

# The Party Politics of Youth Citizenship and Democratic Engagement

Andrew Mycock<sup>1</sup> and Jonathan Tonge<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield, UK;*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Politics, University of Liverpool, UK*

\*Correspondence: [j.tonge@liv.ac.uk](mailto:j.tonge@liv.ac.uk)

Young people populate a uniquely strategic position within society in general and particularly in party political debate about the future development of citizenship and the national community. Political parties in the UK have however been historically reluctant to engage with young people or represent their interests in the formulation of policies, instead prioritising older voters. However, the political resonance of issues linked to youth citizenship and democratic engagement has risen recently as political parties have sought to address steep declines in levels of civic and civil activism and the preparedness of young people to vote in elections. This paper explores the emerging party politics associated with such shifts, assessing the extent to which political parties have sought to reform how they engage with young people or reassert traditional modes of citizenship and political participation.

## 1. Introduction

The riots across England in August 2011 brought the role of young people in society into sharp relief. The ensuing debate into the causes of the disturbances revealed political divisions between the Coalition government and the opposition Labour party. For the government, the riots were ‘pure criminality’; a ‘slow-motion moral collapse’ that was a product of decades of social liberalism encouraging a culture of mindless selfishness and irresponsibility. This was underpinned by poor parenting, broken families and a lack of discipline in schools which had undermined social values and discipline in some—but not all—communities (Cameron, 2011). Whilst Labour also condemned the violence and vandalism, they suggested the causes were more complex. It was argued that there was an ‘inconvenient truth’ that politicians and other powerful business and media elites were also guilty of irresponsibility, creating a ‘values crisis’ (Miliband, 2011).

Persistent social inequality and rising youth unemployment, the impact of government spending cuts, particularly on youth services, increases in university tuition fees and the removal of the Educational Maintenance Allowance had created a 'lost generation' with limited aspirations.

Most parliamentarians were in agreement that the riots were not 'a genuine outlet of political angst' (Khan, 2011) or a form of 'legitimate political protest' and those involved were not rioters but looters infused with a selfishness driven by an 'age of rampant consumerism' (Williams, 2011). Government responses have predominantly focused on the swift penalisation of those involved, including the potential to withdraw welfare rights, together with a rapid expansion of National Citizen Service (NCS) and a 'family intervention' programme to provide social, economic and behavioural support to 120,000 'most troubled families' (Cameron, 2011). This emphasis on the criminality of the young people involved, according to Gary Younge (2011), has allowed politicians to overlook 'the political nature of what took place'. Deputy Labour leader, Harriet Harman was one of the few politicians to suggest 'there is a sense that young people feel they are not being listened to'.<sup>1</sup> Penny (2011) concurred, arguing that 'violence is rarely mindless' and many of those rioting represented a 'disempowered generation' who sought political recognition.

A number of influential reports have concluded that many young people feel they are uniquely isolated or even excluded from a self-serving political system which is reluctant to acknowledge its own limitations (Russell *et al.*, 2002; Power, 2006; YCC, 2009). In particular, there is scant recognition of the lack of status of young people within mainstream party politics when compared with other sections of society (Kimberlee, 2002). Young people are frequently utilised in party literature and electioneering, providing a positive youth-orientated backdrop to policy announcements, campaign manifestoes and speeches. They are also seen to provide much needed lifeblood for political parties. But the interests and aspirations of young people are frequently overlooked in political debates and policy formulation. Supposedly youth-orientated policies often situate young people's citizenship in the future tense, rarely being based on consultation and often reflecting adult interpretations of young citizens perceived needs.

This article seeks to explore how political parties engage with young people and youth citizenship and democratic engagement. It will first consider how youth citizenship is understood and how this influences debates about young people and political participation. It will then explore the 'party politics of youth', focusing on how political parties interact with young people and frame youth-orientated policies. The paper will then consider historical approaches to youth citizenship and how political parties have historically engaged with

<sup>1</sup>BBC *Newsnight*, debate with Michael Gove. Broadcast on 10th August 2011.

young people. It will finally consider how, since 1997, the Labour and Coalition governments have addressed issues of youth citizenship and political participation, exploring whether recognition of declining participation in elections and other areas of civic society have led to changes in how political parties relate to and interact with young people.

## 2. Framing youth citizenship and political participation

Although it is oft-noted that citizenship is a contested concept, there is general agreement that it relates to the rights, privileges and responsibilities associated with membership of a political community. Politicians and policymakers in the UK have increasingly sought to apply concepts of citizenship to frame political, social, cultural or economic orthodoxies or ideologies, as well as developing and implementing policies. Citizenship has not only underpinned the reconfiguration of relationships between individuals, groups, communities and the state but also the civic and civil values, attitudes, identities and interactions of British democratic life. For many politicians and political parties, the rights and responsibilities associated with citizenship are typically understood as a synonym for 'adulthood'. This is, in part, a product of different historical policy legacies predicated on assumptions about age, dependency and juvenilia. Young people are considered to be a social group whose place in society is often differentiated from those of their adult counterparts and whose needs and aspirations are believed to differ significantly.

