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Neoliberalism and the Unfolding Patterns of Young People's Political Engagement and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract: Recent trends suggest that young people in Britain are increasingly rejecting electoral politics. However, evidence suggests that British youth are not apolitical, but are becoming ever more sceptical of the ability of electoral politics to make a meaningful contribution to their lives. Why young people are adopting new political behaviour and values, however, is still a point of contention. Some authors have suggested that neoliberalism has influenced these new patterns of political engagement. This article will advance this critique of neoliberalism, giving attention to three different facets of neoliberalism and demonstrate how they combine to reduce young people's expectations of political participation and their perceptions of the legitimacy of political actors. We combine ideational and material critiques to demonstrate how young people's political engagement has been restricted by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism has influenced youth political participation through its critiques of collective democracy, by the subsequent transformations in political practice that it has contributed to, and through the economic marginalisation that has resulted from its shaping of governments' monetary policy. This approach will be conceptually predicated on a definition of neoliberalism which acknowledges both its focus on reducing interventions in the economy, and also its productive capacity to modify society to construct market relations and galvanise competition amongst agents. From this definition, we develop the argument that neoliberal critiques of democracy, the subsequent changes in political practices which respond to these criticisms and the transformation in socioeconomic conditions caused by neoliberalism have coalesced to negatively influence young people's electoral participation.

Keywords: young people; political participation; neoliberalism; democracy

1. Introduction

During the last three decades, young Britons aged 18–24 have demonstrated a reluctance to engage with formal electoral-oriented politics, such as voting or membership of political parties [1,2]. Turnout at general elections for this generation has significantly reduced since 1992 when 67.3 percent of British youth cast their vote; between 1997 and 2015 youth turnout remained below 55 percent. This trend, however, was reversed at the 2017 General Election with more than 64 percent of young people turning out to vote [3,4]. This turnaround may not be a permanent feature of electoral politics in the United Kingdom (UK), as polls since the 2017 General Election have found that only 54 percent of those aged 18–24 remain certain they will vote in the next general election [5].

Moreover, this generation displays clear dissatisfaction with the current political system, and many admit to having low levels of interest or knowledge about democratic practices and institutions [6]. While conventional wisdom suggests this reluctance to participate may be due to young people's indifference towards politics, a number of scholars, associated with the anti-apathy school [7],

have suggested that the relationship between contemporary youth and formal politics is far more complex. Their studies indicate that far from being apathetic, young people are interested in politics and support democracy [8], but don't trust the motives of politicians [9] and are unhappy with political parties for being remote, hierarchical and centralised [10]. Closely aligned to the anti-apathy thesis is the notion that young people are rejecting formal politics and are channelling their political activities into alternative forms of political engagement [11]. Formal political participation refers to actions such as voting, political party membership and contacting political representatives, whereas alternative participation refers to political activities such as attending demonstrations, signing petitions, political blogging and boycotting or boycotting products. So, while their older contemporaries have maintained engagement with formal politics, today's young people are practising alternative politics. Therefore, it may be more accurate to describe young people's political participation as *changing* compared to older cohorts, rather than simply declining.

Our comprehension of young people's disenchantment with politics is far from complete, however. While existing explanations have provided differing conceptions of how the relationship between young people and politics has transformed in recent years, the question of why younger cohorts are adopting new modes and styles of political behaviour has not been adequately addressed within political science. This forms part of a wider deficiency within the discipline as political science has often neglected to investigate the origins and sources creating the growing resentment towards politics displayed across the spectrum of British society [7,12].

There are two notable exceptions to this omission. The first is the proposition found in postmaterial theory, which claims that in increasingly affluent societies, young people's values will shift away from material concerns and, instead, they will begin to adopt postmaterial values and perform new, non-institutionalised forms of political action [13,14]. A second suggestion is that the neoliberalisation of society has contributed to citizens' increasing levels of cynicism with respect to politics and consequently to the erection of barriers obstructing—in particular—young people's political engagement [12,15–17]. Investigations in youth studies have established the influence neoliberalism has on young people in education [18], social policy [19], poverty [20] and transitions to employment [21]. By way of contrast, the impact of neoliberalism on changing patterns of youth political engagement and political participation have been relatively under examined; one of the primary objectives of this article will be to address this gap in the literature.

Existing accounts have highlighted three strands of neoliberalism which influence youth's changing political participation: Firstly, that the neoliberals' critique of democracy and their insistence on technocratic economic policies has undermined the ability of political actors to respond to the concerns of the citizenry. Secondly, that the disenchantment with politics has occurred due to the influence of neoliberalism on how politics is practised by political parties and political actors and the emergence of a conventional wisdom which has been formed around politicians' motives [17,22]. Thirdly, that the material inequality which has arisen from neoliberal-inspired policy has led to a reduction in young people's ability and motivation to engage with institutionalised politics [23].

