

Disengaged or Differently Engaged? Unequal Patterns of Youth Political Participation in the UK

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the changing landscape of youth political participation in the UK, moving beyond the conventional focus on electoral disengagement to consider whether alternative forms of participation offer a more inclusive model of democratic engagement. Drawing on data from the 2023 European Social Survey (UK sample, ages 18–34), the analysis explores whether falling turnout may be offset by alternative methods of participation, or whether it should be treated as a significant democratic concern. This paper finds that although alternative forms of participation are more common among young people, non-electoral participation actually reinforces turnout, with voting positively associated with alternative methods of participation and internal efficacy. Thus, many young people are disengaged, and with such low turnout, the views of young people are less likely to be represented and the legitimacy of the democratic system is weakened. The findings challenge optimistic accounts of participatory pluralism, suggesting that shifts in the form of engagement have not led to greater equality of access.

Introduction

Turnout is the traditional method of engagement, but is something that has been declining in young people (Skinner et al., 2024). Yet it seems that young people still care about social and political issues, turning instead to other forms of engagement including online activism, protest, and issue-based campaigning (Uberoi & Johnston, 2022). These new forms of engagement evidence a generational shift rather than an outright withdrawal from political participation, but whether we should be concerned about declining political engagement among young people depends on how they are engaging, and whether their methods of participation promote accountability and responsiveness of formal politics. If these methods exert comparable influence over political outcomes, then declining turnout may not threaten democratic legitimacy, but if they do not, or if these actions are concentrated among those already politically active, then youth disengagement from voting remains a serious concern.

This paper finds that although many young people do participate in non-traditional ways, this engagement does not compensate for low electoral participation. It uses data from the European Social Survey to compare behaviour of younger and older voters using chi-square analysis, and to explore the drivers of youth turnout through linear regression. It finds that while young people are more likely to engage in alternative forms of participation than older people, voting remains their most frequent form — reinforcing concerns about non-traditional engagement as substitutes for voting. Therefore, declining youth turnout should be treated as a significant democratic concern as it undermines political equality and representativeness.

Theoretical Framework

Engagement in politics is traditionally defined as turnout; and low turnout is usually considered to be concerning. Powell (1982) treats turnout as the first standard to assess

democratic performance, as he argues that voting is the primary example of citizen involvement which is a requisite of a thriving democracy. Voting ensures accountability, responsiveness, and legitimacy, and so low turnout is worrying. This reasoning reflects unequal participation if some groups are consistently underrepresented at the ballot box. Blais et al. (2020) expands on this argument by showing that when a group abstains in large numbers, they forfeit influence over policy priorities in favour of more electorally active voter groups. In the British case, young people (aged 18-24 and aged 25-34) are less likely to vote. In 1983, 66% of 18-34 year olds reported voting (Fair Pay, 2013), but in 2024 this was only 39% (Skinner et al., 2024). This generational imbalance results in governments who have stronger incentives to prioritise the interests of older voters, creating intergenerational inequalities. This consequence has been documented in the UK, with allowances for older people such as the State Pension being protected in real terms during the era of austerity, while significant cuts were made to child benefits and social security entitlements for working-age people (Crisp & Pearce, 2021). Thus if turnout among young people is low, we should be worried as we risk losing accountability, responsiveness, and the legitimacy of the government.

There are many different theoretical explanations of individual-level turnout, and it is still unclear as to which is the most powerful (Smets & Ham, 2013). The resources model posits that people vote because they can — they have the education, time, and the opportunity to. This model expects turnout to be higher among citizens with higher levels of skills and knowledge, and higher economic statuses. The psychological and rational choice models argue that people engage with politics because they want to, with the psychological models stressing the role of attitudes towards politics, partisanship, and political efficacy; and the rational choice model putting voting as a result of a cost-benefit calculation where a sense of civic duty drives people to vote. Lastly, the mobilisation

model views voting as something that people do because they are “asked”, either through their peers voting, or by campaigns. In attempting to explain low youth turnout, there is likely a combination of these factors at play. For example, while the resource model correctly predicts that more educated young people vote more than their less-educated peers, they still have lower turnout levels than less-educated older adults (Berry & McDonnell, 2014). Further, as Putnam (2000) argued, younger people tend to be less embedded in social networks that drive mobilisation and so less are likely to benefit from the sense of civic duty they provide. Psychological factors are likely also important in predicting youth turnout, as Henn and Foard (2011) found that many young people in the UK believe that politicians are not responsive, which may discourage voting, even when they possess the skills as knowledge to participate.

