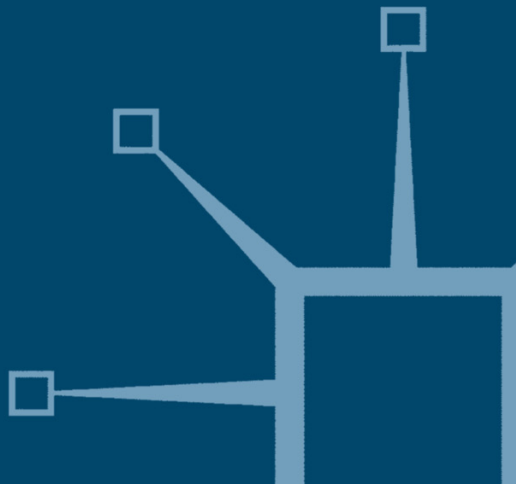# Young People and Politics in the UK

Apathy or Alienation?

David Marsh, Therese O'Toole and
Su Jones

Young People and Politics in the UK

Also by David Marsh

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Young People and Politics in the UK

Apathy or Alienation?

David Marsh
Professor of Political Sociology
University of Birmingham, UK

Therese O'Toole
Lecturer in Ethnicity
University of Birmingham, UK

and

Su Jones
Research Associate
University of Birmingham, UK

For Suzy, Holly, Michael and Rosie

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

The issue of political participation has received a great deal of attention in recent years, both in the UK and beyond. Much of the academic literature, and indeed public debate, identifies three crucial concerns with which this book engages: first, there is considerable evidence of a decline in key forms of political participation in the UK and more generally. Secondly, there is particular concern about the decline in political participation among the young. Finally, both these concerns are potentially crucial issues for the future of liberal democracies and governments have begun to engage with what many see as an emerging democratic deficit.

A decline in political participation

In the UK, the reason for concern about political participation is strongly linked with declining turnouts for local, national and European elections and falling party membership. For example, the turnout in the 2005 General Election was 61 per cent, only 2 per cent higher than the 2001 General Election turnout of 59 per cent, which was the lowest in the post-war period (when turnout was 12 percentage points down from the 1997 Election and 25 percentage points lower than the post-war high of 84 per cent in 1950). In relation to young people, the picture was even more disturbing; MORI's (2005a) figures suggest that the turnout rate for 18–24-year-olds dropped from only 39 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2005. Similarly, membership of political parties has declined significantly (see Mair and van Biezen, 2001). Party membership is ageing (see Seyd and Whiteley, 1992; Richardson, Seyd and Whiteley, 1995) and youth political parties barely exist in numerical, if not in organisational, terms (for the best recent work on youth parties, see Lamb,

2002). To put it another way, the combined membership of British political parties is less than two-thirds that of the largest UK interest group, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (Walker, 2001). These figures worry politicians, journalists and the 'chattering classes'.

These trends are not confined to the UK and there have been numerous studies charting the decline in citizens' engagement in representative politics in advanced democracies since the 1990s (for a summary of this literature, see Norris, 1999).

The issue of youth participation has, however, evoked particular concerns. As Norris (2003, p. 2) argues, 'Political disengagement is thought to affect all citizens but young people are believed to be particularly disillusioned about the major institutions of representative democracy, leaving them either apathetic (at best) or alienated (at worst).'

Certainly, the view that British young people's interest and participation in formal politics are declining is supported by several survey research studies. In this vein, Pirie and Worcester's (1998) data suggest that the 'Millennial Generation', their term for young people who reached the age of 21 just before or just after the turn of the millennium, are: less involved in politics than the equivalent age group were 30 years ago; less likely to vote in national or local elections than older people now or young people 30 years ago; and have little knowledge of politics at local, national or European levels. They conclude that this generation is an 'apolitical generation'. Similarly, Park's (1998) study of social attitudes among British youth indicates that teenagers and young adults are less likely to be: involved in conventional politics; knowledgeable about politics; have an attachment to any political party; or view voting as a civic responsibility.