Theorists have tended to focus on particular individual strands as separate aspects of neoliberalism, and there is an absence of consideration of the interconnectedness of these three features. This article will address the limits within the current literature by documenting how all three strands of neoliberalism form a matrix which contributes to young people's disengagement with electoral politics. Furthermore, many of the existing discussions surrounding neoliberalism's influence on political disengagement have investigated society as a whole. This article will give particular focus to young people and how they are acutely subject to neoliberalism's effects. Young people are not the only social group to feel the pernicious influence of neoliberalism; people's class [24], gender [25] and ethnicity [26] are also characteristics over which neoliberalism exerts a stratifying effect. Moreover, the influence of neoliberalism on political behaviour is felt across all age cohorts [12,17]. However, youth should also be considered as an important category to investigate the outcomes of neoliberalism because many of these factors are unique to young people as a social group [27,28]. Moreover, as we demonstrate

below, youth have been saturated within neoliberal policies for significant periods of their lives and are displaying different political behaviour to their older contemporaries and previous generations at the same age.

Contemporary British youth have been confronted by a political system which is increasingly removing areas of public interest from democratic consultation in a move towards neoliberal policy implementation [16,17,29]. This is compounded by the internalisation by young people of the claim that political actors are unable to make meaningful change and by political interactions which are becoming increasingly coercive [8,22,29]. In particular, the transition to neoliberal economics has politically disenfranchised young people, through the inequality that has occurred as a consequence of the operation of neoliberal ideology in *practice*—this is particularly evident under current austerity conditions within the context of the ongoing global recession [2,23]. In critically addressing these matters, this article will enable us to offer new insights about how the ideology and practice of neoliberalism in contemporary Britain has contributed to young people's eschewal of electoral politics and changing political behaviour.

2. Young People's Withdrawal from Formal Politics

There is a considerable body of research indicating that young people's presence in formal electoral politics (such as voting and membership of political parties) has recently been in decline [1,6]. The explanations offered for this pattern are varied. For instance, one account identifies that this trend has resulted from an alienation of young people from formal democratic institutions and from professional politicians [30,31]. Elsewhere, it has been suggested that young people are apathetic about politics [32] or they are too "stupid" [33] to realise the benefit of voting. Others have suggested that young people's patterns of political engagement and participation may not necessarily be declining, but instead are changing. For instance, when qualitative investigations have asked young people about their withdrawal from formal electoral politics, their responses suggest that the reality is more complicated than a simple lack of concern or from disinterest. According to Chareka and Sears, young people demonstrate "a fairly sophisticated understanding of voting and its place in the political system" [34] (p. 532). They also exhibit a deep awareness about the political issues that influence their lives [35] and believe that voting is important [36]. In fact, not only do contemporary youth have a good understanding of politics and believe that voting is important, they are also keen supporters of democracy [8].

However, there is a considerable body of evidence which demonstrates that young people are deeply suspicious of the relevance of formal politics to their lives, which is why they often eschew electoral politics. For example, they are sceptical about their ability to influence either politicians or the direction of politics and believe that they are ignored in political discussions [9,37]. They are also disappointed with policies offered by political parties, suggesting that there is little to separate the policy direction of political parties [10] and that such policies are not relevant to young people [27]. Contemporary youth are also disinclined to involve themselves in political party structures as they feel they are hierarchical and centralised, offering little opportunity for them to influence the creation of policy exchange information with political representatives [8,11]. Consequently, there is substantial evidence that young people are now replacing participation in formal politics with engagement with alternative (often more individualistic) forms of political action (boycotting, attending demonstrations, signing petitions) [11,38,39]. Indeed, British youth, when motivated by the prevailing agenda and their inclusion in the debate, are open to political participation. This is evidenced by their relatively high turnouts at the Scottish independence referendum, the European Union (EU) referendum, and the 2017 General Election [4,40,41]. Thus, attempts to explain declining levels of electoral participation by young people as a rejection of political matters does not provide accurate insight into their political behaviour.

Therefore, the evidence suggests that young people, while supporting democratic arrangements and displaying interest in issues that influence their lives, do not trust the current political system or

their political representatives. Consequently, they often choose not to engage with electoral politics because they feel that it does not make a difference to their lives and they feel excluded from political discussions. It is our contention that many of these factors which reduce the appeal of formal electoral politics to young people can be traced to changes resulting from interlinking facets of neoliberalism. Neoliberal critiques of democracy and the subsequent realignment of democracy with consumer principles diminishes the relevance of formal politics to young people. This is augmented by the prevalence of individualism—driven by the hegemony of neoliberalism—which makes collective electoral politics unappealing to young people and leads to their increased engagement with alternative forms of politics [42]. Moreover, the socioeconomic conditions that have arisen due to the transition to neoliberal economics encourage young people's electoral withdrawal from politics [2,23]. Therefore, we shall argue that young people's ability to vote, changes in young people's political preferences, and their lack of voice in political discussions can be traced to neoliberalism, and that it can be suggested that these factors coalesce to diminish younger generations from engaging with formal politics. Before we address young people's changes in political behaviour, we will investigate what neoliberalism is, how it has become so influential and how young people specifically are subject to its authority.