However, turnout is not the only form of participation. We may not have cause for concern about the decline in young people engaging in formal politics if they have simply shifted their energy to other forms of participation. Indeed, several studies have found that young people often care about social and political issues, and participate through methods such as protest activity and digital activism at higher rates than older people (Uberoi & Johnston, 2022; Sloam, 2007; Sloam & Henn, 2019). Given this shift, it is pertinent to question whether these alternative forms of participation might compensate for low youth turnout. If young people are alienated from traditional forms of politics rather than apathetic, then they may actually be more engaged than older people as it often requires more political interest to engage in other ways than voting. This is particularly visible on social media where people can engage with political content and participate in campaigns often centred around single issues rather than party politics (Loader et al., 2014). However, there are two problems with the argument that the decline in youth voting is not worrying due to alternative participation. The first is that

these alternative forms of engagement may not meaningfully influence political outcomes, rendering them politically ineffectual (Cantijoch et al., 2018). This is worrying because if young people are having an unequal impact on formal politics, we still risk losing accountability, responsiveness, and the legitimacy of the government. Thus, if new forms of engagement adequately replace electoral participation then perhaps declining youth turnout is not alarming, but if they do not, a section of society is being excluded from decision-making. The second implication is that young people who engage in other forms of participation may also be more likely to vote. According to theoretical explanations of individual-level turnout, we would expect people with higher levels of knowledge, and who are more embedded in social networks to have higher levels of turnout. Thus, we would expect alternative participation to encourage formal participation.

These theoretical debates raise important questions about how young people are engaging with politics, and whether their engagement poses a risk to democratic legitimacy. To explore whether youth disengagement from politics should be considered concerning, I test the following hypotheses:

H1: Young people (aged 18-34) are less likely to vote than older adults, but more likely to participate in alternative forms of political engagement.

H2: Alternative forms of participation do not substitute for electoral engagement as young people who participate in non-electoral activities are also more likely to vote.

Methodology and Results

To test H1, I use 5432 observations from Round 11 of the European Social Survey,

collected in 2023. I conduct a series of chi-square tests comparing political behaviours between 18-34 year olds, and 35+ year olds. It is important to note that turnout in the European Social Survey is self-reported and so there is disparity between reported and actual turnout. This could be for two reasons — firstly, participants could be embarrassed to admit that they did not vote, as voting is regarded as a civic duty, or secondly, the survey could have been fielded to people who are more likely to engage in politics, for example by completing surveys on the topic. As a result, the absolute levels of turnout reported in the ESS should be interpreted with caution, although the relative differences between age groups remain analytically useful. Ages 18-34 were included as both the 18-24 and 25-34 categories have exhibited similarly low turnout in recent elections (Skinner et al., 2024), and to ensure a large enough sample size for meaningful analysis.

Table 1: Cross-tabulations of Methods of Political Participation by Age

Participation Method	18–34	35+	Chi-square	p
Voted (n = 5012)	58.7%	76.4%	176.119 ^a	<0.001**
Contacted politician (n = 5249)	14.7%	22.4%	40.640 ^a	<0.001**
Donated to party/pressure group (n = 5431)	4.8%	6.8%	7.201 ^a	0.007**
Worn/displayed badge or sticker (n = 5432)	7.1%	5.3%	6.109 ^a	0.013*
Signed a petition (n = 5397)	45.8%	39.8%	15.999 ^a	<0.001**
Public demonstration (n = 5429)	11.0%	4.3%	83.523 ^a	<0.001**
Boycotted products (n = 5414)	25.6%	25.6%	0.001 ^a	0.973
Posted/shared political content online (n = 5416)	30.4%	19.2%	80.297	<0.001**
Volunteered for charity (n = 5435)	25.8%	26.7%	0.496 ^a	0.481

Data: European Social Survey, Round 11, UK sample, 2023. Weighted data. All “don’t know” responses have been excluded. Participants not eligible to vote in the 2019 General Election have been excluded from turnout statistics. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

The results reveal a clear generational divide in both electoral and non-electoral forms of political participation. As expected, young people are significantly less likely to vote than

older adults. Among respondents aged 18-34, only 58.7% reported voting in the 2019 election, compared to 76.4% of those aged 35 and over ($X^2=176.119$, $p<0.001$). This finding supports the evidence from the literature that young people are underrepresented in electoral politics, and that this disparity could threaten democratic equality and responsiveness (Blais et al., 2020; Powell, 1982).

The data also shows that younger people are more likely to engage in several alternative forms of political participation including attending public demonstrations ($X^2=83.525$, $p < 0.001$), posting or sharing political content online ($X^2=80.297$, $p < 0.001$), and signing petitions ($X^2=15.999$, $p < 0.001$). These findings align with studies suggesting that young people are not apathetic, but are engaging in alternative ways (Sloam & Henn, 2019; Loader et al., 2014). However, some forms of participation such as boycotting or volunteering showed no significant difference across age groups, suggesting that not all forms of participation are generationally skewed. These results support H1: young people are less likely to vote, but more likely to engage in some alternative forms of participation.

