Young People

Political Participation

Teen Players

Jacqueline BRIGGS

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To Imogen, John, Mum and my late Dad

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Notes on Author

Jacqueline (Jacqui) Briggs is Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lincoln. She was Vice Chair of the Political Studies Association UK (2011–14), with special responsibility for Education and Skills, and served on the learned society's executive committee for more than a decade. In 2012, she became an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. Briggs is a member of the board of the Campaign for Social Sciences; she is also a Fellow of the RSA. The Quality Assurance Agency recently asked Briggs to chair, for a second time, the review panel examining the subject benchmarking statements for Politics and International Relations.

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CHAPTER 1

Young People and Political Participation: Is There an Issue About Young People and Politics?

Introduction

Political youth: is this an oxymoron? It can sometimes be difficult to think of young people as being political animals. Politics is often regarded as an older, or perhaps middle-aged, person's pursuit, when levels of political turnout and participation are analysed. Middle-aged and older generations are, statistically, more likely to turn out to vote and to stand for election than their younger counterparts. Politics, at all levels—European, national, devolved and local—contains relatively few representatives in their late teens, 20s or even 30s. The stereotypical image of a Member of Parliament (MP), for example, has remained relatively static for decades, being predominantly white, male, middle aged and middle class. Against this backdrop, young people may find it hard to relate to politics on a macro level—politics with a large 'P'. The perception is often that politics neither includes young people nor represents young people in both a numeric and a substantive way. They are absent from the ranks of the elected representatives and also their views are either ignored completely or, at least sidelined. Little wonder, therefore, that many young people do seem to regard the political arena as alien territory. This book examines the extent to which these perceptions are correct whilst also assessing topics such as whether young people should be given the right to vote at the age of 16 and 17 and also examining the way in which young people might be seen to be participating in politics in other ways—such as via new social media and through protests and campaigning organisations.

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This first chapter introduces the topic of young people and political participation. Examination is made of what constitutes youth, the growth and development of youth, historical background, youth as consumers and purchasing power. The rise of youth culture and the duality of youth (whereby young people are regarded both as the future and a source of optimism but also as a troubling phenomenon and a sector of society to be feared) are also assessed. This chapter sets the scene in terms of facilitating understanding of what the concept of youth entails and examining the situation from a historical perspective. It is interesting to note that youth is not a new phenomenon and that notions such as ephebiphobia (fear of youth/teenagers) have existed for a significant amount of time. This chapter provides a logical starting point before proceeding to look at youth in contemporary society.

Why Youth?

Over recent years, there has been a burgeoning literature on young people and politics (cf. Henn et al. Sloam; Tonge and Mycock) and on specific aspects (cf. Ramamurthy, on Asian youth movements; Shephard et al. on youth parliaments). Academics are increasingly finding it a topic worthy of detailed investigation and debate. Certainly, in these relatively early years of the new millennium, it is an interesting topic worthy of subject that has exercised both academics and the media alike. In the past few years, specific events and policies have focused attention upon the extent to which young people are engaged with politics. These include, on the world stage, the Arab Spring that took place in the Middle East in early 2011 and, more specifically, in the UK, the rise in higher education tuition fees to £9000 per year, from September 2012, the cuts of 40 per cent to the Higher Education budget and the so-called riots which took place in August 2011. Also, in the UK, as in some other countries, there has been discussion and a move towards granting the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds. The fact that 16- and 17-year-olds were given the right to vote in the referendum on Scottish Independence, held on the 18 September 2014, raised the profile of this debate. There are those who believe that it is only a matter of time before this is rolled out to other elections as the momentum gathers pace. It is worth noting that the Conservative Government has declared that 16- and 17-year-olds will not be able to vote in the referendum on continued European Union membership.[1] Ironically, the European Union referendum disenfranchises some young

voters in Scotland who were eligible in September 2014 as 16-year-olds but who will not be 18 by 23 June 2016. There are not many young people affected by this but certainly enough for it to be an issue worthy of mention. These events outlined above have, however, all conspired to ensure that youth and politics has become a contentious area of politics.