3. Neoliberal Rationality

The developmental journey followed by neoliberalism towards its current hegemonic position as a guide to social and economic practice has not been a uniformly linear one. It has had to adapt to a multitude of diverse institutional, historical, social, political and cultural milieus. Indeed, neoliberalism was not conceived as a cohesive concept due to the apparent dissension amongst its original pioneers. For example, while Hayek felt that *homo economicus* exaggerated the rational capabilities of individuals and believed that there was a role for the state providing it was subordinate to the market, Von Mises, conversely, was committed to the fully rational actor with a priori capabilities of economic calculation and believed that any state intervention was tantamount to socialism [43]. Furthermore, as Munck states, neoliberalism as currently *practised* should be differentiated from ideas that arose from theorists associated with neoliberalism. While the ideas of the latter have certainly influenced the direction of the former, no one neoliberal theorist has had their ideas uniformly converted into economic and social policies [44]. Neoliberalism, therefore, has no specific ontology nor one key thinker; nonetheless, there are certain processes, which influence both society and agents within it, that we can attribute to a process of neoliberalisation [45].

Stedman Jones has defined neoliberalism as “the free-market ideology based on individual liberty and limited government that connected human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor in a competitive marketplace” [46] (p. 2). However, two different but influential theories have sought to describe the processes of neoliberalism and how these have become dominant in the political, economic and social fields. Firstly, the Marxist version has defined neoliberalism as the reactionary reassertion of classic liberal ideology which has attempted to counter the collectivist social and economic policies of post-war governments. This explanation of neoliberalism stresses the material consequences of neoliberal economic policies through resumption of free trade, balanced budgets, deregulation and upper-class privilege which impoverish the lower classes and increase inequality [47]. Secondly, a Foucauldian variant acknowledges the Marxist materialist explanation but places a greater emphasis on ideational factors and understands neoliberalism as a productive process which constructs the “neoliberal subject” via an epistemological transformation [48,49].

Paralleling the Marxist theorists, Peck has explained that there is a “roll-back” function to neoliberalism which conforms to classical liberal economic principles such as privatisation and deregulation. Furthermore, in line with those who adopt Foucauldian understandings of neoliberalism, Peck has also observed a generative element within neoliberalism which he refers to as the “roll-out” function. The “roll-out” stage, however, refers to neoliberalism's use of the state to construct society around neoliberal objectives. This function creates new notions of how society can be proactively

recalibrated through the marketisation of formerly non-market domains and the creation of competition to guide human activity [45].

The productive roll-out function of neoliberalism was first highlighted by Foucault, whose published lectures on biopolitics have forged new methods for conceptualising how neoliberalism organises human and social action. Foucault stated that rather than a form of ideological control which is exerted externally, neoliberalism is a form of governmentality which has been internalised by individuals who self-regulate and discipline themselves [50]. This process is articulated in the work of Hayek who acknowledged that market rationality is not inherent within the behaviour of the individual and needs, instead, to be galvanised and adjusted through their social experiences. Moreover, mechanisms which facilitate the internalisation of market rationality, such as competition between individuals, do not spontaneously occur within a *laissez-faire* framework; they must be created through a conscious and active process of societal adjustment [51,52]. Therefore, contemporary society is undergoing a process of rationalisation in which the values and objectives of neoliberalism are artificially introduced into social processes and the subjectivity of individuals. This epistemological transformation has consequently created agents who are guided by notions of entrepreneurialism and economic outcomes, in which the relationship between these neoliberal subjects is coordinated by private concerns, consumerism and the competition for resources.

Governance has become a key aspect of the roll-out function of neoliberalism. While this does not originate in the writings of the pioneering neoliberal thinkers such as Hayek, neoliberalism in *practice* has matured and governance has become an effective tool at managing populations. It manages conduct by forming best practices, founded on the application of the narrow set of neoliberal values, across a diverse range of institutional settings. Subjects must invest in their human capital to meet the requirements of economic growth which, according to neoliberal logic, can only be achieved via adherence to a narrow set of free-market rules. Individuals become sacrificed to the project of economic growth, but do not form the constituent part of a collective as governance conducts and coerces its subjects to find individual solutions to dilemmas. Notions of citizenship and political participation, therefore, are reconstructed under governance as personalised efforts by individuals to advance economic growth via improvement of human capital [53]. As Brown states, under the sway of governance, political participation is no longer about “contestation and deliberation about norms, [as] there is no place for agitated or agonistic citizenship” [53] (p. 8).

The hegemony of neoliberal values, such as governance, balanced budgets and privatisation, has been expedited in Britain by neoliberals’ prominent roles in sites of knowledge production, the creation of free-market aligned think-tanks, support from members of the intelligentsia and the uptake of these ideas by major political parties across the ideological spectrum [46]. The increased application of neoliberal logic has augmented the internalisation of market rationality as people are subject to increasing competitive scenarios over scarcer resources which require economic calculation; job opportunities are becoming rarer, work is more insecure, wages are falling or stagnating and obtaining the correct human capital is more complex and time-consuming [48].