The utilisation of age as a signifier of a distinctive 'youth citizenship' is complex as there are considerable challenges in defining what we mean by the term 'youth', how it relates to 'adulthood' and what are the implications in delineating the allocation of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Adulthood is often defined by specified 'ages of consent' based on perceptions of vulnerability, competence and comprehension. Yet such markers of adulthood lack consistency and highlight the importance of age in informing subjective perceptions of juvenilia and maturity. The allocation of rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship are therefore fragmented, lacking coherence and failing to define a precise point of adulthood. Moreover, the terms 'youth' and 'young' are applied in inconsistent and increasingly expansive ways involving a broad range of ages that sometimes even includes people in their mid-thirties. Thomson *et al.* (2004) note that such ambiguities indicate transitions from youth to adulthood, including the accumulation of citizenship rights and responsibilities, are complex, plural, open-ended and fluid.

Benedicto and Morán (2007) argue that how we understand youth citizenship is often framed by the relative social, economic and cultural autonomy of young people, both from their parents and adult society as a whole. The interaction between dependence and independence in understanding youth citizenship is

crucial. Increasing numbers of young people are delaying leaving the parental home and buying a house, establishing a family, or entering employment, with many preferring to undertake a period of higher education. Delays in achieving the social and economic independence associated with adulthood further compromise the utility of age as a marker of adult citizenship. This encourages a form of deficit model of citizenship—a ‘quasi-citizenship’—which is apparent across a wide range of areas of policy in the UK whereby young people are seen as ‘second-class citizens’ (Osler and Starkey, 2003). Lister (2007) argues that the definition of young people as immature, ‘not yet’ citizens means that they are not treated as equal members of British society or its polity. Youth citizenship is therefore defined by an aspiration of inclusion with its adult counterpart through the equitable recognition of their interests within political, economic, social and cultural institutions.

Young people populate a uniquely strategic position within society in general and particularly in party political debate about the future of development of citizenship and the national community. Such deliberations are often framed within a binary context whereby youth citizenship is couched in either pessimistic or optimistic narratives to illustrate particular political ideas and policies or to justify or criticise government policies. Young people are as such often discussed within the context of national decline or regeneration, being projected as symbolic of the positive and progressive future or typified as a threat and somehow out of control. They therefore have the potential to reaffirm, develop or undermine established social and political norms, though political debates often draw on broader concerns reflecting inter-generational tensions and conflict.

Young people are typically considered by governments and political parties as having the potential to embrace or subvert established modes of citizenship. As ‘citizens in the making,’ they are in need of appropriate discipline and training before they may become full citizens. The provision of such instruction is primarily the responsibility of families, communities and the state. The interactions between private and public inculcations of citizenship are realised through the provision of formal and informal instruction of young people in schools, communities and others sites where the values, knowledge and practices of older generations can be transmitted. Although the division of labour in passing down established patterns of social and political reproduction to future generations is never fully articulated, young people are usually positioned as the passive recipients of citizenship policy rather than as active citizens shaping their political realities. Even when young people are encouraged to be ‘active’ citizens, it is often within closely monitored parameters founded on replicated modes of citizenship.

However, the role of young people within British democratic life has altered recently and is now often discussed within terms of a decline in their preparedness to vote in elections and their reluctance to participate in party politics or other traditional aspects of civic society. As Russell *et al.* (2002, p. 11) note,

'connection between young people and the democratic state is more fragile than in the rest of the electorate'. In the 1997 general election, the turnout of 18–24 year olds was 59.7%. Since then it has declined dramatically with 49.4% of 18–24 year olds voting in 2001 and this figure falling to 37% in 2005. Although turnout rose to 44% in the 2010 general election, this figure remained considerably below all other voting age groups and concern amongst political parties regarding young people's low levels of voting and democratic engagement remains high.

There have been a number of important studies that seek to explain the 'politically apathetic' (Kimberlee, 1998), 'uninterested' youths (Henn *et al.*, 2005) of a 'disengaged generation' (Jowell and Park, 1998). Farthing (2010, p. 181) observes a key binary in the literature of youth citizenship and democratic participation whereby young people are either 'disengaged or disenfranchised on one extreme, or active and engaged in new forms of politics on the other'. Some studies argue that young people feel alienated from a political system that prioritizes the interests of older voters whilst overlooking representation of younger voters (and those who are not yet old enough to vote; Henn *et al.*, 2002; Kimberlee, 2002). Moreover, many young people may suffer from a lack of political literacy and knowledge, meaning they have difficulty in understanding the language and issues associated with democratic politics, and are therefore mistrustful of the political system, democratic institutions and politicians who represent them (YCC, 2009).

Conversely, young people are seen to be politically engaged but, by operating outside of traditional modes of political activity, are not typically recognized or incorporated within mainstream politics. For many young people, a 'new politics' has replaced conventional political activity which is founded on single-issue activism which operates outside of party politics (Norris, 2003; Henn *et al.*, 2005). It is argued that young people are exploring new and innovative avenues of participation that are informal and founded within new community networks which can emphasise local and global citizenship without engaging within traditional local or national politics. Here the use of new technologies is seen to be crucial, encouraging different types of political activism which do not necessarily seek to interact with political parties or elected democratic institutions (Loader, 2007).