It is worthwhile examining exactly what is meant by youth and here it is worth noting, as mentioned in the introduction, that the concept of youth is a relatively recent phenomenon. The post-Second World War scenario is often cited as being the onset of youth. Prior to this time, it is claimed that the notion of a youth, as it is understood today, did not really exist. One was either an adult or a child, and the notion of an in-between stage, especially with regards to the idea of being a teenager, did not really exist. It is only after the Second World War and especially from the 1950s onwards, with higher living standards and increasing amounts of disposable income, that the notion of a teenager really began to take off. The idea of an in-between stage of life, after childhood and before the onset of adulthood, was a relatively new phenomenon and meant that businesses would all try to target this sector of society. In part, this was defined for the benefit of education, and the growth and expansion of higher education, in particular, fuelled this process. The late 1950s and the 1960s was an era that witnessed many more people remaining in education beyond the statutory school-leaving age. Whilst it still included an élite, privileged, few who were able to study for a degree, nonetheless, the grammar school system, in particular, and later the comprehensive schooling system saw some from working class backgrounds being able to remain in education and become socially mobile via the attainment of a degree. Certainly, the expansion of higher education helped to perpetuate this in-between stage. For example, in 1950, there were 17,337 people who obtained a university first degree; by 1960 this had risen to 22,426, increasing significantly by 1970 to 51,189. By 1990, this had risen to 77,163 but the real leap occurred by 2000 when the figure was 243,246. The rise was aided by the expansion of the university sector with the transition of former polytechnics into universities and other specific government policies that aimed to increase the numbers of young people staying on for further and higher education. In addition to the rise, there was also a shift in the gender balance. By 2000, there were more women than men obtaining first degrees (133,315 women compared to 109,930 men). The figures for 2011 show this trend has continued, with 197,565 women gaining a first degree as opposed to 153,235 men (See Bolton 2012: 20). Latest available figures

reveal that, in 2014, there were 237,690 females and 184,130 males who graduated with a first degree (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2015). Granted some of these numbers will relate to mature students but, certainly, a much larger proportion of young people, therefore, are remaining in higher education for a longer period than hitherto. This potentially impacts the concept of youth in a number of ways. Firstly, it contributes to the extension of time that could be categorised as 'youth' beyond childhood and yet a stage different from the life of adulthood. Secondly, the fact that many more young people than hitherto are remaining in higher education means that they are more likely to become politicised given that universities seek to create critical thinkers and to encourage people to be more questioning, open-minded and, possibly, less accepting of the *status quo*. This could mean that young people who have been to university are more politicised or at least have the potential to become so. It is interesting to consider whether higher education does, indeed, make people more questioning and challenging. In theory, at least, one would expect so. Thirdly, students studying for their first degree have more time not only to reflect on politics but also to actively engage in political activities. This time factor should not be underestimated. Adulthood, often submerged in the world of work, paying the mortgage and raising the next generation, means that many people have neither the time, the energy, nor the inclination to be politically active. Granted, not all young people remain in higher education but, for those who do, it is a potential factor in the politicisation process.

Are They Interested?

In terms of whether young people are actually interested in politics, there has recently been a wealth of discussion and debate. Central to this discussion is whether young people are interested in politics or whether they are apathetic, bearing in mind that apathy may also indicate contentment (Eulau 1963, 1966). Some commentators argue that they are not uninterested in politics but that they are less enamoured with mainstream politics than they are with political issues (cf. Harris et al. 2010). They are, for example, interested in issues such as animal rights and environmentalism. As Nigel Morris states, 'The large numbers of young people moved to march over gay rights, protecting the environment, the Iraq war and tuition fees shows they can be galvanised by single issues' (2014b: 5). Having said this, some commentators and academics question whether

young people are actually interested in politics beyond the mainstream. In response to the issue of whether young people are interested in politics, Rowena Mason (2013) cites academic Stuart Fox, who observes that there is a lack of evidence to support the thesis that young people are participating in protest activity (as opposed to mainstream politics) and also academic Maria Grasso, who states rather candidly that no one really knows the extent to which young people are interested in politics. She points out, however, to the perceived lack of division and difference between the major political parties and a move towards occupying the centre-ground as being a political turn-off, that is, not much to choose between the parties (Ibid.). This potentially contributes to a disconnection between young people and the political parties. It will be interesting to see whether the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Leader of the Labour Party redresses this situation. (Corbyn has, for example, declared his opposition to tuition fees.) The actor, writer and comedian, Russell Brand, guest editor of the *New Statesman* states, 'young people, poor people, not-rich people, most people do not give a f*** about politics' (Brand 2013: 26). For Brand, apathy 'is a rational reaction to a system that no longer represents, hears or addresses the vast majority of people' (Ibid.). If young people are apathetic, for Brand, this would seem a rational response to a system from which they are effectively excluded.