While it has been noted that the increasing prevalence of individualism in today’s society is also being driven by sources unconnected to neoliberalism [54,55], we suggest that much of young people’s displeasure with formal politics is derived from the form of individualism instigated by neoliberal actors and values. Contemporary youth have been socialised in this environment which promotes neoliberalism and produces the “neoliberal subject”. As Woodman and Wyn have argued, not only are they subject to the same entrepreneurial environment described above, the “neoliberal’ policy shift has had a number of effects that differentiated this generation from the previous one” [56] (p. 266). Today’s young people are expected to improve their human capital by submitting to extended periods in education and perpetual upskilling while becoming increasingly responsible for the costs of skill advancement for a jobs market where competitiveness is burgeoning due to precarious employment [56].

In the UK, many government policies to improve young people's situations have been guided by the logic of neoliberalism. New Labour's *New Deal for Young People*, for instance, placed specific conditions and sanctions on those aged 18–24 who were in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance. Similarly, the coalition of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives instigated a *Youth Contract* which placed extra surveillance on young people who were unemployed for extended periods of time. Such initiatives frame young people as a specific social issue to be resolved, where the focus resides upon deficiencies within agency and problems with the supply of labour not the lack of opportunities or the prevailing socioeconomic conditions [57]. The individualisation of youth is also reflected in the language of recent youth social policies. The 2010–2015 coalition Government's *Positive for Youth* report stated that its aim was to “develop greater awareness of the evidence that links a number of key personal capabilities (such as confidence and agency, or resilience and determination) to key longer-term outcomes such as those relating to educational attainment and employment” [58] (pp. 83–84). Indeed, the general direction of youth policies in the UK has been towards supply-side solutions, which frame many young people as deviant or in need of upskilling, at the expense of demand-side solutions, which could investigate, amongst other issues, the paucity and quality of available work to young people, the poor pay progression for younger generations, and why youth have been excluded from access to state initiatives that could improve their material situation [2,57].

Furthermore, how academics conceptualise and understand young people has often been driven by the dominance of neoliberal values and has, in turn, propelled the development of neoliberal attributes among youth [19]. For example, the influential field of “positive youth development” seeks to harness the potential of young people by advocating self-advancement and individualistic strategies for improvement. Though this does contain progressive elements for contemporary youth, Sukarieh and Tannock claim that this strategy is founded upon “pulling young people into the workforce, opening up the spheres of education and youth development to market forces and business interests, promoting the ideology of neoliberalism among the young and undermining the traditional entitlements of welfare state provision” [19] (p. 682). Neoliberal subjectivity, therefore, is constructed and reproduced within young people by their exposure to youth and social policies that are grounded in notions of individualism, entrepreneurialism and competitiveness. Indeed, being saturated in neoliberal expectations creates a tacit knowledge among young people about how they should behave, act and choose [28,59].

The process of rationalisation, however, is not the only outcome of neoliberal hegemony for young people. The increasing prevalence of methodological individualism and locating responsibility for success or failure on the choices of the individual, camouflage sources that are outside of young people's control and which mediate the options that are available for them to choose from. While neoliberalism becomes the sole arbitrator of what it is to be a citizen [49], structural factors—such as gender or class—which provide different opportunities or disadvantages to individuals within the category of youth become decoupled from explanations of young people's progression towards fulfilling their role of (neoliberal-defined) citizen [16]. Indeed, young people's choices and preferences concerning such matters as housing or the labour market are limited by the prevailing economic circumstances of the society in which they live; however, explanations which situate these factors within youth's transition to adulthood become concealed behind the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility [59].

To understand neoliberalism and its effect on society, an analysis is required of how its economic rules (such as balanced budgets, reduction in welfare provision and privatisation) structure the opportunities and life-chances of agents in the material realm. This, however, should be combined with an investigation of how the hegemonic neoliberalism constructs compliant economic actors who self-regulate to meet the requirements of neoliberal guidelines. In this section, moreover, we have demonstrated how these two components of neoliberalism influence contemporary youth. Firstly, it appears that neoliberal values have a rationalising effect on young people's epistemology as well as constructing normative classifications of how to gauge success and failure.

Secondly, neoliberal ideology seems to obscure structural factors that impede some young people's ability to navigate to destinations of their own choosing; simultaneously, neoliberal economic rules reduce the financial power of young people which furthers their difficulty in making self-actualising choices. How these material and epistemological components of neoliberalism reduce young people's political participation will be considered below.

4. Diminishing Democracy: Economic Sovereignty

Hay has provided an interesting correlation between neoliberalism and the increasing rejection of institutional politics by people of all ages. He argues that due to the depoliticisation of government functions and the scepticism that politicians can work for the needs of society, people have become cynical of the motives of their elected representatives and believe that the legislature have been stripped of the power to create meaningful change. According to Hay, it is under the auspices of *Public Choice Theory* (PCT) that the citizenry has become rationalised into distrusting politicians and political practices [17].