Explorations of the causality of such shifts draw on a number of identifiable themes (see Quintelier, 2007). For some, disengagement from traditional politics and the development of a counter-political culture are reflective of 'life-cycle' issues (Norris, 2003). Young people's relative non-participation is not new and is representative of the cognitive nature of the accrual rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Therefore, young people become more interested and engaged in politics as they grow older. However, there is evidence that the scale and pace of disengagement is greater now than for previous generations (YCC, 2009). This

has led others to suggest that it is particular political and social circumstances linked with the policies of recent governments that have meant ‘the Thatcher and Blair generations are less civic minded than their predecessors’ (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, p. 271). This, according to Pattie *et al.* (2004), suggests an ‘atomisation’ of citizenship whereby ‘individualisation’ has led to significant decline in levels of social and political capital which are evidenced in the fracturing of established patterns of social and political reproduction.

However, the complex nature of youth citizenship is rarely recognized by politicians and political parties. Some commentators suggest that little attempt is made to understand how young people define ‘politics’ and this oversight somewhat compromises claims that they are actually ‘disengaged’ (Marsh *et al.*, 2007). The adult-centric prism which shapes narratives of youth citizenship and disengagement produces potentially distorted visions of the needs and interests of young people. Moreover, the contribution of young people is often seen to be peripheral and even overlooked by adults, despite the considerable contribution to society and the valuable acts of citizenship and activism undertaken both within private and public spheres of life (YCC, 2009). This has led many young people to view decision-making democratic institutions, political parties and indeed the act of voting as predominantly as the province of adults (Smith *et al.*, 2005).

### 3. The party politics of youth

Although young people remain supportive of the democratic process (Henn *et al.*, 2005), politicians and political parties interpreted the lack of youth engagement in politics as evidence of their deficiency as citizens. This approach has allowed them to overlook the possibility that politicians, political parties and the democratic institutions they operate create barriers to engagement for young people. Suspicion of the motivations of politicians and political parties is widespread (Hansard, 2010). Many young people view their motivations as self-serving in the pursuit of power rather than the desire to govern for the people. British political parties are seen to be infantile and divisive in their approach to debate and policy formulation, and embarrassing in their occasional attempts to appeal to young people. This has led to a significant disconnection between young people and political parties. This is evidenced through low levels of party identification and reluctance in the preparedness of young people to join, donate to, work for or campaign for political parties across the UK (Henn *et al.*, 2005; YCC, 2009).

Kimberlee (2002) notes that the organisation and policies of UK political parties leads many young people to conclude they are exclusory, remote and irrelevant. Young voters are more likely than other age groups to complain that

their interests were overlooked by political parties and that they did not receive sufficient information about parties' campaigns, candidates or policies (Russell *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, political parties appear to be indifferent, complacent or uninterested in issues influencing young people and often overlook how young people are affected by policy proposals or legislation (YCC, 2009). Young people remain under-represented within government at all levels and with political parties, with average ages of MPs, local councillors and party members typically being over 50 years.

Most UK political parties do have youth wings that are distinct from the 'rump' of the party which act as recruiters for the party but also educate and train young people in key party functions such as campaigning, fund-raising, political communication and party organisation. They also allow party elites at national, regional and local levels to identify and nurture future elected representatives, policy researchers or party organizers and administration. As Russell (2005) notes though, maybe the most important role of youth wings is psychological—drawing in new members and thus providing a sense of connection between the past, present and future for political parties.

There is however no agreement on the parameters of the age which defines 'youth' membership in political parties. The youth wing of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Young Independence, is open to all party members up to the age of 35 years old. Several other parties though, including Conservative Future, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Fein and the Greens, see the tipping point into full adult membership as reaching the age of 30. Young Labour and Liberal Youth set the upper age limit of youth membership at 26 years old. Most parties do not specifically set a lower age for membership, though many do stipulate that those under the age of 18 cannot vote and are therefore a distinct group. Of those who do set a limit, only UKIP limits membership to the legal voting age. Sinn Fein sets a lower limit at 16 years old whilst Labour membership is set at 15. Most parties automatically enrol new members into their youth wings when they join, regardless of whether they may wish to opt out. Some parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, merge their youth and student wings, providing membership within the defined age parameters alongside those registered as a student regardless of age. The Green Party is the only party to have a separate section for teenagers under the age of 18 on its youth wing website. This lack of consistency in age eligibility for youth wings in political parties reflects broader uncertainty as to distinctions between young people and adults.

The youth wings of main British political parties have historically been large in membership, with the Young Conservatives once attracting nearly 250,000 members, but have fallen drastically. They have occasionally provided a radical counterpoint to dominant political orthodoxies or challenge to the main party leadership (Kimberlee, 2002). Such critical or challenging behaviour has

sometimes led to the disbanding of youth organisations, reflecting a gradual curtailment of the potential for young people to influence policy or shape debate within political parties. This suggests that political parties have become increasingly reluctant to give young members too great a voice in party affairs, concerned that potentially radical policy proposals could alienate older voters. It also highlights the subservient role of youth wings within political parties who are also typically reliant the main party for funding.

The segregation of youth wings from the mainstream party does not however mean that they do not have some limited input on policy development and political debate. In some cases, such as the Labour Party, there are youth representatives on national councils and policy forums (Russell, 2005). All parties also host separate conferences and other events for youth wings which are attended by older members of the party. However, the impact of such representation is limited and parties typically seek to consult with youth wings only on youth-specific policies rather than on mainstream political issues. Therefore, the potential for youth wings to have substantial influence on the 'adult' party is undermined by their peripheral standing within the overarching party structures. As Kimberlee (2002, p. 89) concludes, 'it is unsurprising that very few young people are involved in political parties today'.