Youth Unemployment

When assessing levels of unemployment amongst young people and the fact that many of them are part of the NEETS (Not in Employment, Education and Training) (cf. Simmons et al. 2014), it is perhaps surprising that many more young people are not politicised. Not solely down to unemployment but *Generation* Υ, those born after 1982, are likely to grow up to be poorer than their parents' generation. Youth unemployment is a key issue, not just in the UK but also across Europe as a whole. It is claimed that youth unemployment has almost hit the 25 per cent mark, a staggering figure of 24.4 per cent, with one in four young people, across Europe, being out of work.[2] Young people constitute the sector of society worst affected by the high levels of unemployment, with 3.62 million under-25s being out of work. As Russell Lynch asserts, 'Nearly one in four 16 to 24-year-olds across the 17 nations in the single currency is now out of work, according to monthly figures published by the EU's data office, Eurostat'. Moreover, he proceeds to profess that this is worse

in some European countries than in others, for example, 'Well over half of those under 25 in Greece and Spain are not in work, compared with more than 40 per cent in Italy' (Lynch 2013: 1). According to Eurostat figures,[3] the youth unemployment level in Greece is 51.1 per cent, Spain 51.7 per cent, Portugal 33.3, Italy 42.0 and France is 24.6. Contrastingly, Germany is only 7.4 per cent as they have not suffered as much from the recession and the austerity measures. On the whole though, these are substantial figures, especially when one thinks about the impact upon a whole generation of young people. Various negative labels have been applied to this cohort of young people, such as the 'lost' generation or the 'jilted' generation. The chances of finding work, with so many others seeking the same, must be minimal and must surely manifest in a tangible sense of despair and disillusionment. In the UK alone, there are more than one million young people who are seeking work. According to Jon Savage, 'In January 2014, unemployment amongst those aged 18–24 was estimated at 18.6 % and, among 16–17 year olds, up to 35.5 %' (Savage 2014: 19). According to a House of Commons briefing paper, '723,000 young people aged 16–24 were unemployed in May–July 2015, which is down 17,000 from the previous quarter and down 32,000 from the previous year' (Delebarre 2015: 2). Even with this decline, given these staggering figures, it might be anticipated that the politicisation of young people will continue apace in the coming months and years. If young people feel that they do not have a stake in society, they are likely to become increasingly disillusioned. Likewise, the perception that it is they, the younger generation, who are increasingly bearing the brunt of the cuts and the austerity measures across Europe as a whole, is likely to perpetuate discontent and possible dissent. The notion of a 'them' and 'us' society with a relative affluent older sector of society is likely to fuel the feelings of unfairness. Andrew Mycock states that 'Unemployment at such a young age undermines self-esteem and also builds resentment. Responses to youth unemployment have been insubstantial though, with too much faith being placed in the private sector to provide short-term panaceas to long-term problems, particularly for NEETS who are also not in education or training' (Mycock 2011, www.opendemocracy.net). This lack of jobs, allied with other factors, such as higher university tuition fees, the increasing difficulty in terms of accessing mortgages and corresponding rising house prices meaning that first-time buyers are particularly disadvantaged, all contribute to exacerbating this situation. In addition, the proliferation of 'zero hours' contracts, pension reforms such as end of final salary pen-

sion deals and predictions of retirement in one's 80s potentially have a disproportionate impact on younger people. Furthermore, the reality of politicians and policymakers being middle aged or older may perpetuate the viewpoint that they are primarily legislating in their own interests. It is a fact that the socio-economic backgrounds of MPs, for example, are unrepresentative of wider society, as they do not constitute a microcosm of the wider population. They are an élite group but the question to ask alongside this is whether they constitute a 'dominant' élite. Do they rule in their own interests? If young people arrive at the conclusion that they do, then the levels of discontentment will rise even further. Governments, across Europe, need to take youth unemployment seriously before the levels of resentment and disillusionment rise exponentially. A generation living in despair will inevitably lead to discontent; politicians across Europe ignore this issue at their peril.