In this section, we develop Hay's proposition that neoliberal critiques of democracy have influenced how citizens engage with electoral politics. In doing so, we also consider a number of additional aspects of neoliberalism that are critical for investigating youth political engagement, but which are not considered within existing work. Firstly, Hay's definition offers focus with respect to the classic liberal tenets of neoliberalism, although it does not address neoliberalism's roll-out or constructive agenda which provides insight into how free market principles became embedded in the conventional wisdom of society. Secondly, Hay predominantly focuses on PCT, which means that other theories posited by the neoliberals which have influenced our relationship to democracy have not been fully explored. Thirdly, Hay has paid attention to neoliberalism's influence in political disengagement across all ages, whereas we want to specifically highlight how young people's distrust of politicians leads to the former's political disengagement [17]. As we have stated above, neoliberalism as *practised* should be differentiated from the theories of the pioneers of neoliberalism. Our focus in this section will be on some of the key neoliberal thinkers and how they have sought to reimagine democracy—the subsequent sections focus on neoliberalism as currently *practised*.

While the neoliberals were predominantly concerned with reinvigorating liberalism at the expense of government planning and collectivism, they also supplied an overlapping critique of democracy. Increasing democracy would hasten intervention within the economy, intervention in the economy would lead to social ills—because everybody would become poorer, not richer—and interference in the economy would result in totalitarianism. While political freedom and individual liberty flowed naturally from economic freedom, such state-directed economic interventions would result in a subversion of the masses by demagogues who would make unrealistic promises to gain power. Instead, democracy would be far more efficient if pursuing social goods through economic intervention was abandoned and if politics followed the principles of consumerism and the free market [45,60].

The neoliberals' critique of democracy, as we have discussed earlier, is wide-ranging and comprehensive. However, what underpins their attempts to reimagine democracy is their repositioning of economic freedom as more crucial to liberty than political freedom. Attempts to provide social freedom by intervening in the economy are considered undemocratic because they permit small groups of elites, rather than individuals who comprise society, to decide the direction of state planning [61]. Moreover, political freedom is bound to economic freedom, so that efforts to reduce necessity by restricting market forces will lead to political oppression and totalitarianism rather than to emancipation. Friedman also stressed that "economic freedom is [. . .] an indispensable means towards the achievement of political freedom" [61] (p. 8). While Friedman acknowledged that economic freedom does not necessarily translate into political freedom, Hayek claimed that it is more essential for preserving or creating liberty than political freedom. For instance, when Hayek was asked about human rights abuses conducted by the authoritarian Pinochet regime in Chile, he responded

that, “[m]y personal preference leans toward a liberal dictatorship rather than toward a democratic government devoid of liberalism” [62].

As Biebricher suggests, the neoliberals intended that economic freedom would supplant political freedom as the foundation for understanding liberty [60]. More importantly for our analysis, the neoliberals contended that certain aspects of the economy should be beyond democratic mediation as the majority is not in a position to make an appropriate decision about these matters. For Hayek, rules which galvanise and support the free market must be beyond amendment from democratic intervention as an emancipated society may only exist when supported by a spontaneous and free economy [63]. Consequently, the neoliberals were asserting that limitations must be placed on democracy, particularly relating to interventions in the market, and that the economy must follow a one-size-fits-all approach. Thus, a large and important factor in determining people’s life course—the creation and allocation of wealth—is no longer a matter for public deliberation.

PCT builds upon these neoliberal critiques of democracy. For instance, James Buchanan [64] claimed that politicians were motivated by self-interest rather than concern for positive public outcomes. He develops this critique from the position that all people are “rational utility-maximisers” regardless of the context or settings in which such decisions take place. Consequently, politicians will govern according to a narrow agenda which is focused on improving their self-worth and power rather than acting in the best interests of society. Buchanan identified three factors which should lead to doubts about politicians’ motives and of the capability of democracy to solve social problems. Firstly, no voting system can accurately or fairly reflect individual preferences within collective decision-making. Secondly, governments were likely to promote rent-seeking behaviour by diverting wealth to certain social groups and a proliferation of those in such groups seeking government subsidy in return for votes. Thirdly, that government agents would inefficiently increase the size of their bureaus for prestige and to improve their salary [54].

These criticisms depict politicians as being untrustworthy and unable to act in the public good, and also cast doubt on the ability of democracy to mediate social decisions. PCT is correct to emphasise that politicians and bureaucrats are not benign operatives who uniformly implement programmes for the public good and disregard improving their own position. However, PCT makes the converse, but equally absolute, claim that all public servants uniformly try to increase their self-worth and will behave in the same utility-maximising manner regardless of the environment those decisions are made within. The assertion that all political agents act free from other motives or emotions—such as tradition, altruism or ethics—is difficult to sustain when empirical [65] and theoretical [66] evidence provides a different picture of institutional behaviour. More important for our analysis, however, is that PCT presents the market as the remedy to these institutional failings, as the profit-motive counters rent-seeking behaviour or an unnecessary increase in bureaucracy. The market also allows individual preferences to be satisfied as these are not subject to the distortion experienced within collective decisions. Instead, consumers can signal their rejection of the possibilities offered by refusing to purchase (through voting) any of the available options (political parties). So, not only were the neoliberals providing a critique of democracy, they were also creating a privileged position for their economic ideology.

