. These demographics were deemed sufficiently representative of the wider population of young voters in the UK, with the national breakdown being approximately 50% for each age

bracket and gender (ONS 2011). However, the researcher notes that whilst 73% of survey respondents were University students, the wider population consists of 31% University students (ONS 2013), and as such this may impact the generalisation of the findings.

The primary limitation of this method is that surveys emphasise scope rather than depth, meaning the respondents were limited to responding to prearranged questions; thus, it was not possible to gain a greater understanding of the motivations behind their answers (Cargan 2007). It was in order to assuage the implications of this limitation that qualitative methods were also employed in this research.

#### Qualitative Research

The final stage of data collection was to conduct qualitative research to develop a narrative behind the quantitative results collected in the first stage (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). The qualitative research consisted of two methodologies, each step designed to enhance and strengthen the findings of the other. First, brief conversational short-depth interviews (Keegan 2009) were conducted with members of the target group, to gain further insight into the findings of the questionnaire and to delve deeper into the salient issues identified during the pilot study. Respondents were sourced using convenience sampling, whereby members of the target population readily accessible to the researcher were used (Sekaran and Bougie 2010; Weathington et al 2010; Gravetter and Forzano 2012). The researcher conducted 10 interviews; this sample was deemed sufficient as it was evident during the concurrent analysis that saturation had been reached and thus, there was little to be gained from additional interviews (Rudestam and Newton 2007). The one-to-one interviews were semi-structured, with predetermined topic areas (Appendix E), but allowing the interviewees to lead the direction of the conversation and to explore issues of particular importance (Hopf 2004; Longhurst 2010). The interviews were held in informal environments such as coffee shops and participants' homes, to encourage interviewees to feel at ease and talk as openly as possible (Fine and MacPherson 1992; Longhurst 2010), with the tone remaining conversational and casual throughout (Longhurst 2010). Each interview opened with a statement about the focus of the research, confirming responses would remain anonymous and prior political knowledge was not necessary; this introduction aimed to reduce the effect of social desirability, whereby participants deliberately answer questions in ways they feel are more socially attractive, a common limitation of interviews (Bryman 2004). Each interview lasted between 10-15 minutes, as "this short exposure injects some realism into the viewing situation," (Keegan 2009, p.80), with participants encouraged to give their initial, instinctive responses, rather than feeling compelled to exaggerate or invent answers as a result of a longer interview. The audio of the interviews was recorded to allow the interviewer to focus fully on the interaction (Hopf 2004; Longhurst 2010) and to avoid the participant feeling under pressure as a result of note-taking (King and Horrocks 2010). The recording also enabled the researcher to gain evidence of verbal consent from interviewees.

The second stage of the qualitative research took the form of a triad focus group, an intimate take on the traditional focus group with three participants (Beall 2010). The focus group incorporated enabling research techniques (Will et al 1996), such as collage creation and laddering, to overcome barriers that could prevent participants from revealing their true feelings and attitudes, such as lack of self-awareness, fear of irrationality and perceived social conventions (Will et al 1996). This methodology aimed to examine the most prominent issues identified by the survey and interviews in greater detail, and to investigate them from an indirect approach to overcome blocking



strategies (Hofstede et al 2007; Pettigrew and Charters 2008). Belk et al (1997) supported the use of enabling research techniques, arguing that traditional methods may be limited as they are too direct in their approach. The focus group format was chosen to enable interaction between participants with little interference from the researcher (Longhurst 2010); this is important as it reduces the effects of interviewer bias and the risk of leading questions associated with interviews (ibid). Participants were selected from the list of interviewees from the first branch of the qualitative research; this was a form of purposive sampling (Calmorin and Calmorin 2007; Adler and Clark 2011) designed to enable the researcher to tailor the session based on the key issues identified by each respondent in the earlier cycle of research (Kumiega and Van Vliet 2008; Blessing and Chakrabarti 2009). Three participants were selected to participate; the triad format was chosen to ensure participants felt comfortable completing the enabling research tasks and were equally active in discussions, with prior studies indicating this is often more achievable within smaller groups (Bakewell et al 2003; Beall 2010).