Such trends are also evident in many other countries, with a number of studies reporting declining levels of political engagement and participation among young people worldwide (Norris, 2003).[1] For example, data from the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance suggest that in Western Europe, the USA, Russia and Latin America, there is a consistent pattern of young people being less involved in the electoral process than older cohorts[2] (IDEA, 1999). Similarly, a report commissioned by the European Union notes that 'declining political engagement and traditional societal participation among youth is perceived as a threat to the future of the representative democracy' and is a particular source of concern in several European states, such as the UK, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Austria and Luxembourg (Istituto di Ricerca, 2001).

A growing democratic deficit?

It is clear then that many people identify a growing democratic deficit in advanced democracies, such as the UK, that is associated particularly, although by no means exclusively, with the young, which they see as a matter of concern for the future health of democracy. Thus, within the UK, observers like Pirie and Worcester suggest that a 'generational effect' is taking place, whereby today's young non-voters will become tomorrow's adult non-voters. This interpretation is supported by Phelps (2004 and 2005), whose analysis of turnout data for UK General Elections in the post-war period suggests that a generational effect is taking place. Norris (2003, p. 8) draws attention to the broader putative consequences of such disengagement:

> many are concerned that widespread mistrust of government author-ities in the mainstream culture may foster a public climate which facilitates the growth of anti-state movements and, at the most extreme, the breakdown of the rule of law and sporadic outbreaks of domestic terrorism by radical dissidents – whether the bombing of abortion clinics in America, threats of biological terrorism in Japan, the assassination of elected officials in the Basque region, violent racist incidents in France and Germany, heated ethnic/religious conflict in Sri Lanka, or splinter terrorist groups sabotaging the peace process in Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine.

In a less dramatic vein, some UK observers have suggested that young people's disengagement from political institutions and processes is also linked with a variety of broader democratic and social problems, such as disengagement from local communities and lack of social integration – a viewpoint that was raised in the post-hoc analysis of the disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in 2001 (see, for example, Cantle, 2001).[3]

The UK Government is concerned about declining turnout because it raises questions about its legitimacy. Consequently, although it is worried about current turnout, there is greater concern both that the current younger generation will continue to stay at home and that the next generation will follow suit. If this happens, it would be difficult for any government to claim legitimacy when less than 50 per cent of the electorate voted.[4]

Given this concern over declining political participation among young people, the UK Labour Government commissioned the Crick Report, *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*,

which was published in 1998. The Crick Report recommended that, in order to tackle problems of declining political and civic participation among young people, citizenship education should be compulsory for secondary school pupils. The Government subsequently introduced citizenship classes, making up 5 per cent of the national curriculum, from September 2002. In addition, the emphasis on active citizenship reflected in the Citizenship Education curriculum is also evident in the Government's volunteering initiatives, many of which are targeted at young people (for example, Millennium Volunteers and the inclusion of voluntary sector work experience within the New Deal for Young People Programme). At the same time, there have also been a variety of other participatory initiatives, sponsored by central and local Governments, including: the United Kingdom Youth Parliament (UKYP); locally focused Young People's Parliaments in many British towns and cities; local (ward-level) youth forums; and youth-focused neighbourhood renewal projects. More broadly, there has also been increased emphasis on youth consultation within local democratic institutions.

The issue of declining participation has also proved interesting to social scientists and to funding bodies. In particular, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) established a *Democracy and Participation Programme* with £3.5 million, funding 21 projects, which ran from 1999 to 2003,[5] to investigate declining political participation in the UK. The project which this book reports was funded by that Programme, while the major quantitative study was by Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley (2004) and we consider their work in detail in the next chapter.

Our argument

This book then is located against the background of concern about the decline in the political participation of young people. However, it is a book which offers a critical assessment of the idea of youth political apathy. Essentially, we develop four main arguments. First, we argue that the mainstream literature has tended to operate with a narrow, imposed conception of the political and hence of political participation. It therefore fails to engage with how young people themselves conceive of the political and does not attempt to investigate their political imaginaries. This tendency is, to some extent, driven by a reliance on quantitative survey methods that aim to measure political engagement and in our view there is a need to investigate young people's own conceptions of the political through the use of qualitative methodologies.