The impact of these thinkers’ critiques on neoliberalism as *practised* should not be underestimated. Friedman and Hayek both advised the British Conservative Party, which instigated full-fledged neoliberal reforms in the UK. Their ideas, in addition to Buchanan’s, also influenced the knowledge disseminated by free market British think tanks, such as the Adam Smith Institute and the Institute for Economic Affairs [46]. Consequently, the neoliberals’ evaluations of democracy have permeated mainstream consciousness and have increased the discord between young people and electoral politics by forming the widespread opinion that the state and its representatives cannot facilitate positive social change. Diffusion of PCT into mainstream consciousness via academics, think tanks, youth policies and politicians themselves has been an important factor in increasing the scepticism towards political actors across all cohorts [18,67]. However, young people are more likely than their older contemporaries to

express doubts about the current system of government and are particularly critical of the motives of politicians [68].

More specific to young people's criticism of formal politics is that political parties fail to address the policy concerns of the young. We will discuss the socioeconomic status of youth in more detail below, but the positioning by political parties of economic freedom as the foundation of liberty above that of *political* freedom has often justified a limiting of democratic intervention within the economy. As a result, there has in recent decades been a broad convergence of the economic priorities and policies of the main political parties in Britain. Studies have revealed that as a consequence of this ongoing process, policies that are directed towards the improvement of young people's economic circumstances are often absent from the rhetoric and policy programmes of political parties [30,31,36]; in this context, the broadly common trajectory of economic policy offered by these parties and their exclusion of young people from policy formation [69] leaves contemporary youth with relatively little scope to express their preference for alternative socioeconomic policies at elections. A recent exception to the pattern of youth electoral abstention was the upsurge in youth turnout at the 2017 UK General Election. The limited currently available evidence suggests that may have in part reflected youth support for the Labour by that party's abandonment of the neoliberal economic consensus in favour of manifesto commitments to improve the economic situation of young people and the poor [70,71]. In general, and aside from that particular election case, if political decisions are continuously restricted by adherence to neoliberal guidelines, and if an environment exists in which politicians are framed as typically untrustworthy, then it is perhaps not surprising that young people will reject electorally oriented representative politics and search elsewhere for methods of meaningful political engagement [72].

5. Depoliticisation and New Forms of Political Practice

Neoliberalism has contributed to the current scepticism young people have with electoral politics by guiding political parties in the UK towards a hierarchical form of democracy where commands from those in the leadership create policy free from interaction with the electorate. Many young people display a preference for direct forms of democracy in which they contribute to policy formation and feel that their opinions are listened to and acted upon [73]. The neoliberal method of governance, where political authorities rely on coercion rather than on the exchange of ideas and information, is likely to reduce the attractiveness of formal politics to those young people who aspire to create policies in concert with their political representatives.

The critiques of democracy by the neoliberals discussed above have certainly influenced neoliberalism in *practice*. By positioning free market principles as the answer to democratic failings, neoliberalism in *practice* has sought to replace sovereign citizens with sovereign consumers. This transition is the result of reforming democracy in favour of governance rather than government. These new techniques of democracy, broadly known as *New Public Management* (NPM), define government representatives as providers of services who are detached from the day-to-day functioning of their political role which is, instead, performed by non-political actors [74]. As such, politicians devolve the provision of services to politically autonomous agents (such as Quangos), while simultaneously resisting any collective requests of the electorate that seek reform of public provision outside of pre-established boundaries [60,74]. For the neoliberals, the majoritarian system of voting leads to decisions being imposed on a minority who didn't vote for them and risks individual preferences becoming eclipsed by the bargaining and concessions needed for democratic decision-making.

If the collective nature of such a democratic system forces individuals into conformity, then a mechanism is required to realise the predilections of each of the participants. The market is advocated by the neoliberals as the instrument to transmit individual inclinations accurately and to protect the liberty of each participant. Therefore, neoliberalism in *practice* has attempted to privilege individual liberty over collective political action by remoulding the concept of citizenship. A sovereign consumer, unlike a sovereign citizen, is not restricted in their behaviour or value-preferences as they purchase

what they desire without needing to deliberate with other political agents. In practice, implementing the NPM approaches may paradoxically exacerbate the problems that the neoliberals identified with democracy; individuals are likely to see a reduction in their choices of public services, and the market—like bureaucracies—is likely to stifle the potential of imagining new policies by limiting potential democratic outcomes to those that already exist [60].

Indeed, efforts to encourage young people to engage with formal politics via the introduction of youth councils and the evolution of party youth wings is hampered by the consumer approach to democracy [69,75]. Young people's experiences of youth councils replicate the centralised and hierarchical aspects they dislike within electoral participation. Rather than being active collaborators within these forums, young people are treated as consumers to be consulted and are excluded from active participation within major decisions that affect their lives. Youth councils, therefore, may not be vehicles for social change or improving young people's inclusivity, but, instead, provide legitimation to politicians and political parties by signalling their (superficial) engagement with youth opinions [75]. Similarly, youth wings of political parties, despite rhetoric to the contrary, reproduce the notion that citizenship represents responsibility to other citizens and the duty to vote rather than encouraging active engagement with policy creation. While many young people favour active citizenship, political parties have been reluctant to broaden democracy, preferring that youth wings provide a consultative environment without mechanisms to create or influence change [69].