Political Engagement

It is certainly the case, therefore, that if one considers issues such as youth unemployment, higher tuition fees and the difficulties of getting on to the property ladder, young people *ought* to be interested in politics and in the politicians whose policies shape and impact their lives. It is difficult to determine accurately whether or not young people are interested in politics. Matt Hartley and Ted Huddleston cite researchers in the UK who refer to '"the millennial generation", a generation of young people who have little interest in politics, particularly party politics, or belief that voting in elections will make a difference, and who consistently hold low expectations of government' (2010: 13). Yet, if they are uninterested in mainstream politics, are they interested in politics *per se*? According to research undertaken by Alexander Hensby, a PhD research student from the University of Edinburgh, 76 per cent of students say they discuss politics, but the question is how is politics being defined? As he states, 'Only 4 per cent claim to "never" discuss politics, with 76 per cent claiming to do so at least "sometimes". Around a quarter of students claim to discuss politics regularly'[4] (Hensby 2013: 4). It does not necessarily mean to say that they are discussing Parliamentary politics or politics at a macro level. Politics is a difficult concept to determine accurately. Certainly, it relates, in part, to the allocation of a finite amount of resources. Difficult decisions have to be made in terms of how those resources will be shared. In the words of the famous American political scientist, Harold Lasswell,

and the title of his seminal text on the topic, it is about *Politics: Who gets What, When, How* (Lasswell 1958). If politicians spend more on defence, correspondingly there will less to spend on other areas, such as education or health. There will be winners and losers and, inevitably, therefore, politicians will be unable to please everyone. A wider definition of politics (cf. Adrian Leftwich's work entitled *What Is Politics?* for differing interpretations of what constitutes politics) might include discussion of power relationships, even, for example, who does the washing up at home might be regarded as a political decision, as it entails the concept of power. It depends, therefore, how the notion of politics is being interpreted. Relatively recently, in the UK, there has been a concerted effort to encourage people to understand the relevance of politics to their lives. A cartoon advert shown in newspapers and then animated on television, using voice-overs from actors Jim Broadbent and Timothy Spall, was first used in the 2004 European Elections and then again in the following year's General Election. Focusing upon the theme of 'If you don't do politics there's not much you do do?', the attempt was primarily to reverse the trend of low electoral turnout by trying to get people to make the connection between politics and their daily lives. The price of a pint, the proliferation of road works, sporting achievement and graffiti were amongst the examples presented as indicative of how decisions made by politicians impact the ordinary people. The powerful advert, spanning only 50 seconds, attempted to remind people of how politics affects them. The implication being that it was imperative to turn out and vote so that one's voice could be heard. This multi-million-pound campaign was indicative of a government fearful of low electoral turnout and the question of legitimacy. Whether it had a specific appeal for young people is debatable but it did at least try to get people to make that causal link between political decision makers and their daily lives. This connection is a crucial one for young people, in particular, to make if they are to become politicised.

The disconnect with politics has been well documented and does not just relate to young people (cf. Stoker 2006; Hay 2007). As Gerry Stoker pointed out more recently, 'Not everyone "hates" politics and not everyone is disengaged from it, but there is undoubtedly substantial anti-political sentiment in British society' (Stoker 2011: 11). He proceeds to cite the Hansard 2011 survey which shows, 'Only one third believe the system of governing Britain works well. Only just over a quarter are satisfied with the working of Parliament, the lowest figure so far recorded in the Hansard surveys. Only one in three of us now agree with the statement

"when people like me get involved in politics, they really can change the way that the UK is run"' (Ibid.). The perception is that people are unable to make a difference or, at least, that it is very difficult for them to make a difference. There is also a greater degree of cynicism in evidence than hitherto in relation to how politicians are perceived. Having said this, people are not opposed to democracy. Stoker encapsulates this by saying that citizens 'remain convinced by the benefits of democracy but are unconvinced by the role of politics in delivering that democracy' (Ibid: 22). Clearly, all sectors of society, to varying degrees, appear to be disillusioned and disengaged.

The focus of this study is the extent to which young people are disengaged. In answer to this question of whether or not young people are interested in politics, Ben Kisby, author of several works on citizenship and young people, states, 'In general, I think young people are interested in politics. It is true that forms of disengagement from electoral politics, particularly amongst young people, by which I mean roughly 15 to 25-year-olds, are pronounced in historical terms, such as low levels of turnout in elections, membership of political parties and trust in politicians and political institutions. However, the evidence from the UK and Western Europe suggests that young people are not politically apathetic. They have their own views about political issues and engage in democratic politics through various modes of participation'.[5] Kisby goes on to say, 'In particular, there has been a proliferation of youth participation in a myriad of alternative forms of engagement, such as signing petitions, joining boycotts or participating in demonstrations, and in alternative arenas of engagement, such as the utilisation of social media'. This dimension, that is to say the use of social media, is examined in detail in Chap. 4. Kisby proclaims the fact that young people do appear to be participating in politics in ways which differ from what might be regarded as the norm. Muniglia et al. also denote these varied forms of youth participation, 'Young people's participation takes place on all levels; from the local to the global, from informal settings such as groups, networks and communities, to formal structures such as youth organisations, municipal youth councils, school councils and elections' (2012: 5). This difference in the type of political participation is also recorded by Reingard Spannring, who states, 'academics have interpreted the changes not as a decline but as a *transformation*, a shift in the repertoire of political engagement. The decline in traditional forms of participation seems to be partly counteracted by the expansion of new and 'modern' forms of political and social engagement' (Spannring 2012: 39).