Russell (2005) suggests political parties face a difficult dilemma. How do they focus on strengthening the representation of committed young people within party structures whilst also reaching out to non-members who may be sceptical of party politics or the political system as whole? This is a potentially intractable problem, particularly in light of the diversification of the political interests and issues amongst young people. Moreover, as Sloam (2007) rightly notes, the non-participation of young people is potentially self-reinforcing, particularly when parties resort to negative campaigning that appeals to their core vote whilst overlooking the interests of young people. In light of this, it appears somewhat contradictory that political parties, increasingly seen as remote and failing to engage with younger voters, have increasingly placed emphasis on strategies for encouraging youth citizenship.

The approaches political parties have adopted in framing youth-orientated policies to encourage democratic participation and youth citizenship provide clear insights into how they construe the position of young people in society. It is possible to identify a number of contingent binaries which appear to underpin a 'party politics of youth', highlighting the role and interplay between political ideology and concepts of citizenship. Questions persist as to whether political parties have sought to develop youth engagement policies that encourage replicative or transformative citizenship to either regulate the actions of young people or to emancipate them. Have youth-based policies and initiatives introduced aimed to develop critical or compliant citizenship? To what extent do political parties

seek to encourage young people to recognize the legitimacy of their rights or prioritize their responsibilities?

A key element in how youth citizenship is framed is the extent to which policies encourage the development of citizenship skills or literacy. The role of citizenship education is particularly contentious, offering necessary training for 'citizens to be' according to supporters or political indoctrination to young people at a vulnerable age for opponents. Such debates also link to issues of active citizenship. Emphasis on volunteering and community participation can be seen as a counterpoint to rights-based citizenship but also raises a number of questions about the relationship between civic or political engagement as distinct from civil activism. To what extent is political participation organic, something which is natural by-product of civil participation, or a cognitive product of intervention and education by the state and other interested actors? Whether political parties are seeking to develop social and political engagement that is critically informed or simply encouraging life-long altruism and enhancing the employability of young people is an unresolved question.

The promotion of youth citizenship and democratic participation by political parties also raises questions about the tensions between individualism and communitarianism. The encouragement of young people to take more responsibility and to rely less on the state promotes greater individualisation which potentially conflicts with concerns over lack of engagement within communities and society as a whole. This links with debates about community cohesion and the promotion of a common British national identity underpinned by a range of civic and civil values, practices and institutions. Political parties also make normative value judgements on what constitutes appropriate young citizen activities, attitudes and behaviours. *Pykett et al. (2010)* suggest that the identification of 'good' or 'bad' citizenship is often subjective and politically defined. This raises the potential that young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been excluded from government conceptions of citizenship due to their failure to act as responsible citizens but at the same time have been criticized for their lack of democratic engagement.

#### **4. Historical party political approaches to youth citizenship and political engagement**

The supposed crisis of youth citizenship of the twenty-first century seemed very distant from the halcyon days of the 1950s and 1960s, when there appeared to be few strong reasons to assume that young people might adopt forms of political behaviour markedly different from adults. Political parties rarely attempted to engage with young people or consider issues of youth citizenship or political participation. Whilst the 1960s saw an increased focus on young people, political

parties tended to frame policy as law-and-order issues involving youth cults, such as 'teddy boys' and 'mods and rockers'. Yet there were concerns over youth political apathy as early as the 1950s. In 1959 Labour set up a Youth Commission (a device, as noted below, repeated nearly half a century later) in an attempt to attract the interest of the young. The difference between the 1950s model and the later commission was that the earlier version was designed to boost Labour Party fortunes rather than seeking holistic, non-party-based remedies.

Among political parties and policy-makers, the common-held view during the 1960s was that the desire of young people to participate in political parties and elections was similar to their elders. Although consideration of the voting age was beyond its remit, the Latey Committee on the Age of Majority recommended in 1967, with only two dissenters, that the limits on full capacity in civil law be removed for 18–21 year olds, creating momentum for the age of franchise to be addressed. Support for lowering the voting age was not universal. In the debate on the Latey Committee report, a Labour backbencher, Charles Pannell, argued that 'when considering a situation in which people decide their own personal affairs, it may be right to settle on the age of 18, but that when considering the general corporate affairs of the country, the age of 20 is more sensible?' (Hansard, 1968). The subsequent Speaker's Conference on Electoral Law argued in 1968 for the voting age to be lowered to 20 amid debates over whether the appropriate age for individual citizenship rights should be conflated with the appropriate age for the fulfilment of societal citizenship duties (House of Commons, 1968).

Labour and the Liberals had however already advocated lowering the voting age in their 1966 election manifestoes, the issue placed within the broader context of citizenship rights (Latey, 1967). This was sufficient to allow the UK to become the first state in the world to lower the voting age to 18 in 1969 as part of a broader package of measures offering full citizenship rights at an earlier age. This was a bold step for a party still infused with considerable conservatism and the decision was thus undertaken with some nervousness via a whipped vote, with one-third of Labour MPs previously viewed as unsupportive of change. Within the Labour cabinet, positions on whether to lower the voting age appeared to be conditioned more by base political calculations, namely the impacts upon Labour's image and its working-class support, alongside fear of a growth of the Left or of the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties (Fielding, 2003, p. 185).

