The Political Inclusion of Young Citizens

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Introduction

Democracy relies on the active participation of the citizenry. Until the late 20th century, this participation had been taken for granted. Recent generations of Britons had struggled for the vote, had died to defend their democratic institutions, and had regularly rallied at election time to support their preferred political party. But in the final decades of the millennium, it began to be evident that something had changed; newer groups coming into the electorate were exhibiting considerable civic reticence and were failing to engage with the institutions of formal politics.

Since that time the situation has worsened further, such that there is now a yawning gap in rates of participation between younger and older cohorts. We argue in this chapter that youth non-participation and the political inequality it engenders has significant consequences for political outcomes, including social inequality. What people put into the system determines what they get out, and younger voters are being increasingly poorly served by the governments who purport to represent them. The situation is becoming so serious that bold measures are required to address it.

The remedy we suggest is compulsory voting for first-time electors, a policy innovation we introduce and discuss.

Turnout amongst young voters is in decline

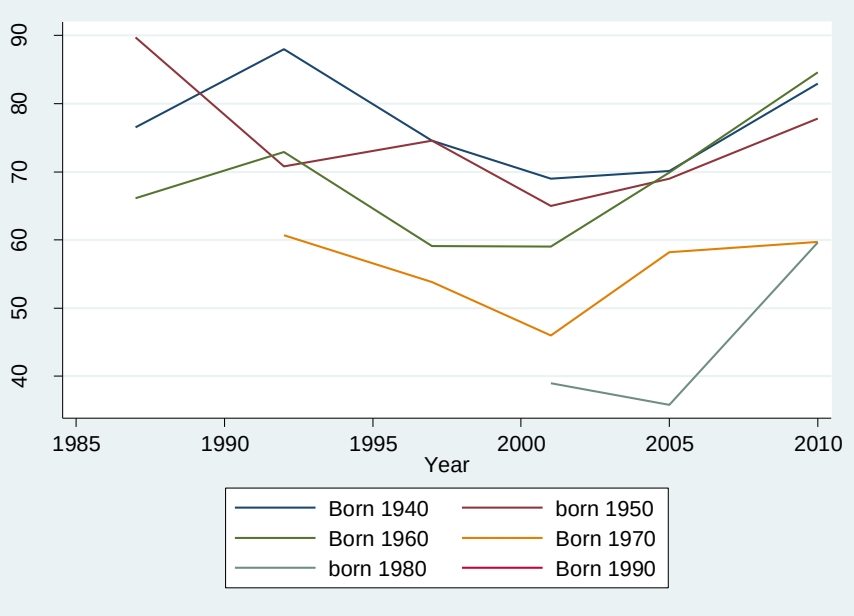
It is well known that the number of people neglecting to turn out at elections is on the increase. It is also firmly established that non-voters tend, on the whole, to be younger than the population at large. What is less widely appreciated is the growing demographic distinctiveness of non-voters as a group, a distinctiveness that makes their non-participation in electoral life increasingly problematic for representative democracy.

At the 2010 General Election, Ipos-Mori estimated that 76 per cent of 65 year olds voted, whereas turnout among the 18-24 age group was only 44 per cent.[1] One might argue that it doesn't matter too much if young people are less likely to vote, as they will make up for it in their later years. There is little evidence of this overall, however, with turnout exhibiting a downward trend among most age groups, as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, each successive generation starts its voting life at a lower turnout rate than the previous generation (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley, 2004). This evidence comports with the findings of previous research which has suggested that if citizens fail to vote the first time they are eligible, they are less likely to vote throughout their lives (Dinas, Franklin, 2004).

Viewed over time, this trend is alarming. In 1970 there was an 18 point turnout gap between 18-24 year olds and those aged over 65; this had more than doubled to over 40 points in 2005.
By the 2010 General Election, the turnout rate for an average 70 year old was 36 percentage points higher than that of the typical 20 year old. These worrying trends in turnout inequality show no signs of being reversed.

To add to this demographic changes will further tilt the democratic process in favour of the grey vote. Craig Berry shows how in the next couple of decades an ageing population will concentrate voting power among those aged over 50: by 2021 the number of potential voters (c. 902,000) for an average single-year cohort size for 50-somethings will dwarf the equivalent number of 18 year olds (c.708,000) (Berry 2012).