Secondly, this narrow conception of political participation, reductively and erroneously, equates non-participation by young people in a range of activities specified by researchers with political apathy. In our view, it is crucial to take a more nuanced view of non-participation and acknowledge that apathy is not necessarily participation's 'other' (DeLuca, 1995).

Thirdly, the conception of the political within much of the literature on participation is generally premised on a separation between the public and the private and fails to take account of the politics of the personal and, thus, the politics of identity. Following feminist critiques of the separation of the political from the personal, we argue for a conception of politics that understands it as a 'lived experience'.

Finally, the dominance of behaviouralist, indeed intentionalist, approaches to political participation has meant that insufficient attention is paid to the features of the political system itself and how these shape political participation (beyond the specific jurisdictional issues pertaining to the British constitution). Turning to recent political sociological literature, we engage with the argument that changing governance practices and the emergence of 'reflexive individuals' may have a profound impact on the extent, objects and repertoires of political participation. Here, we suggest that Henrik Bang's (2003, 2004) work on the development of 'culture governance' and the emergence of new types of participants, 'Expert Citizens' and 'Everyday Makers', strongly resonates with our findings. Following Bang, we suggest that the changing nature of the relationship(s) between the state and the citizens invokes new democratic challenges. More specifically, as Bang argues, the key problem of contemporary political participation is not a 'free-rider' problem, with non-participation a reflection of the political apathy of unengaged citizens who, nevertheless, enjoy the benefits of citizenship, but rather a problem of political exclusion, with many alienated from a political system which they experience as unequal and unfair.

These arguments are explored through: a critique of the existing literature; our advocacy of an alternative methodological approach to studying political participation; and an analysis of findings from our qualitative empirical research on young people's engagement with politics, based on work from our ESRC-funded project *Explaining Non-Participation: Towards a Fuller Understanding of the 'Political'*.[6]

The book's structure

In Chapter 1, we begin with a critical analysis of the most recent, comprehensive data on political participation generally and youth

participation particularly: Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley's (2004) work on citizenship and participation in the UK; and Norris' (2002 and 2003) comparative study of political engagement.[7] Whilst these studies tell us a great deal about particular aspects of political participation, in our view they operate with a narrow conceptualisation of the 'political', which is imposed upon respondents. In contrast, we suggest that it is crucial to focus on how young people themselves understand politics and, in effect, to view politics as a structured 'lived experience'. These arguments are developed in the second section of Chapter 1.

As we have already indicated, debates about the extent and form of political participation have broader resonance for questions about the nature of both contemporary citizenship and contemporary governance and the relationship between citizens and states. In Chapter 2, we identify our position on, first, citizenship and, subsequently, governance. It is clear that different conceptions of citizenship are related to different notions of politics and 'the political' and, thus, of political participation. As such, we consider three broad conceptual-isations of citizenship: rights-based conceptions; responsibilities-based conceptions; and participatory-based conceptions. We then consider Henrik Bang's argument that new forms of political participation and types of citizen have developed as a result of changing patterns of cultural governance. In our view, Bang's work poses an important chal-lenge to much of the contemporary political participation literature. Finally, we argue that the British political system has historically taken a top–down approach to citizenship, which is inimical to more particip-atory conceptions of citizenship, and that such tendencies persist under New Labour – despite its professed commitment to neighbourhood and civil renewal and active citizenship.

As we emphasised, our empirical work aims to examine how young people themselves understand and experience politics, rather than meas-uring their engagement in a set of predetermined activities. This aim has methodological implications. In particular, given our critique of the quantitative bias of much of the existing literature, we needed to employ a method that set out to understand our respondents' own concep-tions of politics. To this end, we elected to use open-ended methods that allowed our respondents to discuss their understandings of politics in their own terms, with minimal direction from the researchers. To achieve this, we presented focus groups of young people with a series of images including: overtly political images (for example, party candid-ates, demonstrators and protestors); images of social inequalities (for example, a young woman and baby, a man and child, a homeless hostel);

images relating to identity and belonging (for example, sporting events with fans in national colours, flag-waving groups); and images of public services and public spaces (for example, school, hospital, public park, police). Each focus group circulated two copies of each image and the group were asked to free-associate with the image. After the group had discussed all the images, they were then asked to conduct a sort of the images, into those they considered to be 'political' and those they did not, giving their reasons for doing so. Subsequently, follow-up individual interviews were conducted with all of the focus group participants who were willing. These interviews dealt with their more personal experiences of and engagement with politics, in the light of the focus group discussions. The method is discussed and justified at more length in Chapter 3. The key point here is that the method stems directly from our criticism of the mainstream literature and the concerns which develop from that critique.