It appears, therefore, that young people are participating politically but that they are participating in ways different from traditional forms of political participation. They may be less inclined to vote and to participate in mainstream politics but they are more willing to engage in less conventional forms of political participation. The aforementioned focus upon single-issue campaigns and taking part in direct action, signing petitions and boycotting products and services is an example of this new type of political engagement and involvement. Couple this with the use that young people make of new social media and it becomes clear that young people are participating but in ways which are less conventional than hitherto. Social networking sites such as *Facebook*™ and micro-blogging sites such as *Twitter*™ provide vehicles for young people to discuss and to organise themselves politically. The arena for political engagement and participations has shifted significantly. This might be seen as the democratisation of political engagement. No longer is politics simply the preserve of an élite group but sites such as these provide a platform for people (and young people in particular) to debate, discuss and organise.

Other Issues

In addition to unemployment, young people are also adversely affected by other factors. For example, a study by the Campaign for Better Transport claims that young people are particularly disadvantaged by government spending policies in relation to transport. This is especially the case given that the 16–24-year-old age group tends to be more reliant on public transport and less likely to have discounted travel than older people. Cuts, therefore, 'have had a significant impact upon the young … [with many] young people not in employment, education or training … often unable to afford to seek work because of rising transport costs' (Topham 2013: 11). Transportation is a key issue as far as young people are concerned, especially for those living in rural communities who, where they do not have easy access to cheap reliable public transport, may find themselves increasingly isolated and ostracised. As the young people interviewed in Chap. 6 elucidate, transport is one of the key issues regularly championed in various young people's forums. They articulated feelings of being 'trapped' and of being unable to afford the high bus fare (see Chap. 6).[6] Certainly, as James Sloam rightly points out, young people have borne the brunt of the austerity measures in the UK and are likely to be 'the first

generation since the Second World War who will be worse off than their parents' (Sloam 2013a: 4).

University Tuition Fees

One of the key factors that undoubtedly has increased the politicisation levels of young people is the introduction of and then the increase in university tuition fees. It appears that once it was established in principle that students should contribute, at least in part, towards the cost of their higher education, there has been no going back. Tuition fees were first introduced in September 1998, following the recommendations of the Dearing Report. Published in July 1997, the findings of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, Chaired by Sir Ron Dearing, included the premise that students should contribute towards the cost of their tuition. In September 2006, universities were allowed to charge up to £3000 per annum in variable tuition fees, or top-up fees. Critics believe that, in the same manner as prescription fees have continually risen, once that precedent is set, the upward trajectory is inevitable (prescriptions are, however, free in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Fees have increased from £3290 per annum to £9000 per annum. This increase took effect from the autumn of 2012 and impacted the cohort who started university at that time. Students now were faced with the prospect of paying £9000 per year for each of the three years of their university degree course. The reality is that many young people would now leave university having incurred a minimum debt of £27,000. For some families, the amount of £9000 as fees per year represents a huge reduction on their school fees and so it is not always viewed as an extra cost; for some (albeit a minority) it is a significantly reduced cost. For many, however, this is regarded as a substantial debt with which to commence one's working life, especially given that these early years in the world of work often coincide with the acquisition of a mortgage and, possibly, the expenses incurred with starting a family. A letter to the *Times Higher Education* sums up the predicament quite succinctly, 'Students have always accepted being broke while they study: being broke for the rest of their lives because they studied is another matter entirely'.[7]

Added to this hike in tuition fees would also be costs relating to living expenses, such as accommodation and subsistence requirements. Students could also obtain a loan towards these expenses, thereby adding to the already substantial debts incurred. This was mitigated, according to