Beyond such calculations, there was genuine parliamentary consideration of the implications for individual and collective citizenship of allowing young people to vote. The linkage and weighting of rights and responsibilities and the age at which either should be put into effect, along with the balance between individual and collective aspects of citizenship, have continued to figure prominently in party political discourse around civic engagement. Enfranchisement of

the young was seen as means to give young people a bigger stake in society. Yet encouragement of political activism also had other motivations. Offering young people a legislative voice by giving them a vote was seen as a means of incorporating youth into the existing system of political engagement, emphasising their responsibilities whilst preventing the need for a wider review of processes of civic activity. Whilst a lowering of the voting age was clearly a legislative act of emancipation, it was also a derivative of more conservative, regulatory thoughts, part of a process of harnessing youth, a top-down process also evident in the recruitment efforts of political parties.

As Fielding argues, Labour's largely unsuccessful attempt to attract young people to politics during the 1950s and 1960s, via a Commission and then the formation of the Young Socialists, were 'underpinned by the party's desire to instil "responsibility" in the young, by which was meant their acceptance of Labour's own political assumptions' (Fielding, 2003, p. 166). Democratic norms and party politics were to be imposed from above and inculcated by young people. With some prescience but greater paternalism, Labour feared that individualistic modes of consumption, amid greater consumerism, might threaten collective political organisation (although this pessimism was confounded by the looser collective student radicalism of the late 1960s). Whilst the Labour party debated whether it was better to engage the youth via political or social activities, the latter form tended to dominate the Conservatives and its youth wing, the Young Conservatives, which enjoyed a membership ten times the size of Labour's.

During the 1970s, youth citizenship was rarely considered by political parties beyond the scope of education, training and employment, though policy reforms were implemented from above with little or no consultation with young people. Although some leading members of the Labour party were prepared to support campaigns to introduce political education in schools (Crick, 2002), issues of youth citizenship and political participation were largely overlooked. The rights-based framing of citizenship was not extended to young people whose interests remained peripheral in party political debate or government policies. But by the 1980s it was evident that young people, especially graduates, were less likely to strongly support political parties than their elders (Harrop and Miller, 1987). Life-cycle theories, originating in the USA (Verba and Nie, 1972), grew in popularity in the UK as explanations of the greater detachment of young people from politics. However, an exhaustive study of such participation in the UK found that there was a clear generational effect, as 'young people appear averse to conventional political participation' to a degree which could not simply be explained by life cycle factors and that 'young adults have consistently fewer memberships of formal groups of various kinds' (Parry *et al.*, 1992, pp. 158–160).

Although other studies suggested that the most obvious features of youth citizenship were that of a stable transition to adulthood and loyalty to the polity,

meaning the values and norms young and old remained close (Braungart and Braungart, 1986, p. 373), a decline in formal participation had nonetheless occurred. This was only partially compensated by a reported growth in direct action and an above-average level of concern for environmental and peace issues among the young. The lack of conventional civic engagement had been a rapid development. Prior to the 1997 election, age was not seen as a key variable in measurable aspects of civic engagement, in contrast to economic factors such as employment. In the 1983 election, for example, half of the unemployed did not vote (Banks and Ullah, 1987). Young people with a stake in society via a job remained politically engaged, whereas those bereft of employment were likely to detach themselves from processes of civic engagement, turning off from all politics and uninterested even in extremist political parties.

The 1980s came to be seen as a period in which hints of youth civic disengagement emerged, but the problem was seen as requiring remedial economic action rather than needing new formulations of citizenship or civic engagement. There was however evidence that significant numbers of young people were politically engaged, but they increasingly associated with single-issue causes and groups rather than political parties. Membership of youth wings fell significantly during this period and attempts to re-engage with young people, such as the Labour-sponsored Red Wedge campaign of 1987 which attempted to fuse music with political activism, largely failed. But other non-partisan initiatives, such as Rock the Vote in 1987 which was endorsed by all the main political parties, also failed to bolster falling youth turnout. Rock the Vote was criticised as a conservative attempt to bolster mainstream political involvement by making politicians popular or trendy, rather than enhancing serious political debate or eliciting sustained civic engagement (Cloonan and Street, 1998).

Political parties still considered youth citizenship to be a peripheral concern and political engagement and participation to be largely organic in its development as part of a life-cycle. Although 'education for citizenship' was established as one of the five voluntary cross-curricular themes in the National Curriculum in 1990, it promoted a distinctly 'Thatcherite' view of the role of young people in society that consciously avoided engagement with political participation or literacy (Mycock, 2004). Moreover, there was scant evidence that the development of the New Labour project would radically revise the way in which political parties interacted with young people.