In Chapters 4–7, we analyse the findings of our study, which investigate the ways in which age, class, gender and ethnicity are both aspects of, and shape, our respondents' lived experiences and, consequently, their conceptions of politics. In doing this, we are arguing that these aspects of identity should be seen not merely as independent variables as they are in most studies of participation, but as formative influences on young people's political imaginaries. So, age is not best viewed as a variable that affects political participation, it is rather an experience that has strongly political dimensions, in which we can see structures and agency interacting. So, in this book we shall examine how our respondents live politics, through the lens of their experience of age (in Chapter 4), class (in Chapter 5), gender (in Chapter 6) and ethnicity (in Chapter 7).

Conclusion

Although, low levels of engagement with electoral and parliamentary processes, particularly among young people, have often been read as evidence of political apathy (Toynbee, 1997; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1997; Pirie and Worcester, 2000; Hiscock, 2001), there is an emerging recognition that apathy does not adequately account for (young) citizens' disengagement (Power Inquiry, 2006, especially Chapter 1). So, there are a number of studies indicating that widespread dissatisfaction and distrust towards mainstream political institutions and processes sit alongside high levels of civic engagement (Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, 2004) and unconventional (Norris, 2002) and postconventional (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle, 2004) forms of political

participation. In essence, our study seeks to understand why young people appear to be disengaged from mainstream politics, without assuming that this results necessarily from apathy, in order to open out investigation of how young people respond politically to the world around them.

At the same time, we are concerned to relate this consideration of political participation/non-participation to developments in governance and citizenship. As such, we return to those broader issues in the conclusion, paying particular attention to Bang's work. Broadly speaking, the UK Government's strategy for achieving 'democratic renewal' has concentrated on increasing citizens' political literacy and encouraging participation in local and neighbourhood initiatives (or 'low politics'); we argue, however, that political literacy cuts both ways and that democratic renewal must take place at the level of 'high politics' in relation to the structures and practices of mainstream political institutions.

1
The Study of Political Participation

The study of political participation has undergone some key changes since Barnes and Kaase's (1979) and Parry *et al.*'s (1992) seminal studies. In particular, both the traditional distinction between 'conventional' and 'unconventional' modes of participation (Barnes and Kaase, 1979) and the view of participation as essentially focused on influencing public officials (Parry *et al.*, 1992) have undergone refinement in recent years. According to Norris (2002, pp. 215–216), there has been a diversification in terms of:

> (the) *agencies* (the collective organizations structuring political activity), the *repertoires* (the actions commonly used for political expression), and the *targets* (the political actors that participants seek to influence).

The notion that the agencies in which people politically participate are evolving and diversifying arises from the contention that, since the 1960s, new forms of collective organisation, such as social movements, have emerged that differ from traditional forms of political organisation, such as trade unions, political parties and pressure groups. Following the emergence of feminist, civil rights, gay rights and environmental movements, we see a more fluid conception of membership of political organisations that grow out of social networks and 'contentious politics' (Tarrow, 1998), and which engage in a variety of forms of collective action (from disruption, use of slogans, music or dress or renaming of familiar objects). Indeed, Tarrow debates whether the late 20th century may have produced a 'movement society' (1998).

In relation to the changing repertoires of political participation, many point to the development of new forms of action as a consequence of technological innovation, such as Internet activism (Bennett, 2004) or

text-mobilisation, as witnessed in the demonstrations against Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, alongside the evolution of older forms of action. For instance, whilst there is a long history of economic boycotts with a political purpose (Shapiro, 2000), such actions have in recent years developed into more focused forms of mass political consumerism, such as the No Sweat or Fair Trade campaigns (Micheletti *et al.*, 2004).