In keeping with social research guidelines, the focus group lasted for one-hour (Cook 2004; Longhurst 2010; Neelankavil 2007; Stevens et al 2013); the session was divided into four 15 minute segments, with a different task being completed in each. The session was segmented to ensure that participants' interest was sustained for the full duration. The first quarter utilised the enabling technique of collage creation (Rickard 1994 cited Pachler 2010; Belk 2006; Edwards 2010), with participants asked to produce a collage depicting how they view politics using a range of UK magazines, and to explain the meaning of the images to the group. Guided by Rickard (1994 cited Pachler 2010), collage construction was used to enable participants to better explain their perceptions of politics, by providing a vehicle for discussion.

The second section incorporated the laddering technique (Reynolds and Olson 2001; Miles and Rowe 2004; Zikmund and Babin 2007), asking participants to analyse the importance of voting to them. Laddering was used to obtain further insight into the core motives behind voting, based on the principal of means-end chain theory which suggests that consumer perceptions follow a hierarchy that ranges from attributes to consequences to core values (Reynolds and Olson 2001).

The third quarter asked participants to produce a mock-manifesto imagining they were running for Prime Minister. This task overcame any lack of verbosity within the group, facilitating better verbal responses by anchoring respondents' thinking and providing tangible references for discussion (Belk 2006). Finally, the last section involved a group discussion around how the participants feel politics can better engage young voters. Following the data collection process, the researcher analysed both the quantitative and qualitative data (Appendix C, F-K); quantitative data was analysed using the SPSS software package, and the interviews and focus group were transcribed and interpreted as an autonomous body of data (Thomson et al 1989; Bloom and Habel 1998), with preconceived theoretical assumptions being bracketed (Bloom and Habel 1998). This analysis led to the extraction of two global themes which are discussed in the following section.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The primary intention of the research is to examine the extent of young voter apathy; more specifically, to identify factors attributing to the decline in turnout and engagement in the political process. The discussion focuses on two emergent global

themes; the barriers to entry faced by young voters, and the possible solutions they have identified. It was initially important to recognise current obstacles inhibiting young voters' active involvement in the political process, and to investigate the extent to which apathy is to blame. Participants demonstrated the trajectory of distancing themselves from politics and becoming disenchanted with the practice. They identified the primary forces driving this pathway as a lack of political understanding and a negative view of politics, rather than apathy or ambivalence towards the process. This finding counteracts narratives of apathy highlighted by existing academic literature, such as Kimberlee (2002), Russell et al (2002) and Sloam (2007), the implications of which will be analysed in the conclusion of the paper.

Next, it is essential to consider possible solutions to these barriers from the perspective of young voters. Participants voiced several key recommendations; the continuance and improvement of Citizenship as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, political actors and parties communicating with young voters on their level, a focus on building trust in politicians, and the introduction of online voting.

### Barriers to Entry

A prominent theme identified was a perceived lack of political understanding among participants, supporting existing findings by Henn et al (2002) and Russell et al (2002). The majority of survey respondents (43% or 47 respondents) disagreed when asked if they believe they have a good understanding of British politics, reiterated during the qualitative narratives. Interview accounts suggested this deficit of understanding has led to young voters becoming detached from politics as a result of social desirability (Liebrand et al 1992; Martin and Tesser 1992; Rubin and Babbie 2011), specifically not wanting to appear unintelligent, demonstrated by 23-year-old retail assistant, Lydia:

*I think lack of understanding is a big issue, I mean it puts me off talking about it or even reading into it because I don't really get it and I don't want to look stupid.*

It is also apparent that this gap in understanding has impacted on participants voting behaviour, highlighted by Production Engineer, Nathan, 22:

"I guess the fact that I don't or didn't have a particularly good knowledge of politics did prevent me from voting and also made it harder for me to take more of an interest in it.