## 5. New Labour and youth citizenship

Increasingly, political parties began to acknowledge the potential for a seemingly unstoppable cycle of mistrust, disaffection and disinterest to undermine public life and democratic politics in the UK. This has led in recent times to an

almost continuous debate of the conceptual and empirical contents and limits of citizenship and the role of key democratic institutions (Benedicto and Morán, 2007). The philosophical shift in how citizenship has been understood during the past 30 years or so has seen the main political parties in the UK de-emphasise liberal (rights-based) citizenship in response to a range of phenomena including globalisation, deindustrialisation, immigration and the decline of the post-war economic and social consensus. In its place concepts of communitarianism have increasingly influenced governments, seeking to prioritise the obligations and duties of citizens in realising the responsibilities of citizenship through employment and conditional public welfare, but also the building of stocks of social capital in communities (Etzioni, 1993). However, concerns about political capital and the fracture of the political relationship between citizens and the state have also seen the resonance of civic republican thinking in the reframing of citizenship.

Strategies to promote youth citizenship and the democratic participation of young people have focused both on both civil and civic dynamics. The election of the Labour government in 1997 saw the gradual de-emphasising of rights-based citizenship, seen as divisive, isolating and potentially selfish, and growing emphasis on the value of volunteering and reciprocity to develop community participation and cohesion. Such initiatives were strongly influenced by communitarian thinking to encourage young people to become active citizens who were prepared to volunteering and participate in their schools and communities. Labour also emphasised the importance of political knowledge and literacy to encourage political participation to address concerns over democratic deficits.

Labour's response to the apparent crisis of civic engagement was to introduce citizenship education as a statutory element within the English school curriculum from 2002 (Andrews and Mycock, 2007). The centrality of citizenship education to Labour could be questioned, given its non-appearance in the party's 1997 election manifesto (Labour, 1997, p. 31), its introduction instead owing much to the determination of the new government's Education Secretary, David Blunkett, to build social capital and also improve political literacy and bolster interest in democracy among young people. Frequently, the precise aims of citizenship varied according to the latest perceived crisis, ranging from the need to tackle social disorder following brutal murders, to the promotion of Britishness amid race riots in 2001 and the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London (Andrews and Mycock, 2008). Moreover, the depth and quality of citizenship education varied considerably between schools as the inculcation of citizenship remained beyond the main concerns of exam-focused teachers.

Nonetheless, the desire to promote greater political knowledge as a means of enhancing youth political engagement has remained a constant theme amid the 'bolt-ons' to the subject which subsequently emerged. Labour also sought to

promote Youth and Schools' Councils which were organised to replicate government decision-making structures (Matthews, 2001; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). These developed on an ad hoc basis though, as some schools and local authorities were reluctant to establish youth-based councils. Concerns about cost were often cited but this did not lift the suspicion that some were concerned about the potential for the establishment of a forum for young people to aggregate and express their interests and criticisms of organisations concerned. This established a post-code lottery which meant that young people's ability to participate in such forums was limited by their location. Moreover, such forums were typically non-politically partisan, thus denying the development of political party structures which could be linked with their senior counterparts.

In response to ever-growing concerns over youth political disengagement, the Labour government under Gordon Brown established the Youth Citizenship Commission (YCC) in 2008, as promised in the Governance of Britain Green Paper published one year earlier. The YCC's remit was to examine how young people define citizenship, consider ways of increasing young people's participation in politics and to consult over whether the voting age should be lowered to 16. The Commission argued for empowered citizenship and substantial institutional change in the manner in which young people's issues are addressed, including the 'youth-proofing' of legislation, the use of representative consultative bodies of young people and more consistent delivery of citizenship education. These measures, the YCC (2009) argued, would be far more meaningful in the promotion of effective and empowered citizenship than a lowering of the voting age which might merely exacerbate the issue of low percentage turnout.

Somewhat tellingly, most parliamentarians and political parties did not engage with the YCC when offered the opportunity (Tonge and Mycock, 2010). The YCC did not consider how political parties could restructure their own internal arrangements to give young members a greater voice in their day-to-day operation or policy formulation. Moreover, Labour's period in office saw little change in the way political parties accommodated the interests of young people. 'Top-down' policy formulation remained the norm amongst political parties, with few policies were specifically addressing young people's interests. Attempts to engage with young people, such as Labour's text campaign to some new voters promising to deregulate drinking hours in the 2001 general election, were often clumsy and myopic. But whilst it is frequently recognized that the transition from youth to adulthood has altered considerably for young people today from previous generations, it is less clear as to whether Labour revised their view of the place of young people in society or how youth citizenship was understood. Labour's framing discourses and policy agendas relating to young people within the context of 'active citizenship' merged communitarian and

civic republican concepts of citizenship. This, as Hall *et al.* (1998) noted, suggested other rights-based conceptions of citizenship were 'passive'.

Research suggests that this realignment in how Labour understood citizenship was realised in policy terms and strongly influenced young people who now found it markedly more difficult to identify their rights as opposed to their responsibilities (Lister *et al.*, 2005). According to some critics, Labour's prioritising of 'active citizenship' was founded on enduring conservative principles which narrowed the parameters of 'legitimate' citizenship and limited the range of activities available to young people to challenge and reform established democratic orthodoxies (Gifford, 2004; Faulks, 2006).