Finally, the argument that the targets of political action are changing acknowledges that political power and authority in the contemporary (globalising) world are changing and, hence, also the nature of political campaigning and action. In this scenario, the nation-state is no longer seen as *the* primary target of action for a host of different groups, for whom supranational agents may have greater significance, such as transnational corporations (exemplified in the boycott Nike campaigns) or international bodies (as witnessed by the anti-G8 protests).

Alongside these transformations in political organisation, action and aims, it is suggested that new citizens are emerging who are much less collectivist than previous generations, more individualistic and issue-oriented and concerned with 'postmaterialist' values (Inglehart, 1990). For many, such trends are particularly exemplified in the young.

Much contemporary British political science has been rather slow to address these issues of change, however, and there has been a continued dependency on traditional categories of participation. In part, this reflects a reluctance to lose the longitudinal power of established survey instruments, but, in our view, it also reflects a focus on intentional, rather than structural, explanations of participation. Indeed, it seems to us that a great deal of recent British political science work on political participation has been primarily concerned with the decline of traditional forms of participation, rather than with theorising the significance of changing patterns of governance and participation more broadly conceived. In this chapter we set out our dissatisfaction with much thinking around the crisis of political participation, whilst in the next chapter we pay more attention to broader conceptions of citizenship and how these relate to changing aspects of governance.

1.1   Quantitative survey studies of youth political participation

1.1.1   Pattie *et al.*'s study of citizenship and participation

We begin by examining the approach and findings of the major study of citizenship and participation in the UK, by Pattie *et al.* (2004). This

was a large quantitative survey project undertaken within the ESRC's Democracy and Participation programme of which our study was also a part. We pay particular attention to Pattie *et al*. (2004) for three reasons: first, they provide the most up-to-date and the most recent, comprehensive work on political participation in the UK, and our empirical work focuses on the UK. Secondly, their work represents a major advance on the previous equivalent work on the UK published in 1992 by Parry *et al*., which operated with a much narrower understanding of politics. As such, this study in many ways represents an advance on previous survey research, particularly because it broadens the range of political activities it considers. Third, in an important sense, our work represents a response to the approach they adopt.

Pattie *et al*. report the results of three separate surveys based on representative samples of the population of England, Scotland and Wales. The main merged sample, which is the basis of the results we consider here, included 12,163 respondents from face to face and mail surveys conducted in 2000.[1]

Pattie *et al*. considered naming their book the 'Atomised Citizen' and suggest (2004, p. 275) that 'this reflects many of the trends we are observing in contemporary Britain'. More specifically, they identify a number of characteristics of participation in modern Britain. In the first place, they suggest that citizens have not in fact contracted out of politics; rather they are engaged in a large number of non-traditional forms of political participation. Whilst collectivist forms of participation have declined, overall, individualistic forms of political participation have increased. In particular, there has been a notable rise (since the Parry *et al*. study conducted in 1984) in consumer boycotts (2004, p. 81, Table 3.12). Pattie *et al*. argue that this pattern of individualistic engagement makes it meaningful to talk about 'consumer citizenship' (2004, p. 267). In contrast, there is a decline in party membership; now if people join organisations they are usually motoring, fitness, sport and work organisations (2004, p. 98, Table 3.13). In addition, membership of political parties is largely passive (2004, p. 268, Table 3.14). Alongside this decline in more traditional forms of participation, there is a great deal of micro-political action. So, 43 per cent of their respondents had taken action to try to improve their working conditions, while 24 per cent with children in school had taken action to attempt to improve their child's educational provision and 11 per cent had taken action to try to change their medical treatment (2004, p. 114, Figure 4.1). However, this action is individual and politicians are rarely involved (2004, pp. 117–119, Figs 4.2–4.4).

In relation to trust, they found that trust in others is quite high, but trust in politicians, especially national politicians, is low (2004, p. 36, Table 2.2, and p. 38, Table 2.3). Their findings suggest a feeling that government is indifferent to citizen's opinions with fairly low levels of political efficacy (2004, p. 43, Table 2.6, and p. 45, Table 2.7).