Figure 1: Estimated Turnout Changes by Age Cohort



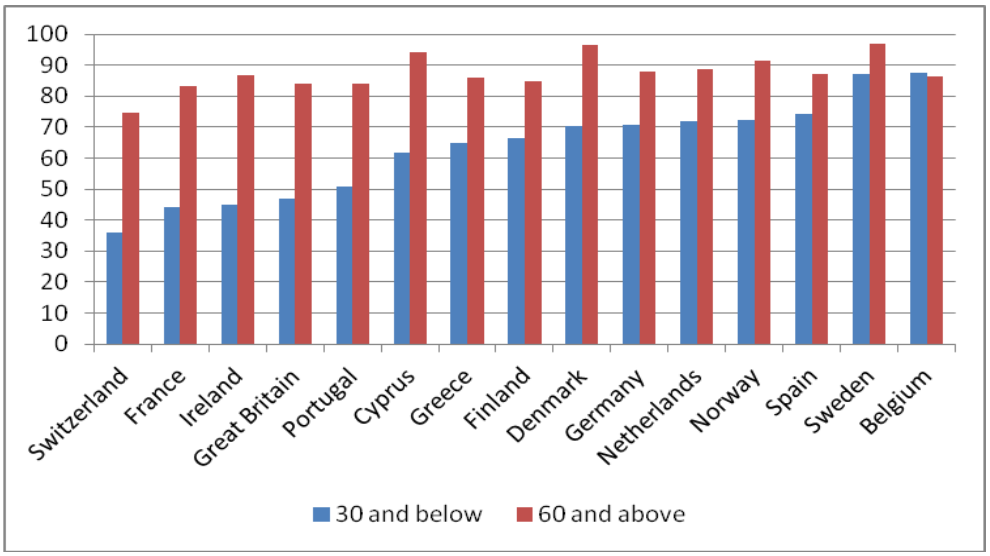
Sources: British Election Studies and MORI

Figure 2 compares voter turnout rates between under-30s and over-60s age groups across several Western European democracies.[2] Though younger people vote in fewer numbers than older people in nearly every country, youth turnout in Britain is comparatively low – only Switzerland, France and Ireland have lower turnout levels. Older voters in Britain turn out at levels more comparable to their European counterparts, however, leading to one of the largest imbalances of voting power between young and old in Europe. The countries which have the *least* amount of voter inequality between age

groups include the Nordic countries, Spain and Belgium (the only country with compulsory voting).

These trends are now clearly established, but what is much less well understood is the extent to which rising political inequality affects the policy outcomes generated by government and the political system more widely. In other words is the political system less responsive to those groups that do not participate than to those that do?

Figure 2: Turnout by country and age groups



Source: European Social Survey (2010 – Wave 5)

Note: Question asks "Did you vote at the last national election?". Does not include those who were ineligible to vote at last election.

One logical place to look for an effect of this sort is in the Coalition Government's 2010 Spending Review, which led to dramatic cuts to government spending in most spheres. Though virtually all groups have in some way been affected by the cuts, the argument for a 'political inequality effect' would suggest that those groups which participate less ought to be disproportionately affected by the cuts. Table 1 presents the results from a

statistical model estimating the impact of the cuts – expressed in real cash terms – on survey respondents to the British Election Study (which allows us to compare the position of those who voted in the 2010 election with those who did not).[3]

The results demonstrate that the average annual loss to voters is £1,850, whereas the average loss to non-voters is £2,135, or 15 per cent more. The difference is even starker when considered in terms of the average household income between groups.[4] The cuts are estimated to represent 11.56 per cent of the annual income of voters, and a full 20 per cent of the income of non-voters. Thus non-voters will be almost twice as badly affected by the provisions of the Spending Review as those who went to the polls in 2010.