It would seem that the advance of consumer sovereignty further intensifies the disdain many young people feel towards formal politics. As politicians internalise neoliberal guidelines, there follows a shift in their position from governing to the oversight of services delivery; this is accompanied by a growing homogeneity between political parties and by policy convergence. Appearance and managerial qualities have begun to supersede policy and the function of representatives is being increasingly limited to the efficient provision of services to sovereign consumers [74]. The gravitation of political parties towards the political centre has occurred due to reductions in traditional ideological identification and by parties attempting to maximise their vote share by attracting median voters [76]. Yet the convergence of UK political parties towards the centre also fulfils the function of enforcing quasi-constitutional status for neoliberal economic rules that are free from democratic intervention. Burnham characterises this depoliticisation as a "technocratic form of governance" which drives "acceptance of rules rather than discretion, particularly in the area of monetary policy" [77] (p. 129). Young people, however, have been critical of the uniform policies offered by political parties and have cited the increasing similarity of political parties as a reason for avoiding electoral participation. Moreover, contemporary youth have stated that political parties don't offer policies which consider the needs of young people [8,39], and this is likely to continue in a political system which consistently prioritises the median voter and economic technocracy.

The adoption of a consumer approach to democracy and politics is also having a detrimental effect on rates of formal political participation because of the relationship it introduces between the electorate and politicians. While alternative forms of political engagement have been recognised as forming an important and positive feature of young people's political repertoires, such transitions to new forms of politics are driven by the increasing individualisation within late modernity [54,55]. For Hay and Stoker, this is problematic, as a furthering of individualism by neoliberalism, due to a consumer approach to politics, is leading to disenchantment within the political process. The individualistic tendencies encouraged by neoliberalism which attempt to negate the cooperative foundations of deliberation that are necessary in politics is creating dissatisfaction amongst citizens as they fail to recognise that democracy is about making collective decisions which will not satisfy all interested parties [67]. As Hay and Stoker suggest, "[politics] is rarely an experience of self-actualisation and more often an experience of accepting second-best" [67] (p. 234). If young people are being socialised into believing that politics is a transaction based on individual choice in which a consumer's desires are met, then the reality of democracy in which agents must traverse complex topics without any guarantee of satisfaction with the result, may become a frustrating experience.

However, neoliberalism may be sowing the seed of its own destruction by encouragement of individualistic approaches to political participation [22]. Citizens, particularly young people, are now finding a contradiction between the individualism encouraged by neoliberalism and how formal politics is organised under neoliberal ideology. This is why Bang has stated that “neoliberalism is virtually committing suicide by attempting to erase the politics of ideas” and “control the practices of network politics” [22] (p. 440). Neoliberalism’s subservience to powerful interests and use of hierarchical policy exchange would therefore seem to be anathema to agents who, under neoliberal ideology, have been encouraged to believe that sovereignty resides in the individual. Bang, therefore, has identified how neoliberalism in *practice* contributes towards disillusionment with politics, but also how it undermines its own legitimacy.

Bang, who analyses people from all age cohorts (rather than focusing specifically on young people), states that the paradoxes of neoliberal governance have led to increasing concerns around the legitimacy of contemporary political practices. This is because politics and government become oppressive under the influence of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is dependent on maintaining its hegemony by threatening, sanctioning and coercing agents into acceptance of its authority. People may accept these commands because of the threats which accompany them, rather than because they consent to the legitimacy of current politics. For Bang, these threats are the hierarchical commands which are forced upon society by the neoliberal political structure; they negate deliberation between the citizenry and their representatives and they undermine the legitimacy of neoliberalism in the eyes of the citizenry [22].

As a consequence, it is claimed by Bang that people are becoming cynical about the ability of governments to resolve contemporary risks and difficulties, such as global warming. Nor are agents satisfied that the market or technological advances can overcome these problems. New forms of political action are driven by the individualism inherent in the roll-out of neoliberalism, but, concurrently, are constrained by the coercive approach of neoliberal politics. The lack of autonomy that is granted towards these new political repertoires augments the corrosion of trust manifested in people’s increasing avoidance of formal politics. Agents are becoming increasingly aware that they do not contribute towards the creation of policy and that their views are superseded by the instrumental politics of latent groups who operate in what Bang terms the “backstage” of politics. In essence, these backstage operators, whose ability to lobby governments far outweighs the ability of the public to pressurise their representatives, have instrumental demands which do not align with the citizenry’s concerns and which often exacerbate the difficulties that people are most concerned with [22].