advocates of the new fees regime, by the fact that graduates now had to be earning at least £21,000 per annum before they would begin to pay off their loan at a low rate of interest. In addition, any outstanding amount still owing beyond a 30-year period after graduation would automatically be wiped clear. Others stated that, rather than seeing this as a debt, in the same way as a mortgage or a credit card, for example, it is better to view it as a tax, akin to a graduate tax, whereby the money is taken off at source from high earners (or at least those earning £21,000 and above). Certainly, the University Central Admissions System (UCAS) data on university applications and acceptances for the 2012/2013 academic year did reveal a significant decline. It is still early days, however, as to whether the new fees regime will lead to a permanent decline in applications and acceptances. Preliminary data reveals that levels are starting to revert to an upwards trajectory with the value of a university degree, with its potential to lead to a graduate job being uppermost in young people's minds. Allied to this, the prospect of three years to immerse oneself in academia, critical thinking and, not to be underestimated, the lifestyle of an undergraduate, remains an appealing proposition. As Sean Coughlan reveals, it appears that 'the massive underlying demand for higher education has snow-ploughed its way through the financial barrier of trebling fees' (Coughlan 2015). Having said all this, the fees increase was not brought in without opposition. The winter of 2010/11 was dubbed the 'winter of discontent' (the same moniker applied to 78/79 but for different reasons). Students organised a series of protests against the proposed increase in university tuition fees and against the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance in further education. These included protests held on 10 November 2010, 24 November, 30 November, 9 December, 19 January 2011 and 29 January 2011. One of these protests, held in November 2010, drew support from 50,000 students, and there was also a violent attack on the Conservative Party offices in Millbank. Alastair Hudson believes the tactic of 'kettling' (derived from the German word for cauldron, '*kessel*' meaning to keep the protestors enclosed in a confined area) used on 9 December 2010, and of which he was a part, 'was an exercise in state violence against teenage sixth-form and university students voicing genuinely held concern about their futures and the futures of others' (Hudson 2011: 33). Clive Bloom draws parallels with earlier protests by school children of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He contends that such protest is not a new phenomenon. 'Starting in 1889, there were waves of national school strikes … centred on issues

such as corporal punishment, the length of the school day, holidays, the school-leaving age, exploitation of "monitors", unpleasant teachers and bullying headmasters or headmistresses' (Bloom 2011: 37). In the contemporary protests, the Liberal Democrats, in particular, also came in for criticism, especially their then leader, Nick Clegg, as prior to the 2010 General Election, they had pledged to vote against rising tuition fees. As the former leader of the National Union of Students, Liam Burns, stated, 'Nick Clegg won the trust and votes of young people and their parents by signing the pledge, but has now lost them once and for all by breaking it'.[8] The fact that the Liberal Democratic Party lost 49 seats in the 2015 General Election and went down from 57 (in 2010) to eight (in 2015) lends credence to this argument.

Not all young people were in favour of the protests. For example, a 17-year-old member of the Youth Parliament (the UK Youth Parliament comprises around 600 young representatives),[9] representing Sleaford and North Hykeham, urged young people not to participate in the protests as the previous protests had not worked, and 'If anything they were counter-productive, as the hijacking of them gave a horrendous, unfair and unjust misrepresentation of the majority of young people in the UK'. Instead, he urged people to complete an online survey being organised by the British Youth Council[10] as a way of articulating their opposition to the proposed fees increase.

As stated, there were a number of demonstrations, protests and even riots. The Parliamentary vote took place on 9 December. There were around 40 occupations across the country. The protests continued into 2011. Some of those young people who were protesting were against the changes to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). They also took part in the demonstrations, so it was having an impact in sixth-forms too. The EMA, aimed at 16–19-year-olds and based on the parental level of taxable income, was introduced across England in September 2004. A number of pilot schemes (15) were introduced in 1999 and then extended to another 41 areas in 2000. The money, a maximum of £30 per week, depended upon parental income, was paid to the young person directly. They had to be studying for at least 12 hours per week, and bonuses were also given for full attendance and for completion of the course of study. Essentially, it was intended to encourage those from low-income families to remain in further education (see Fletcher 2009). In October 2010, the UK government scrapped it as part of the budgetary cuts, replacing it with a bursary scheme for those on low incomes. Higher education

funding changes and tuition fees are seen as a cause of youth politicisation but they are also a 'policy' and need to be examined in that light too. A survey carried out by the polling group Ipsos MORI for the Sutton Trust, an organisation which campaigns for easier access to university for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, found that whilst '86 per cent believe that attending university will help them "get on in life", 65 per cent have significant concerns about the financial implications' (Parr 2013: 8). Students from poorer backgrounds especially seem particularly averse to taking on a huge debt in comparison with those from wealthier backgrounds. The 2014 Student Academic Experience survey, conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute (Hepi), found that 'a quarter (not an insubstantial amount) believe their degree is a "poor" or "very poor" return on their investment' (Baker 2014: 5). The higher education sector has to constantly convey its message regarding the value of a degree in order to counteract such negativity. Clearly, although over time there may be a sea change in how tuition fees are perceived by young people (with the notion of a tax possibly superseding the focus upon a substantial debt), currently this is not the case, and tuition fees, if not necessarily acting as a barrier to university entry, are certainly making some young people, and especially those from poorer backgrounds, think twice before they commit themselves.