Nathan's reflection on his non-participation in the 2010 general election suggests that a lack of understanding can not only become a barrier to discussing politics, as identified by Lydia, but also to participating in elections."

Quantitative data also reinforced the impact of understanding on youth participation, with respondents who were either not intending to or unsure if they intended to vote in the next election indicating that the factor most likely to encourage them to vote (31% or 19 respondents) would be if they gained a better understanding of the difference between parties and their policies. This underpins the significance of the perceived low understanding among young voters, with arguments that non-participation undermines the legitimacy of the UK political system as a democratically elected government should represent the entire electorate (Loader 2007; Sloam 2007). Qualitative accounts also identified the frequency of young voters making uninformed choices or casting votes based on family input, highlighted by second-year University student, Jamie, 20:

"I voted last time because I could; I didn't really know what I was voting for. I based my vote on my Mum's decision. I think a lot of people do the first time."

Academics have postulated that uninformed voting is tantamount to non-participation in terms of negative implications for democracy, arguing the

representativeness of government is equally damaged (Brennan 2011; Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012). Master's graduate, Millie, 24, supported this, believing it to be problematic that young people are making uninformed voting choices:

"It's a problem that young people don't really know the difference between the parties or what they're voting for exactly. We could end up with anyone in government just because people liked the sound of their name or the colour of their tie."

Whilst academics have previously contended that young voter non-participation or uninformed voting choice has come from a sense of apathy or ambivalence towards politics (Denver 1997; Pirie and Worcester 1998; King 2002; Schaupp and Carter 2005; Kaid et al 2007; Marsh et al 2007; Nickerson 2008), qualitative accounts counteract this, instead demonstrating that lack of understanding is not tantamount to lack of interest. A significant proportion of survey respondents (55% or 60 respondents) purported to take an interest in British politics, expressing a desire to have a better understanding of it (85% or 93 respondents), reflecting earlier findings by Russell et al (2002).

Another key barrier to entry identified by participants is a shared negative view of politics, both in terms of politicians and the process. When asked why they did not vote in the last election, 21% (13 respondents) indicated they did not think their vote would make any difference. Arguably this viewpoint presents damaging implications for democracy and citizenship, demonstrating that young voters do not believe the democratic principle of one man one vote to be true (Balinski and Young 2001; Savigny 2008 cited Lees-Marshment 2009), instead believing their vote is not important to society. This finding reinforces arguments that young voters experience a sense of weak political efficacy (Roberts and Sachdev 1996; Pirie and Worcester 1998; O'Toole et al 2003; Sloam 2007).

Furthering the negative view of politics, qualitative accounts also indicated a shared sense of mistrust of politics, mirroring Moore and Longhurst's (2005) conclusion that declining trust in political institutions is an integral part of young voters' political perceptions. Nathan reasoned that past examples of dishonest behaviour are to blame:

They're [politicians] constantly denying accusations that turn out then later to be true so I don't think they're very truthful.

First-year University student, Alexandra, 19, offered an alternative explanation of young voter political mistrust, alluding to the prominent debate surrounding agenda-setting (Druckman 2001; Jamieson and Valdman 2003; Lakoff 2004; Russell 2004; Pinkleton et al 2009; Davis 2010; Smith 2010):

People are trained to know that politicians lie, so when they say they're going to do something, we're like well we're not buying it...Maybe that comes from the media, like we are always told they [politicians] lie so we believe it. Or maybe we're just smarter than they like to think.

Alexandra's suggestion that the electorate may be underestimated by politicians also brings contention to the effects of agenda-setting, instead supporting the concept of the rational voter (Haan 2004). Other participants did, however, reinforce the role they believe the media has played in shaping their view of politics, demonstrated by coffee shop manager, Peyton, 20:

I think programmes like Mock the Week where they make fun of politicians don't sort of help the younger watchers who don't really know much, watch these sort of shows and are just like oh these people [politicians] are obviously idiots that don't know what they're talking about. I guess a lot of the media do that too though, like papers

and websites that cover that kind of thing, so that doesn't help young people to have a good view of politics.