Table 1: Impact of the Spending Review Cuts on Selected Groups

Category	**Average net change**	**Average change as a proportion of annual household income**
Voters	-£1,850	-11.56%
Non-voters	-£2,135	-20.00%
Aged 16-24	-£2,850	-27.53%
Aged 25-34	-£2,139	-14.47%
Aged 35-44	-£2,471	-15.60%
Aged 45-54	-£2,204	-15.08%
Aged 55-64	-£1,474	-13.41%
Aged 55-74	-£1,305	-10.06%
Aged 75+	-£1,365	-14.46%
Average across all groups	-£1,953	-14.64%

When we use the same model to examine the impact of the cuts on different age groups, we see that the cuts consistently hit the young harder than their

elders (see Table 1). The 16-24 year old group is suffering particularly from the cuts; people in this cohort face cuts to services worth an estimated 27.53 per cent of their annual household income, whereas no other age group faces average cuts worth more than 16 per cent of their income.

This analysis of the 2010 spending review provides empirical evidence to support the claim that, in this instance at least, the government privileged voters over non-voters. There are, of course, limits to the results from this type of case study analysis. Most obviously it tells us nothing about causality: we know that non-voters got a raw deal from the spending review but we don't know whether this is because they are non-voters. Doubtless other factors – such as the political values and outlook of the coalition – shaped the decisions. Nonetheless, given everything else we know about contemporary politics, it is reasonable to assume that electoral considerations played some part in the government's calculations, even if they were not the most salient. Surely it is not just coincidental that the Education Maintenance Allowance for young people was scrapped, while benefits for those over 65 years old - free TV licenses and bus passes, and winter fuel payments – were protected? Or that tuition fees were trebled when pensions were fastened with a triple-lock?

In recent decades political parties and governments have become much more adept at targeting particular voting groups through their communications and policy development. Not surprisingly, they tend to target groups that are most likely to vote.[5] Moreover, for all its faults, recent analysis has demonstrated that the British political system does a reasonably good job of responding to the *electorate* - that is to voters (Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). In other words, voting matters, and those who do not participate are less likely to get listened to.

This is not to argue that British politics can be said to be characterised by systematic and deliberate discrimination against non-voters. The relationship between electoral participation and political responsiveness is more subtle than this (indeed some decisions may simply reflect an unconscious bias among the political class).[6] Instead, as comparative research suggests, over time, and as a consequence of their sustained (self) exclusion from electoral politics, parties start to form strategies and policies that are biased in favour of those groups with relatively high turn-out rates, and ignore those who are less likely to participate (Offe, 2013: 198; see also Streeck, 2007: 28; Lijphart, 1997: 4).

Whatever the subtleties of this relationship the consequences for democracy are dire. By tilting politics in favour of high turnout groups, unequal turnout unleashes a vicious cycle of disaffection and under-representation for those groups for whom participation is falling. As policy becomes less responsive to their interests of the young, more and more decide that politics has little to say to them, which further reduces the motivation to vote, which in turn reduces the incentives for politicians to pay attention to them.

This vicious cycle is made more acute by virtue of the fact that different age groups often have divergent policy preferences (Busemeyer, 2009; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2006). This suggests that a strong upward skew in the age profile of voters, such as that observed in the UK, will bias policy in favour of older cohorts. Governments are likely therefore to continue to allocate scare resources to the health service and state pensions, at the expense of investing in policies that favour the young. This point is reflected in a recent IPPR and Policy Network report which found that support for the traditional welfare state consensus was, much higher among older voters, whereas support for adopting policies designed to address new social risks, such as

childcare provision, was higher among younger voters. The report warned of a danger that growing inequalities in electoral participation might further entrench the welfare status quo and heighten the onset of intergenerational and distributional conflict.[7]

A prolonged era of austerity is likely to exacerbate this situation leaving politicians more vulnerable to the demands of the retiring baby-boomers, heightening the chances that public policy will become increasingly distorted against the interests of younger people.[8] Last years controversy of the so-called Granny tax which asked pensioners, and relatively affluent pensioners at that, to make a relatively small contribution to deficit reduction illustrates how difficult it is for governments to resist the pull of the grey vote. If this is the case it will likely result in more young people turning their backs on the electoral process.

Tackling turnout inequality among young people

It stands to reason that the solution to this cycle of under-representation and under-participation must entail the remobilisation of the under-represented back into the electorate. This must be the 'key imperative for democratic reformers' (Adonis and Tyndall, 2013).