Interestingly, voting remains the most common form of political participation among young people as while only 58.7% reported voting, this figure still exceeds participation in any other political act, with the next most common acts being signing a petition at 45.8% and sharing political content online at 30.4%, showing that voting still constitutes the primary form of political participation. Further, signing petitions and sharing content online are actions which require minimal time commitment or skill, and if young people were truly more engaged and alternative engagement was compensating for declining youth turnout we would expect to see very high levels of alternative activity, perhaps to the turnout levels of the 35+ group. Therefore, it is possible that those who take part in alternative forms of engagement may also be more likely to vote. This raises doubts

around the argument that alternative participation compensates for low turnout.

To address this concern and test H2, I ran a linear regression model, filtering respondents so that only those aged 18-34 were included. The dependent variable was voting in the 2019 General Election and independent variables included education level, internal political efficacy (measured on a 0-8 scale), political interest, and an index of non-electoral political participation (measured on a 0-8 scale).

Table 2: A Linear Regression Analysis of Youth Turnout

	Coef.	Std. Error	Beta
Constant	0.397**	0.033	–
<i>Education (ref: Mid Education)</i>			
Low Education (up to GCSE)	-0.196**	0.035	-0.167
High Education (Degree)	0.043	0.030	0.044
Index of Internal Political Efficacy (0–8)	0.066**	0.008	0.259
Index of Participation (0–8)	0.072**	0.008	0.267
$R^2 = 0.288, N = 1087$			

Data: European Social Survey, Round 11, UK sample, 2023. Weighted data. Dependent variable: self-reported turnout in the 2019 General Election, filtered by age 18–34. All “don’t know” responses have been excluded. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

The results show that non-electoral participation is a strong positive predictor of voting ($B=0.072$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2 that alternative engagement is not substituting electoral participation but reinforcing it. Specifically, each increase in non-electoral

activities is associated with a 0.072 point increase in the likelihood of voting on a 0-1 scale. This aligns with the argument made by Cantijoch et al. (2018), that political activities often cluster, meaning that individuals who are more active in one area are more likely to be active in others. Further, internal political efficacy also emerged as a significant positive predictor ($B=0.066, p < 0.001$), suggesting that young people who feel confident in their ability to understand and participate in politics are more likely to vote. This aligns with psychological models of turnout that emphasise political competence (Smets & Ham, 2013).

Finally, education level was also significant, and having lower qualifications (up to GCSE) was associated with a 0.196 decrease in the likelihood of voting, supporting the resource model. However, holding a university degree was not a significant positive predictor ($B=0.043, p=0.159$). This could be due to the fact that many respondents in the 18-34 group are likely to be current students or may be in the future, skewing educational categorisation. In this model, a degree educated, 18-34 year old voter whose internal and external political efficacy are 4 out of 8, but who has participated in no non-electoral activities has a 60% probability of voting, but this increases to 74.4% if they have participated in two. This suggests that alternative political engagement has a role in meaningfully reinforcing participation and that encouraging young people to participate in these ways could play a role in reducing the turnout gap. Participating in a couple of non-traditional forms could bring a young person's turnout probability up to levels similar to those over 35. However, it is important to note that the inverse could also be true and voting could encourage participation in alternative forms of participation, particularly if they are dissatisfied with the political system. This highlights the reciprocal nature of participation, and that if young people are absent from both voting and alternative forms of participation then their political voice risks being under-represented.

The model explains approximately 28.8% of the variance in self-reported youth voting ($R^2=0.288$), indicating moderate explanatory power. While included predictors were important in explaining turnout, a substantial portion of the variation remains unexplained, which is unsurprising given that voting is influenced by a wide range of factors. To develop the model further, a logistic model could be used to improve robustness. Further, it would be interesting to break down participation methods to see whether specific actions contribute more to turnout as the theory suggests that community-based actions may be more likely to do this. Nevertheless, the model offers meaningful insights into which factors matter for understanding youth political engagement, and increases understanding of whether alternative participation substitutes or reinforces voting. The results of this model suggest that alternative political participation is not replacing formal engagement but reinforcing it, supporting the argument that youth disengagement from politics is concerning.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine whether we should be concerned about young people not engaging in politics. While some argue that falling turnout may be offset by alternative methods of participation, the evidence suggests that this is too limited. Chi-square analysis showed that young people are less likely to vote, but more likely to participate in some non-electoral activities including signing petitions, protesting, and posting online. However, none of these activities surpassed voting in frequency, with overall levels of alternative engagement remaining moderate. Further, regression analysis demonstrated that non-electoral participation actually reinforces turnout, with voting positively associated with alternative methods of participation and internal efficacy, supporting the argument that many young people are disengaged. With such low turnout, the views of

young people are less likely to be represented and the legitimacy of the democratic system is weakened. Therefore, we should be concerned about youth disengagement from politics, and about whether the political system is meaningfully representing their interests.

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