In relation to attitudes towards rights, citizens have a significant sense of individual rights, such as the right to die, have an abortion, or take fathers' paternity leave, although they are much less tolerant of gay rights or gay marriage. The majority also believe in state-provided rights, such as housing for those who cannot afford it and government action to reduce inequalities. As far as individualistic rights are concerned, there is a division between those who think the state should provide and those who think individuals should decide (2004, p. 55, Table 2.12).[2]

In relation to attitudes towards the duties of citizenship, they suggest that the sense of civic duty to vote runs deep, but there is little sense among their respondents of a duty to be more broadly politically engaged (2004, p. 50, Figure 2.7).

Finally, they find that all forms of political participation are related to age (discussed next), education and socio-economic status, but not to gender or ethnicity (2004, p. 86, Table 3.4). Perhaps most crucially, it is the disadvantaged who feel they need the state, while the privileged are able to achieve their own ambitions.

With regard to youth participation, the main conclusions of Pattie *et al.* covered areas relating to political and civic activity, interest and attitudes. In relation to activities, they found that the sense that voting is a duty is lowest among the young, that is those aged under 24 (2004, p. 70), and that people are most likely to be politically active in their middle age, with the young and the old more likely to be disengaged (2004, p. 86). Whilst collective political action is relatively more common among the young and more educated (2004, p. 87), they suggest that the young, together with the old, women, the working class, the poor and the less well educated, are less likely to belong to formal organisations (2004, p. 104), and the young especially are more likely to be found in informal networks or friendship groups (2004, p. 105). Overall, in all the participation models that the authors examined, they found that youth inhibits participation (2004, p. 173). With regard to political interest, they found that the young, together with the poor and the working class, are the least politically knowledgeable and interested (2004, pp. 90, 92). Finally, in relation to attitudes, they found that young people tend to be liberal, rights-oriented and less trustful than most other groups. So, they found that liberal values are stronger among

the young than in almost all other groups: 'the younger the person, the greater the likelihood that he or she supports gay relationships having equal status to marriage, and the older the person the more likely the contrary point of view will be held' (2004, p. 71). Furthermore, the young, together with the poor and the working class, are more committed to state-provided rights – education, health, social security and so on (2004, p. 72) – whilst both trust generally, and particularly towards the police, only matched by the levels among minority ethnic groups (2004, pp. 61–63), and respect for the law are lowest among the young (2004, p. 68).

As such, the general picture about young people and political participation to emerge from Pattie *et al.*'s study is that the young are less knowledgeable, interested and efficacious about politics and less likely to vote, engage in civic participation or join any formal political organisation, particularly political parties. However, at the same time, they are more likely to be members of informal groups and more likely to be involved in protest politics. The picture appears one less of apathy, or even inactivity, and more of different forms of engagement.

1.1.2 Norris' studies of the agencies, repertoires and targets of political participation

This is a picture confirmed by both Norris' comparative work and other, more qualitative, work on young people's political participation in the UK (Eden and Roker, 2000; White *et al.*, 2000; Henn *et al.*, 2002). Norris has published three contributions which are relevant here: the *Democratic Phoenix* (2002); 'Young People and Political Activism' (2003), which focuses on a comparative analysis of activism in Europe; and 'Who Demonstrates? Anti-State Rebels, Conventional Participants, or Everyone' (2005), which looks both at comparative material on protest politics taken from the World Values Study and at a detailed case study of protest in Belgium.

Norris consistently makes the point that there has been a diversification of the repertoires of political action. She also contends that young people's political repertoires are different to other cohorts, in that they are more likely to engage in demonstrations and consumer boycotts. In this vein, she distinguishes between citizen-orientated actions, relating mainly to elections and parties, and cause-orientated repertoires focusing on specific issues or policy concerns, that is consumer politics, demonstrations and petitioning (2003, p. 4). This distinction leads Norris to broaden her approach to politics in comparison with most classic studies of political participation. So, she contends

first that: 'An important characteristic of cause-orientated repertoires is that these have broadened towards engaging in "consumer" and "life-style politics", where the precise dividing line between the "social" and the "political" breaks down even further' (2003, p. 5). She continues, 'identity politics around issues of ethnicity and sexuality also commonly blur the "social" and the political' (2003, p. 5). Finally, she contends: 'Another defining characteristic of cause-orientated political activity is that these are directed towards parliament and government, but also towards diverse actors in the public, non-profit and private sectors' (2003, p. 5).