Peyton's view reflects concerns in academic literature that the 'dumbing down' of political news coverage can lead to increased cynicism (Stoker 2012). In line with this, the apparent disconnect between young people and politicians was described by several participants as a key barrier to entry, encapsulated by Lydia:

Politics comes in a dowdy middle-aged man package. It doesn't exactly inspire me to get involved as I can't relate to them.

Other participants also reported having stereotypes about the demographic background of politicians, further reinforcing their inability to relate to them and posing questions over the ability of the government to represent the wider electorate. First-year University student, Dan, 25, depicted this:

The majority of politicians seem to be white, middle-aged, middle-class, heterosexual men. How can they really represent everyone when there isn't a balance of people at the top?

This question of politicians' ability to represent the wider electorate has also been reflected in academic discussions (Seyd and Whiteley 1992; Rudig et al 1995; Braverman 2002; Kimberlee 2002; Grant 2003; Wilson and Barker 2003; Loader 2007). In addition, the most recent UK census (ONS 2011) reflected a multi-cultural nation with a median age of 39, and a population ranging in class background and sexual orientation, adding further credence to narratives of unrepresentativeness.

Following the identification of the primary barriers to entry, the research turned to focus on possible solutions, discussed in the subsequent section.

#### Possible Solutions

In 2002, the UK National Curriculum was amended to make politics a compulsory subject, taught as part of the Citizenship module (Kerr and Cleaver 2004). The intention of this amendment was to give people a greater knowledge of politics from a young age, however, participants reported vast inconsistencies in the level of political teaching they received at school. With the exception of two participants, none of the interviewees recalled learning about political parties or the democratic process. Participants reported this insufficient level of political education as having directly led to a deficit in their political understanding. In recent years there have been debates over the merits of keeping Citizenship as a statutory subject (Department of Education 2011), however, the findings of this research demonstrate not only the importance of its continuance, but also the need for a review of the content.

Results of the survey indicated that 85% of young voters (93 respondents) would like to gain a greater understanding of the political process, further supported by the qualitative narratives discussed in the previous section. This is significant as it counteracts notions of apathy and presents an opportunity to increase voter turnout, supported by academic literature which postulates that higher rates of civic understanding are correlated to increased participation in the political process (Milner 2005). When asked how they would increase understanding, participants highlighted the need for politics to continue to be a compulsory part of education in the UK, with the content updated to focus on giving students an overview of the political system, demonstrated by Dan:

It should be taught in schools from a younger age, rather than just an optional module. Then people would have a basic overview of how the system works and that it's important to take part.

Research conducted in other countries that prioritise teaching of citizenship has found a positive relationship between this and levels of political engagement and turnout among young people (Milner 2001; Howe 2003). This finding mirrors Russell et al's (2002) contention that education is a prerequisite for reviving democracy, and is supported by Alexandra's argument that it is as a direct result of insufficient education that young people are less likely to participate in the voting process:

I don't think they teach you properly in school and stuff. I think it should be a compulsory part of the curriculum. A lot of people don't vote because they don't know who to vote for. If it was taught better in schools then maybe they would, or at least they'd know it's important for them to vote whatever.

As underlined by Alexandra, the importance of voting needs to be a primary focus of political education, particularly given the finding that young voters do not believe their vote counts. In addition to promoting the importance of voting, another potential benefit of improved education identified by participants is an increased interest in politics, demonstrated by Nathan's experience:

The only reason I'm interested now is because we talked about it [politics] a lot at college so I get it a bit more now. I definitely think having it taught in schools is a good idea. Even if people don't like it at the time or think it's really boring, at least they have been exposed to it and it might make them be more interested when they're older.