What to do? Since the dramatic decline in turnout that led to fewer than three in five eligible electors taking part on the General Election of 2001, there have been a number of concerted efforts to boost electoral participation, particularly among the young. Citizenship education has been enhanced, targeted voter education materials have been developed, 'get the vote out' campaigns have been organised, and efforts have been made to make voting more convenient through, for example, the introduction of postal ballots.[9] Self-evidently, such initiatives, important as they are, have conspicuously failed to boost the turnout rates of marginalised groups (while attempts to make voting easier have actually heightened concerns about electoral fraud[10]). At best it could be argued that without these efforts the problem of turnout inequality may have become more severe, but the idea that a bigger push on this front will have the transformative effect that is required seems highly dubious. The scale of turnout inequality has become so pronounced now that we believe these efforts will need to be combined with more radical institutional change.

Compulsory turnout for first-time voters

By far the most effective – albeit controversial - way of boosting participation is to make voting compulsory (Birch 2009). It is more widespread than many realise, and is currently practiced in approximately a quarter of the world's democracies, including Belgium and Australia, though in no case is voting itself required by law; rather what is mandatory is attendance at the polls. In states that have adopted compulsory voting since the Second World War, there has been an average turnout increase of 14 per cent (Birch: 2009: 85) but its impact can often be considerably higher, increasing turnout rates by around 30 per cent (Hill, 2011). Turnout in Australia has averaged 95 per cent in the 24 elections since 1946. In Belgium turnout has averaged 93 per cent in nineteen elections since 1946.

Most importantly, however, compulsory voting drastically reduces turnout inequality by enhancing the representation of marginalised and apathetic groups (Singh 2013; Fowler 2011). In Belgium - where compulsory voting is still law yet not enforced – the turnout rate for those under the age of 30 is 88 per cent.

Calls for compulsory voting are, however, commonly met with the objection that it is a citizen's right to choose not to vote and this is an argument that has long stuck in the collective gullet of the British public. To allay such fears, we propose a more limited approach which is to make electoral participation compulsory for first elections only.

Under this model voters would be obliged to go to the polls once, on the first occasion they were eligible (see Birch 2009). Voters would only be compelled to turnout and would be provided with a 'none of the above' option should

they not wish to cast a vote for any of the candidates. To ensure high participation rates a small fine should be used to enforce the policy (we recommend a similar model to that used in Australia which issues fines of AU$20 – the equivalent of about £12). This measure would place a small burden on young people, but its main effect would be to force politicians to pay attention to them.

What is the case for first-time compulsory voting? The first reason is that voting is *habitual*. As Mark Franklin's research shows if people vote in the first election for which they are eligible, they are far more likely to vote in subsequent elections (Franklin, 2004).Therefore there is good reason to believe that if young people were obliged by law to give voting a try, this could well go a long way toward kick-starting a life-time habit of voting. In other words a small element of compulsion could have a substantial and lasting impact on turnout.

Secondly, first-time compulsory voting, is deliberately targeted on improving the representation of young people, where levels of turnout inequality are highest. Moreover, first-time compulsory voting could easily be combined with a number of other reforms designed to inculcate democratic participation among the young. Andrew Adonis has persuasively argued that young people should be registered to vote at their place of study with polling stations located in schools and colleges so allowing young people to share the experience of voting (Adonis and Tyndall, 2013). Citizenship education, he writes, would not only lead to mock elections but real elections. This is right but we would add that this whole experience could be transformed further if it was known that young people *had* to cast their first vote.[11]

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, if politicians knew that young people would be voting in large numbers at their first election they could not afford, as is often the case now, to ignore their concerns and interests in favour of

those of groups who already vote in large numbers. Critics of compulsory voting often fail to acknowledge how this element of compulsion – forcing politicians to engage with voters – can help address underlying causes of political disaffection, not just there symptoms.

Fourthly, if young people from poorer backgrounds were required to vote this might encourage their non-voting parents and grandparents to exercise this democratic right, thereby closing the political inequality gap between classes as well as generations.