Interestingly, this brings Norris closer in many ways to our under-standing of politics 'as lived experience' which we shall discuss below. Unfortunately, however, despite these acknowledgements, and, at least in part, because of the quantitative surveys she relies on, her results do not really reflect that theoretical sophistication. Rather, in all her empirical work reported here she treats ethnicity, and indeed age, class and gender as independent variables, not identities, while, like other studies, including ours, she has no information about sexuality as a variable, let alone as an identity.

Norris (2003) identifies three competing interpretations of the rela-tionship between age and participation, interpretations that focus on: generational effects, life-cycle effects or period effects. She tests these three interpretations of what may be happening to youth participa-tion. Because she has no longitudinal data, she uses panel data from the European Social Survey (ESS). This involves data from a represent-ative sample of the population of 14 European nations and Israel:7 in Northern Europe (Norway, Sweden, Finland, UK, Ireland, Netherlands and Switzerland); 4 from the Mediterranean (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Israel); and 4 from East Central Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia). The data were analysed to establish whether there were linear trends in activism over successive age cohorts (for example, if, as cohorts grew older, there was more voting and less protest participation). If there are linear trends, that would tend to support the generational interpretation. In contrast, life-cycle effects would be reflected in a curvilinear pattern across successive cohorts; for example, in which youngest and oldest vote least. Finally, period effects would be reflected in a significant change in participation at one time, following a key event.

In relation to the relationship between age and citizen or cause-orientated political action, Norris found that, across the 15 countries, citizen-orientated acts attract an older profile and a 'significant age gap

[is] apparent in all citizen-orientated repertoires of action, including voting, contacting, donating money, party membership and party work' (2003, p. 11), whilst cause-orientated acts attract a slightly younger profile (2003, p. 11). Thus, 'contrary to the thesis of young people's apathy, the age gap [is] both substantially larger and also reversed for all the cause-orientated forms of activism' (2003, pp. 11–12). She concludes then that there are differences of age 'even after including all relevant controls, however, age (in years) remained not only statistically significant but one of the strongest predictors of citizen action' (2003, p. 12), whilst 'the age profile remained significant even after including the full battery of controls and it was consistently reversed, with young people more likely to engage in cause-orientated forms of action, not less' (2003, p. 13).

She comes to somewhat different conclusions as to whether these age differences reflect life-cycle or generational effects, however. In the case of citizen-orientated activism, this tends to be expressed in curvilinear form (2003, Figure 3) in all types of society (Northern Europe, Mediterranean and East Central Europe). So, there seems to be a life-cycle effect, but no generational effect. For example, in relation to turnout across each nation, 'although there is a large age gap in turnout, nevertheless this can be attributed more to life-cycle patterns, so that the younger groups can be gradually expected to vote more often as they enter middle age' (2003, p. 13). It is also worth pointing out here that Franklin (2004) identifies a gradually extended decline in turnout across all democracies as a result of lowering the voting age. He consequently argues that the decline in turnout which has occurred in Western Europe will cease and may be reversed as the generations affected by these changes mature.

The pattern in relation to the cause-orientated repertoire is different however; here 'older cohorts are least engaged in these ways, (but) there is a linear rise in activism until it peaks among the younger cohorts, and this rise is most marked in Scandinavia and, to a lesser extent, Northern Europe' (2003, pp. 13–14), which 'suggests that younger people are more likely than their parents to engage in cause-orientated political action, contrary to the thesis of youth apathy' (2003, p. 14).