Moreover, the promotion of 'active citizenship' invariably focused on reimagining or reforming normative constructions of citizenship but rarely sought to redefine the legal framework of youth citizenship or codify the rights and duties underpinning the status of young people. In 2009, as part of a Ministry of Justice initiative to formulate a bill to set out a list of rights and responsibilities of citizens in the UK, a youth guide to the green paper was produced (Ministry of Justice, 2009). Its focus was instructive, prioritising young people's responsibilities before their rights, with scant acknowledgement of their political citizenship. Although it argued 'young people should be able to challenge decisions made about them by the Government or other public bodies', it provided a caveat that their views should be given 'due weight' depending on their age and maturity and made no mention to how this could be realised.

Labour's approach to youth citizenship and political engagement was characterised by a lack of surety as to desired aims and outcomes. They were the first government to begin to address the role of young people's place in society seriously. Towards the end of their period in office, they sought to connect with young people in a more sustained manner, establishing a Minister for Young Citizens and Youth Engagement, increasing young people's voice in local and national government, and taking tentative steps to changing the ways policymakers and democratic institutions worked. In the 2010 general election, Labour asserted they would seek to lower the voting age to 16 if elected again. During their period in government, had pushed upwards the age of consent in some areas of social citizenship and lowered ages in other aspects (YCC, 2009). The asymmetric age thresholds defining the legal responsibilities of adult citizenship continued to be underpinned by an enduring incoherence and uncertainty.

## 6. The coalition government: positive for youth?

In opposition from 1997 to 2010, the Conservatives did not tend to treat youth civic disengagement or youth citizenship as major issues. They however did establish the Democracy Commission, examining how politics in general and

the Conservative party especially could involve and interest young people. The [Liberal Democrats \(2010\)](#) advocated the lowering of the voting age and argued that electoral reform towards a more proportional voting system would empower young voters. Both parties issued separate youth policy papers during the 2010 general election aimed at young people, which drew on a number of shared if somewhat eclectic themes. Common themes included youth training and employment but each party also promised to help young people ‘fight back against crime’ and anti-social behaviour, with the Liberal Democrats also promising to ‘tackle homophobic bullying’. Other proposals, such as Conservative support for the expansion of the high-speed rail or superfast broadband networks, were not clearly youth specific. Beyond the Liberal Democrats’ promise to lower the voting age to 16, there was little to offer younger citizens either paper beyond the introduction of an NCS programme for 16 year olds, the establishment of an Olympic-style school sports competition, and the promise to remove under-16s from the National DNA Database ([Conservatives Party \(2010a\)](#) ([2010b](#)); [Liberal Democrats, 2010](#)).

David Cameron had previously noted that young people ‘tell me how sick they are of the whole political system—the shouting, finger-pointing, backbiting and point-scoring in the House of Commons. That’s all got to go’. Cameron asserted ‘I want young people to see politics not as a waste of time but as a way to change the world’ ([Cameron, 2005](#)). Since forming the Coalition government in May 2010, policy relating to youth citizenship has been more focused upon civil engagement through volunteering, than upon civic participation. Central to this has been the promotion of the Big Society narrative and policy agenda which has sought to rebalance the relationship between individuals, society and state, encouraging the sharing of responsibility and placing trust in citizens and local communities. The Big Society is also seen to have the potential to address civil apathy and supposed lack of civic engagement amongst young people by developing good citizenship through community service and altruism.

The introduction of the NCS programme has emerged as a central plank of the government’s promotion of the Big Society amongst young people. [Cameron \(2010\)](#) has suggested that NCS ‘is about sowing the seeds of the Big Society and seeing them thrive in the years to come’. NCS aims to encourage voluntarism, community participation, responsibility, social mixing and an enhanced sense of Britishness. Children’s Minister, [Tim Loughton \(2011\)](#), proposed that NCS is about ‘transition to adulthood and rites of passage’, suggesting that 16 is now the age where young people become adults. Loughton has argued that he wants young people to have a greater role in scrutinising youth services and that there needs to be increased accountability of government and politicians ([Hillier, 2011a](#)). He has however rejected the potential for lowering the voting

age, thus discounting the idea that young people can directly hold institutions and political parties accountable at the ballot box.

NCS does not however seek to directly encourage political participation and pilots have focused on community rather than political activism (Mycock and Tonge, 2011). A number of concerns have also been raised about the cost of the programme and the extent to which its aims can be realised within the six-week period of citizen service, amid spending cuts on youth services (Education Selection Committee, 2011). Of more concern, only 8,500 of the 11,000 places available were taken and some providers of the programme reported high drop-out rates of young people involved (Ainsworth, 2011).

The idea of NCS and the promotion of the Big Society have replaced the stress upon political literacy or participation evident under the previous Labour government. Although Loughton has urged 'young people to get involved with youth councils, youth mayors and youth parliament to make sure their voices are heard' (Hillier, 2011b), there is scant recognition of the disproportionate impact of spending cuts on youth services which is limiting such initiatives (Education Selection Committee, 2011). Many established youth engagement programmes have been scaled back or scrapped completely, thus limiting the ability of young people to engage or participate. But the prioritisation of civil society over its civic counterpart is instructive, highlighting a return to a more traditional organic view of young people and democratic citizenship. The current 'Positive for Youth' programme led by the Department for Education draws on much of the work of previous youth commissions but provides a clear shift in focus which is influenced by the overarching Big Society agenda (DfE, 2011). There is therefore no mention of reform of political institutions or parties or other issues such as lowering the voting age. It instead focuses on employment, education and volunteering without acknowledging the impact of current government policies on young people.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have also questioned the utility of citizenship education, expressing concerns about potential political indoctrination (Mycock *et al.*, 2012). Education Secretary, Michael Gove, has promised to strip down the 'politically motivated' curriculum, questioning 'why is it that we imagine a particular subject put on the National Curriculum can address these deep and long-standing challenges?' (Paton, 2009). A review of the English National Curriculum announced in January 2011 is widely expected to propose the scrapping of statutory citizenship lessons in favour of history (Shepherd, 2011). Given that politics is not taught as a discrete subject in the curriculum until offered as an optional 'A' level, it is unclear how political literacy is to be developed fully within the curriculum if citizenship classes are not supported.