Table 2: support for first-time compulsory voting by age

	18-24	**25-54**	**55+**
Strongly agree	9.8%	16.1%	23.0%
Agree	11.6%	19.9%	23.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	17.9%	21.3%	21.1%
Disagree	22.3%	21.8%	20.9%
Strongly disagree	13.4%	15.3%	10.1%
Don't know	25.0%	5.6%	1.9%

The objections to compulsory first-time voting are similar to those routinely launched against all forms of compulsory voting. The most politically damaging criticism is that it is undemocratic to oblige citizens to engage in political life. There are counterarguments to the position, however; civil liberties go hand in hand with civic duties, one of which is to take part in political decision-making. In fact, a strong version of the duty to vote is intimately bound up with the development of British theories of representation. Lord Bryce summarised this view succinctly when he wrote that 'as individual liberty consists in the exemption from political control, so political liberty consists in participation in legal control'; in other words, the protection of personal freedom is perfectly compatible with the legal obligation to take part in collective decision-making through the election of law-makers.

There are already many aspects of our lives that include an element of compulsion, from going to school to annual MOTs to jury service to completion of the census. Electoral registration is effectively compulsory: under the current rules, all those resident in the UK are obliged to provide Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) with the information they are asked for, or face a £1,000 fine.[12] Young people are required by the law to attend school. Adding just one more small task to this list would not represent an undue burden, and it could well help to reinvigorate democracy. And let's remember too that there is a 'none of the above' option; no first-time elector would be obliged to vote for any particular candidate or party.

Another complaint levelled at compulsory voting is that while it might improve participation rates it does not improve the *quality* of democratic participation. Those forced to vote will not do so in a meaningful way. This is a serious point, but the claim seems overstated: in Australia, for instance, so-called 'donkey votes' – a form of spoilt ballot - accounts for well under 5 per cent of total votes cast. Additionally, states with compulsory voting tend to have higher levels of satisfaction with democracy (Birch, 2009). However, we fully appreciate that compulsory voting is not a silver bullet for ending political disaffection, the root causes of which are deep and complex. For these reasons we believe that first-time compulsory voting is best combined with other reforms designed to overcome the barriers to participation (see the example of schools above). Indeed it might strengthen the impact of other reforms. An obvious example here is the call to lower the voting age to 16. There are strong normative reasons for votes at 16 but the evidence is mixed in terms of the potential impact such a move would have on participation rates. Combining the two policies would guarantee that reducing the voting age would not deepen levels of political inequality.

Would compulsory first-time voting *over-represent* the young? There are two counter-arguments to this objection: firstly, no individual voter would be disadvantaged by such a move, as no-one would be deprived of the franchise by the measure and all votes cast would still be equally weighted. Indeed, increased participation by the young might well spur members of other age groups to vote to right the balance. Secondly, over time all members of the electorate would at some point in their lives experience mandatory voting, such that all would be treated equally over the course of the life cycle. The exception would be those individuals who had already voted once at the time of the introduction of the measure, but again, there is nothing preventing aggrieved members of this group from exercising their franchise whenever they have the opportunity.

Table 3: Responses to the question: 'Thinking for a moment about voting in British elections, we would like to know if you *agree* or *disagree* with the following statements: [...] People should be *required by law* to vote in the *first election* for which they are eligible'

Strongly agree	18.1%
Agree	20.3%
Neither agree nor disagree	20.9%
Disagree	21.6%
Strongly disagree	13.1%
Don't know	6.1%

A final objection might be that compulsory first-time voting lacks popular support. This is hard to gauge as the idea has not been prominent in public debate. This is reflected in the only polling so far conducted, where a large number were undecided. However, the polling also revealed that it is supported by most of those who have made up their minds on the proposal. When asked if people should be required to vote in the first election for which they were eligible, 38 per cent of those surveyed in July 2013 agreed, with 35 per cent against the idea.[13] (The remaining 27 per cent either said they did not

know or they neither agreed nor disagreed).[14] When these figures are broken down by different groups in society, we find that young people themselves are, not surprisingly, somewhat ambivalent about the idea. Only 21 per cent voiced support, while 38 per cent opposed, but there were actually far more – 47 per cent – who said they did not know or were neutral. Interestingly, the proposal was popular among older people (who have a stronger belief in the duty to vote).

Introducing an obligation for new electors to turn out once would thus go a considerable way toward breaking the habit of non-voting that often gets passed from generation to generation. This measure would also right the balance of British electoral politics, which has tilted toward the grey vote in recent years, and it would oblige politicians to speak to new sections of the electorate and develop policies to suit the needs of those groups.