Norris has also undertaken, with two colleagues, Walgrave and Van Aelst, a study of activism (2005), which pays significant attention to age as an explanatory variable. As they argue, 'Perhaps the most common explanation for the growth of protest politics, and the main reason for popular concern, claims that growing political disaffection and alienation has generated this phenomenon' (Norris *et al.*, 2005, p. 3). This

position has been criticised by those who argue that viewing radicals as disaffected is a stereotype that ignores the broader sociological changes that underpin the rise of protest politics. Thus, authors like Inglehart (1997, 2005) and Dalton (2004) advocate modernisation theory, which emphasises that the shift from industrial to post-industrial society has been associated with higher levels of education, increased leisure time and more sophisticated communication systems and has produced more informed and demanding citizens. Finally, some authors (see McAdam *et al*., 1996) argue that context is crucial; the extent and nature of protest depend on the context set by particular events, issues, actors, mobilisation frames and so on. Norris *et al*. attempt to adjudicate between these positions by posing the following question: are protest politics replacing (see Bennett, 1998) or supplementing (Norris, 2002) traditional forms of participation? To address this, they use two data sources. First, they used the 1973–76 Barnes and Kaase (1979) Political Action Survey, updated with material from World Values Study, for eight nations: the UK, West Germany, Netherlands, Austria, the USA, Italy, Switzerland and Finland. Secondly, they drew on a case study of Belgium, the country with the highest proportion of demonstrators in the comparative data and with sharpest rise in demonstration activism from the early 1980s. These data are taken from Van Aelst and Walgrave's (2001) study of demonstration participants in seven demonstrations in Belgium between 1998 and 2001, in which they conducted 2448 face-to-face interviews and postal surveys. Aelst and Walgrave identified four categories of demonstrations reflecting the type of organiser and the location of the issue involved on an ideological spectrum: 'new-left', 'old-left', 'new-mixed' and 'new-right'. These data were supplemented with data from the 1999 Belgian General Election Survey.

The main findings were that protest politics has increased, especially in Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden (Norris *et al*., 2005, Table 2). They argue (2005, p. 92),

> Estimates based on the World Values survey suggest that demonstrating (experienced by 16% of the public overall) has become more widespread today than many traditional forms of participation such as active party membership (5%), or active trade union membership (5%).

In predicting party participation or civic activism in Belgium, age continues to be important – participation increases in middle age before falling among the elderly. In contrast, as regards demonstration

activism, 'protest activity remains more popular among the younger generation than for their parents or grandparents' (Norris *et al.*, 2005, p. 15). Their data tend to dispute the perspective that it is the disaffected who protest, since the people who take to the streets in Belgium are not particularly critical of the political system: 'Not only are demonstrators as a group generally not disaffected about government and democracy [. . .] but none of the seven specific demonstrations was crowded with anti-state radicals, not even the anti-globalisation protest' (2003, p. 18). They found some limited ideological effects, in the sense that demonstrators are drawn disproportionately from the left, but not from the far-left, but that tendencies to become members of political and civic associations were correlated, so that people who demonstrate are more likely to be civic joiners, party members and TU members. They suggest that indeed context matters a lot. 'New-left' demonstrators are usually young, well educated, middle class, more politically interested and 'left-wing'. 'Old-left' demonstrators are more usually working class, less interested and more satisfied with democracy. 'New-right' demonstrators are older, less politically interested, less satisfied with democracy and more 'right-wing'. Furthermore, event organisers played a role in mobilising protestors. Unions mobilised supporters for 'old-left' events, but there were fewer union members in 'new-left' and 'new-right' events. Parties mobilised for the 'new-right' and civic associations for the 'new-left'. Overall, they conclude, 'the popular concern that demonstrations are undermining representative democracy, by displacing conventional channels with radical and extremist politics, even violent tactics, due to political disaffection, seems misplaced' (2005, p. 20).

Norris' comparative data certainly suggest that the UK is not an exceptional case. Any comparison between the results of Pattie *et al.* (2003) and those of Norris (2003) indicates that young people do participate in politics, but their participation takes different forms. They are less interested in, and knowledgeable about, politics and feel limited levels of political efficacy. They are less likely to vote or join political parties. However, in contrast, they are more likely to demonstrate or protest. It is hard not to agree with Norris *et al.* (2005) that: 'the political energies among the younger generation in post-industrial societies have diversified and flowed through cause-orientated activism, rather than simply ebbed away through apathy'. This applies to Britain, as Pattie *et al.* show, as much as to the other countries in Norris *et al.*'s (2005) analysis.