National Citizen Service

One development that is worthy of mention is the introduction of a National Citizen Service in England, under David Cameron's leadership. Essentially, this entails a scheme aimed at encouraging young people, 16- and 17-year-olds, to learn new skills and to volunteer in their communities. It is seen as a non-military form of national service (compulsory national service ended in 1960 in the UK). Part of the plan is that young people will develop skills such as team building and communication skills. Young people, primarily those who had just finished their GCSEs, would attend a two-week residential, outdoor pursuits course, and then they would spend three to four weeks working on local community projects. First announced in 2010, a total of 12 pilot projects were launched in areas such as Cumbria, Devon, Cornwall and Teesside, which were then rolled out to the rest of England during 2011. MPs criticised the costs of the programme when youth services were being cut across the board and other critics[11] failed to see the purpose of the scheme. The anticipation

was that up to 10,000 young people would take part in the scheme, which would eventually expand to 30,000 young people in 2012. In the event, more than 30,000 young people did sign up for it in 2012. By 2015, more than 130,000 young people were said to have participated. Upon completion of the scheme, the young people also have the opportunity to participate in a National Citizen Service graduation ceremony to celebrate and recognise their achievements. Despite its critics, the scheme is generally seen as a success, although the government does not plan to make it compulsory. The National Centre for Social Research has carried out an evaluation of the National Citizen Service. It affirms the aims of the initiative as being to build a 'more cohesive, responsible and engaged society'[12] and finds a range of positive impacts in relation to teamwork, communication, leadership and transition to adulthood but a smaller number of positive impacts and less consistency of impact in relation to social mixing and community involvement. The study recommends that more time should be allowed to recruit participants and staff, that there should be great flexibility of programme delivery and that more should be done to raise awareness of the scheme.[13] Andy Mycock and Jonathan Tonge have also assessed the National Citizen Service. They believe that it is 'an important plank of the Conservatives' promotion of the Big Society, but is representative of a broader lack of precision regarding motivations and perceived outcomes' (Mycock and Tonge 2011: 65). They also believe that it 'may need to link volunteering to democratic participation and citizenship more explicitly and connect to the state in addition to local communities' (Ibid.). Clearly, the National Citizen Service still exists, remains voluntary and focuses upon developing the personal and social skills of 16- and 17-year-olds. There is still work to be done, however, if the National Citizen Service is to achieve success on the terms outlined above.

Bite the Ballot

One relatively new campaigning organisation that encourages young people to participate in politics is entitled *Bite the Ballot*. Co-founded in 2010 by former teacher Michael Sani, *Bite the Ballot* aims to facilitate higher levels of youth participation in politics. Their quest, just as Rock the Vote did in America, is to encourage young people to have a greater understanding of politics and to register to vote. *Bite the Ballot* seeks to encourage young people to have a greater understanding of what is meant by politics and to comprehend the practicalities of how to register and how to actually cast

their vote. As Managing Director Sani maintains, young people often have an interest in specific issues (e.g. transport) but they do not necessarily regard these as political (cf. Mason 2013). Young people need to make the link, therefore, between issues of concern to them and the world of politics. As *Bite the Ballot*'s website illuminates, it 'is a not for profit organisation that empowers young people to speak up and act, to make their votes and opinions count. We inspire young people to be counted and make informed decisions at the ballot box, encouraging them to take power and become the champions that will change the face of British politics. We are not affiliated to any political party—we think they all need to do more for the youth vote' (*Bite the Ballot*, http://bitetheballot.co.uk/). One innovation from *Bite the Ballot* has been the setting up of National Voter Registration Day; the first one took place in 2014. The date 5 February was chosen because this is the date of the 1832 Great Reform Act which introduced voter registration and extended the franchise, albeit to, as Sani points out, rich men. It will be interesting to assess whether this social enterprise, *Bite the Ballot*, can make a real difference to levels of youth political engagement and participation.