Conclusion

The representative mechanism is the lynchpin of our democratic system. Though almost all states in the contemporary world hold elections, few of these electoral contests provide a means whereby the electorate can reliably embody its collective will and effectively hold its leaders to account. In Britain we are very fortunate to have such a system, but the evidence presented here suggests that our system of responsive government is in danger. In particular, younger groups in the electorate are being marginalised and neglected by policy makers.

Not surprisingly, many members of those groups are increasingly loath to cast votes. Given that it is these younger citizens that make up the future electorate, this level of political exclusion is a serious problem. And serious problems demand serious responses. The measure we have proposed, compulsory first-time voting, many seem drastic to some, but we have shown that it actually has widespread support among large sectors of the population. This is an innovation whose time has come.

Notes

[1] http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2613/How-Britain-Voted-in-2010.aspx

[2] Unfortunately we cannot compare all Western European democracies as we are limited to those countries made available in the European Social Survey dataset.

[3] The predicted cuts used in this model are in cash terms on an annual basis between 2010-11 and 2014-15, uprated to April 2010 prices.

[4] The income data used are gross annual household income, as reported in the British Election Study survey. The income of respondents is reported in bands. Point estimates are calculated at the mean of each band. Those in the top band, £90,000+, were estimated to have incomes of £100,000. This undoubtedly under-estimates the income of some of these respondents, but they constitute only 4.4 per cent of the sample, so the distortion resulting from this estimate ought not to be severe.

[5] More accurately they target voters who are most likely to vote for them, and voters in marginal seats.

[6] To make a very obvious point, parties can't afford to completely ignore non-voters because they are still *potential* voters. Also relevant here is that there are plenty of examples of parties pursuing policies that favour groups with relatively low participation rates, most obviously redistributive policies targeted at low income groups.

[7] In Britain, for example, older voters are strong supporters of prioritizing spending on the NHS: 51 per cent compared to 37 per cent for 18 to 24 year olds. The rations for prioritizing spending on state pensions is 44 to 13 per cent, and policing 36 to 18 per cent. Older voters are less likely to support increased investment in primary and secondary education by 16 to 32 per cent. Moreover, older respondents support cutting back maternity and paternity benefit by a margin of 37 to 15 per cent compared to younger voters; the ratio is 29 to 12 per cent for child benefit, and 24 to 9 per cent for pre-school childcare.

[8] And policies intended to appease older voters have consequences for younger generations. The IFS notes that the new triple lock pension reform plans will have a disproportionate effect on younger generations who entered the labour market from 2002 onwards. This includes women who take time off to have children and part-time workers – many of whom are low income households.

Each of these groups will likely end up receiving a comparatively lower pension at the state pension age (Crawford, Keynes and Tetlow, 2013).

[9] A raft of experiments and pilot projects have been undertaken to facilitate electoral participation through weekend voting, voting over several days, voting in supermarkets and kiosks (Norris, 2004)

[10] See Norris 2004.

[11] Evidence from the roll-out of citizenship education in schools since 2002 suggests that it has not so far been undertaken with sufficient intensity to generate notably higher levels of political engagement (See Avril Keating David Kerr Thomas Benton Ellie Mundy and Joana Lopes 'Citizenship Education in England 2001-2010: Young People's Practices and Prospects for the Future: the Eighth and Final Report from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS)', Department for Education Research Report DFE-RR059, 2010; Jon Tonge, Andrew Mycock and Bob Jeffery, 'Does Citizenship Education Make Young People Better-Engaged Citizens?', *Political Studies* 60 (2012), pp. 578-602.). This could change if it was linked with first-time compulsory voting.

[12] The Coalition Government recently proposed moving to a system of voluntary enrolment at the time of the planned introduction of individual voter registration, but this idea was subsequently abandoned when it was pointed out that it would exacerbate the problems of political inequality.

[13] The data reported here are taken from the British Election Study Continuous Monitoring Survey, fielded in July 2013. The survey was an online poll carried out by YouGov. The total number of survey respondents was 1,140.

[14] These figures do not sum exactly to 100 per cent due to rounding error.

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