Qualitative accounts also underlined the need for politicians to specifically target young voters, tailoring their communication towards them rather than speaking to them as part of the wider electorate. Millie highlighted this, referencing the importance of making communication relevant and appropriate for the target audience:

You need to target your audience, if you're addressing people who might not understand then you need to make it relevant and talk on their level.

Further to this, the majority of qualitative accounts highlighted the complex vocabulary and unfamiliar terms often used by politicians as a barrier to their participation and one that needs addressing in order for politicians to communicate with young voters, summarised by Peyton:

They [politicians] use a lot of words that I wouldn't have a clue. I want to know what they're talking about but I don't, so I'm just going to turn over or stop reading.

However, despite the apparent need for simplified lexis in politics, participants stressed the importance of politicians avoiding using language that is too informal or condescending. This is supported by literature which contends that people associate the use of formal Standard English with credibility and professionalism (Lalwani et al 2005; Phillipson 2000) and demonstrated by Nathan:

They have to hit a middle-ground between jargon and being patronising, I mean they still want to be taken seriously.

Several participants drew comparisons between student elections and national politics, particularly the strengths of the former over the latter. The narratives focused on how candidates in student elections are more capable of making the campaign engaging and communicating to voters on the same level, as demonstrated by Lydia:

Student elections are much more fun. They [the candidates] talk to you, not at you.

Final-year University student, Rachel, 21, believed that if political parties were able to learn from this, they would be able to gain the support of young voters, which is

important given the majority (54% or 59 respondents) purported to not support a party and research shows loyal voters are more likely to vote (Burbank 1997; Clarke et al 2001; Greene 2004; Brandenburg 2011). She continued to stress the importance of political actors being able to effectively convey themselves, in line with Cloonan and Street's (1997) argument that engaging young voters is a primary challenge for political parties:

It's like a teacher that's really clever but can't teach, and politicians should be able to convey themselves better. I'm sure the majority are really good at their jobs but if they can't get that across then it doesn't mean anything.

A key area of discussion that arose in several of the interviews and focus group was the example set by London Mayor, Boris Johnson. Participants believed that Johnson is an example of a politician able to engage young voters, highlighted by Jamie:

He's [Boris] doing the same thing, he's got the same ideas, it's just the way he presents the ideas and the way he delivers them and interacts with people is very different, and people respond to it.

Whilst several participants identified Johnson's personality as a key strength, they also emphasised the need for this to be balanced with professional conduct. Millie reinforced this notion:

*You have only got to look at Boris Johnson to realise that being fun and having personality helps. They [politicians] can't have too much fun all the time or try too hard, but some is definitely needed to engage people more.*

Dan furthered the need for a balance, highlighting that deviating too far from traditional political conduct may result in damage to their credibility:

I think he [Johnson] definitely helps keep people interested in politics because he's a character and he's got personality. Maybe sometimes people might be a bit dubious because they think this means he might be less competent at his job.

Competence was ranked as one of the most important characteristics for politicians to possess, second only to trustworthiness which emerged as the primary trait young voters expect politicians to have. Qualitative narratives further reinforced the importance of trustworthiness to young voters, supporting the significance of the mistrust identified in the previous section and by Moore and Longhurst (2005). Participants outlined the importance of politicians communicating a trustworthy image, highlighted by Brooke:

Honesty really is the best policy and when you're honest other people will trust you more and then you'll be more effective.

However, Jamie offered a word of caution for politicians, stressing the importance of earning trust through actions:

I don't want them to say they're going to change things for us; I want them to actually change them. They can stand there and say it, but it's just words. Actions speak louder than words.

This supports Maarek's (1995 cited Palmer 2002, p.356) contention that "image is intrinsically unstable, whereas political record is not."