One other recent development instigated by *Bite the Ballot* and think-tank Demos, and, in part, financed by the Political Studies Association UK and by a number of universities including Newcastle, Royal Holloway and Lincoln, is the creation of a voter advice application called Verto (an anagram of voter). The App (more particularly a cross-device, cross-browser, mobile Web application) aims to encourage youth participation (the 5.6 million potential young voters) by providing the target demographic (16–24-year-olds) with a number of statements, where they swipe left or right if they agree or disagree with the statements. It then matches their responses with the political parties. The statements are grouped around policy categories such as health, education, crime and justice and the environment (see: http://bitetheballot.co.uk/verto/). Social media, including digital platforms, are potentially one way of re-engaging young people with politics. These are examined further in Chap. 4.

Other initiatives worthy of flagging up include a youth campaign group called MyLifeMySay (http://www.mylifemysay.org.uk), the organisation Democracy Matters (http://www.democracymatters.org.uk), the Politics Project's Clicktivism, (http://www.thepoliticsproject.org.uk), the group '45 for the 45th', the Hansard Society's Your Vote Matters, UK Youth's Youth Count! Democracy Challenge, the Rock Enrol® initiative developed by the Cabinet Office, the Student Room, Backbench—an online

platform for young people to write about politics, the British Youth Council's Youth Vote and the Political Studies Association UK's Charter for Active Citizenship, all of which aim to encourage greater youth political participation.

Free the Children

The international campaigning and educational group, *Free the Children*, is another organisation that seeks to 'empower and enable youth to be agents of change' (Free the Children, http://www.freethechildren.com/). This group, started in 1995 by a 12-year-old Canadian boy, seeks to help young people to get involved with both local and global issues. It seeks to free children from poverty and exploitation. *Free the Children* provides resources for schools, a forum for debate and acts as a conduit to enable young people to bring about change on a global scale. Such organisations illustrate that young people are interested in issues and seek to bring about a changed world.

To Lower or Not to Lower…

In relation to this topic of youth political participation, a key issue is whether or not lowering the franchise to enable 16- and 17-year-olds to vote would have an impact upon levels of engagement? As illustrated in Chap. 5, where the focus is upon this vexed question of lowering the voting age, opinion is very much polarised. It does appear, however, that a certain momentum for change is gathering pace, not least because the Scottish referendum, held in September 2014, focused on the debate. The decision by Alex Salmond (Scottish politician who became Scotland's First Minister in 2007) to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to participate in this plebiscite led some to argue that this would eventually result in 16- and 17-year-olds voting in elections to the Westminster Parliament. Many see this as an inevitability and simply a matter of time before this becomes the reality. As noted at the time of writing, this is not going to happen in the referendum on continued European Union membership. When asked specifically about whether the voting age should be lowered to 16, Ben Kisby, interviewed as part of this research process, proceeds to explain his views, 'I think it is right that 16 and 17 year olds will be able to vote in the Scottish independence referendum. I think it is right they have a say in the future direction of the country. I think it is also something that

should be seriously looked at for all elections in the United Kingdom and I reject the idea put forward by some that 16 and 17 year olds are necessarily insufficiently mature to reflect on political issues and cast their vote on the basis of these reflections'. He goes on to say that, 'One particular advantage I can see with lowering the voting age to 16 would be that it might force political parties to take young people's concerns more seriously than they do at present'. This point about young people's issues being taken on board by the political parties is examined in detail in Chap. 5. A rational assumption to make is that, if young people are less likely to vote in elections, politicians and policymakers would be better served by focusing their attention upon those sectors of society who are more likely to go out and cast their vote—namely, the older generations. Lowering the voting age is likely to ensure that young people's concerns make it on to the political agenda.

The Riots of August 2011

One area that has been cited as depicting the politicisation of young people is the riots of August 2011. Whilst many people regard what happened in the summer of 2011 as, essentially, wanton violence with little or no connection to political engagement or protest, others see the riots as the manifestation of disillusionment and despair. As Mycock and Tonge state, the riots 'brought the role of young people in society into sharp relief' (2012a: 138, b). There were opposing views as to what caused the riots, from the government's perspective, 'the riots were "pure criminality"… underpinned by poor parenting, broken families and a lack of discipline in schools' (Ibid.). On the other hand, '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' (Ibid: 139). Andrew Mycock states that 'suggestions that these are the first post-political riots fail to acknowledge their multiple causes and broader issues concerning the segregation of young people from mainstream society' (Mycock 2011, www.opendemocracy.net). Some did not see the riots as political or even post-political protest; their interpretation was rather that the looting was due to greed and selfishness, and so it was not a political protest as such. Countervailing viewpoints prevail on this point but it remains the case that many of those who rioted, as Mycock and Tonge contend, constituted 'a "disempowered generation"