Anger of young people against the Coalition government, and the Liberal Democrats in particular, has been a persistent feature so far. Increases in Higher Education tuition fees encouraged large numbers of young people to protest and some to riot. The Liberal Democrats have also been seen to break their election pledge to seek a reduction in the voting age to 16 when offered the opportunity during parliamentary debates on the Alternative Vote bill. Coalition government approaches to youth citizenship and democratic engagement, through the Big Society, NCS or other youth initiatives, have, as yet, done little to address the marginalisation of young people in influencing party politics, elections or public policy.

## 7. Conclusions

Effective citizenship and political participation are seen as prerequisites for a functioning society. Concerns over youth political disengagement have been evident for several decades. By the end of the twentieth century, the problem of political disengagement in the UK was perceived as sufficiently acute to trigger a plethora of reports and commissions, each designed to facilitate greater civil and civic participation. In a non-exhaustive list, suggested remedies have included the introduction of citizenship education, a lowering of the voting age to 16, institutional change, the growth of volunteering and the promotion of British values. Given that civic disengagement and de-alignment from political parties are global problems, reflected by, for example, declining electoral turnouts in most countries and occurring amid the atomisation of society and a lack of social capital, no local solution has offered an obvious immediate means of redress. Moreover, it is important to disaggregate the more evident decline of loyalty to particular political parties or institutions from wider civic disengagement, although there is also evidence of the latter. The apparent disconnection of young people from conventional political activity has led to an ongoing search for ways to improve youth citizenship. The history of attempts at empowering civic engagement has mainly involved efforts to reconnect young citizens to traditional political organisations and methodologies, rather than harness newer forms of youth politics.

Amidst fashionable talk of a crisis of civic engagement, there remain those unconvinced that youth disengagement is a major problem. O'Toole *et al.* (2003) caution against a reductionist, audit-driven approach to studying civic engagement, in which non-participation in formal political modes of activity is misinterpreted as apathy. Whilst citizen audits are indeed top-down interpretations of what young people ought to be doing and lack cognisance of self-constructed civic engagement, the difficulty with the O'Toole *et al.* argument lies in explaining why young people *did* engage in conventional political activity

in the past. The question begged is, what changed? How and why have conventional forms of political activity become so unappealing to young people and why have young people decided to disengage? By the mid-2000s, one in five teenagers viewed voting as a 'waste of time' (Park *et al.*, 2004, p. 20) and only one in eight declared that they would be certain to vote when eligible (MORI, 2003). Good citizenship extends beyond political engagement. Nonetheless political activity contributes substantially to citizenship.

The history of youth citizenship in the UK indicates the old forms of politics—voting, parties, politicians and parliament—are subject to apathy or hostility from a greater proportion of young people than might once have been the case. The question begged is whether parties and politicians, as the perceived problems, can provide appropriate solutions. The programmes of youth engagement initiated by the Labour and Coalition governments have prioritised communitarian conceptions of citizenship over civic republican counterparts, thus emphasising civil above civic engagement. They have not however sought to empower or emancipate young people politically or socially. The stress on responsibility and duty underlines the replicative underpinnings of how citizenship is understood by the Coalition government, with young people expected to limit their claims to social rights enjoyed by previous generations and to fill in emergent gaps in public welfare provision left behind by a rapidly withdrawing state.

The failure of political parties to develop inclusive modes of political participation of young people underlines the extent to which divisions based on age endure. Young citizens are still considered as distinct from the rest of society and their citizenship rights are diminished accordingly. But it is the manner in which governments and political parties continue to interact with young people which is potentially more damaging. The failure to acknowledge the limitations of the existing party-based political system, both in its limited appeal to young people and its exclusory internal structures, has resulted in the adoption of youth citizenship agendas whereby culpability is misguidedly youth centric. This lack of introspection of political parties will continue to undermine youth initiatives to encourage political participation.

It would appear, in the wake of the riots, that political parties remain unsure of the place and value of young people in democratic politics or society in general. There is an urgent need for political parties of all hues to consider their own part in the decline of political participation of young people and to realise that they must shoulder some of the blame. Politicians must recognise that the arbitrary breaking of the few election promises focused at young people, together with the preparedness to scale back social and economic rights which they themselves enjoyed, have consequences. Young people will not engage with a party system that prioritises older voters without consultation or

consideration of their interests. Political parties must therefore modernise their own internal structures to give a real voice to younger members. They must also develop effective consultative forums to aggregate the views of young people and then be prepared to develop policies which are reflective their aspirations. For if political parties continue to adhere to a myopic and exclusory 'party politics of youth' then the political disengagement of young people will surely further increase.

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