Finally, findings across both the quantitative and qualitative data highlighted that young voters support the introduction of online voting. 62% (67 respondents) of people that intend to vote in the next election reported they would like the option to vote online, and 16% (10 respondents) of people unsure if they will vote in the next election said it would make them more likely to vote. Qualitative accounts supported this, with Jamie arguing that it would increase young voter turnout:

Online voting would make more young people vote because it's easier and requires less effort and commitment.

This finding supports research conducted in America which concluded that if marketed effectively, e-voting may increase young voter participation (Schaupp and Carter 2005). In addition to increased participation, several participants suggested online voting may result in more informed voters by presenting parties with an opportunity to directly communicate their manifestos, demonstrated by 21-year-old student, Lucas, 21:

"It would be good if each party had a two or three minute video that you could watch and see what their values are and what they want to do with the country and then you could vote online afterwards. That way more young people would vote and they'd make more informed choices."

As highlighted earlier, uninformed voting is comparable to non-participation in terms of the negative impact on democracy (Brennan 2011; Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012) and so must be a key area of focus for political communication. The research has outlined the key barriers to entry faced by young voters, presenting an alternative to notions of apathy. In addition, potential solutions to these barriers have been identified by participants, the implications of which are discussed in the concluding section.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to enhance existing understanding of the relationship between young voters and the political process; specifically focusing on the extent to which the British youth are apathetic and the factors contributing to the decline in turnout and engagement. Drawing from the quantitative data and qualitative narratives, it was found that young voters are not apathetic as academic and market research, as well as media narratives has argued. Instead, lower levels of engagement amongst this demographic is, as they say, because they face specific barriers to entry; a perceived lack of political understanding and a negative view of politics. The research also identified potential solutions to overcome the aforementioned barriers; the continuance and improvement of Citizenship as a compulsory part of the National Curriculum, political actors and parties communicating with young voters on their level, a focus on building trust in politicians, and the introduction of online voting. These recommendations voiced by young voters offer specific, actionable points for political parties to use in their attempts to improve engagement with this generation.

The findings of this research are particularly significant as they dispute academic literature (Denver 1997; Pirie and Worcester 1998; King 2002; Schaupp and Carter 2005; Kaid et al 2007; Marsh et al 2007; Nickerson 2008) and media reports (White 1998; Phillips 2000 cited Kimberlee 2002) that the British youth are a lost cause, apathetic to the political process and uninterested in taking an active role in the democratic society. Thus, highlighting the opportunity for increasing engagement and participation among the younger generation by focusing on overcoming the barriers and implementing the solutions recommended by participants, arguably a shared responsibility of academics, political parties and the media (Russell 2004).

Alt

though academics have previously acknowledged a lack of participation and engagement among young voters (Kimberlee 2002; Russell et al 2002; O'Toole et al 2003; Russell 2004; Drummond 2006; Loader 2007; Sloam 2007), the conceptions of young people have been somewhat overlooked (O'Toole et al 2003). This research has contributed to existing knowledge by specifically focusing on the views of young voters, investigating alternatives to apathy, and exploring the conditions necessary to engage the British

youth in the political process. The finding that young voters are not apathetic towards politics is significant as it implies that measures can be taken to reduce disengagement among this group and prevent it developing in future generations. As identified previously, youth disengagement is an important issue as it questions the legitimacy of the UK political system (Loader 2007; Sloam 2007). Consequently, it is imperative that political candidates and parties, along with the media, recognise that young voters are not apathetic and as a result should be educated and targeted as active members of the democratic process.

This paper was intended to broaden existing knowledge on youth disengagement and to offer additional lines of enquiry for future research. It has given an insight into the relationship between young voters and politics; however, caution should be taken when generalising findings as this study is a preliminary step in gaining greater understanding of the issue. Recommendations for future research are to look in more detail at the specific conditions needed to make political education in schools effective; to delve deeper into the formation of negative political stereotypes among young voters; and finally to examine the effect of media portrayals of the youth as apathetic on the attitudes and behaviours of young voters.

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