Bang’s suggestions find support when reviewing young people’s concerns with formal politics. Evidence suggests that a majority of British youth, though offering support to the ideals of democracy, felt that they are unable to influence governments and that elections do not really change anything. Furthermore, young people are often reluctant to engage with major political parties because they appear remote, centralised and hierarchical [9,37]. If politics is constrained and directed by ‘backstage’ actors at the expense of young people, then it is likely that the political process will become even less appealing. Indeed, the surge in youth voting at the 2017 General Election was partially due to the personable style of campaigning adopted by the leader of the Labour Party which sought to directly engage with voters. In contrast, the Conservative campaign—which, in the neoliberal mould, relied on coercive commands from a centralised and hierarchical political apparatus—largely served to repel many young people [78,79]. The coercive nature of political exchange between representatives and the citizenry under neoliberalism has encouraged the feeling amongst young people that politics is a hierarchical interaction in which they are expected to be compliant subjects rather than active participants. Evidence suggests that due to the influence of neoliberalism, young people are increasingly displaying individualistic political values and behaviour which favour a more direct and reflexive relationship to politics [42]; the constraints on policy exchange means they are looking beyond institutionalised participation which is subordinate to the wishes of powerful lobbyists,

and are becoming attracted to newer forms of engagement which allow youth to realise their political preferences [80].

New Public Management, the turn to consumer citizenship and the influence of “backstage operators” are all forms of depoliticisation, in which political decisions are removed from the public sphere and inserted into the private sphere. As many young people’s preference is for a more direct form of democracy [11], depoliticisation of formal politics and its subsequent limiting of political interactions encourages youth to search for new sites to realise their political value and behaviour. Indeed, the manner in which politics is conducted has undergone significant changes under neoliberal hegemony and, consequently, many young people have revised their attitudes towards engagement. Bang’s descriptions of the malign effects that neoliberalism has on the practice of politics provides invaluable insights into why young people dislike politics. The legitimacy of governments is often undermined by the coercive and hierarchical approach neoliberalism adopts to policy exchange. Young people, furthermore, are increasingly favouring direct and egalitarian forms of political action which are at odds with a political system that relies on deference to backstage operators. While all age cohorts are disadvantaged by a political system which privileges those who are able to command more political influence due to their large resources, young people’s increasing preference for closer interaction magnifies the constraints on policy which is formed from the bottom up. Moreover, if large potential areas of public concern are depoliticised and free from democratic debate, many young people whose preference is for closer forms of political collaboration may become less motivated to engage. As neoliberal governments do not facilitate a greater association between citizenry and their representatives, some young people have started to engage with alternative forms of political action to realise their aspirations.

6. Economic Disadvantage and Political Disenfranchisement

The implementation of neoliberal policies—which are predicated on the free market, non-redistribution of wealth and a reduced role for the state—are also a significant dynamic which contribute to patterns of youth political engagement. The adoption of neoliberalism by mainstream political parties in the UK has led to significant restructuring of the economic system which has reversed the increasing economic equality witnessed during the early postwar decades. Since 1979, social and economic inequalities have risen significantly [81] and have had a particularly disproportionate and negative effect on young people [82]. Moreover, the consolidation of wealth to a limited minority has meant that the wealthy are in control of the political agenda. As Birch et al. state, “[t]he experience of recent decades has left the impression that the rich can pressure governments by threatening to take their wealth elsewhere” [23] (p. 4), which supports Bang’s concern about backstage operators. This final section will demonstrate in more detail how this youth generation have lost out under neoliberal economic policy. It will also establish how the subsequent stratifying effects impact on young people both in terms of increasing their likelihood to abstain at future electoral contests and of leading them to question their role as citizens.

The changes to monetary policy which arose from the transition to neoliberal economics have seen certain social groups in the UK experience a decrease in income. The increase in the size of the British economy during this period has not meant that all citizens have seen a proportionate increase in their income or living standards; in reality, some groups have been subject to significant economic marginalisation [23]. This has been particularly evident for young people following the implementation of governmental austerity policies since 2010, reflecting a neoliberal response to the global economic crisis. In particular, analyses reveal that the 16 to 24 year-old group has suffered more than any other group from cuts in social spending in welfare and investment in public services [23]. However, young people were suffering from stagnating wages before the financial crisis and it is becoming increasingly likely that poor pay progression is now an enduring structural feature of the British economy, rather than a cyclical phase. Indeed, the average starting wage of those aged 17–20 have, since the early 1990s, been far lower than previous generations [83]. The housing

market in Britain, driven by neoliberal reforms, is also contributing to young people's economic marginalisation. For today's young people, social housing is harder to achieve than previously and home-ownership is dominated by older age cohorts. Consequently, young people are having to live in privately rented accommodation which is both more expensive and insecure compared to previous decades due to neoliberal housing reforms and deregulation [84]. Young people's worsening socioeconomic environment, therefore, is driven by neoliberalism in *practice* and decreases their likelihood of voting [2].

While it is true that politicians—whose potential policies are generally limited by economic realities—will rationally target social groups which are more likely to vote, this has the counter-effect of neglecting non-voting groups such as the poor, ethnic minority communities and especially young people. As politicians prioritise social groups most likely to vote, the needs of non-voting groups are often overlooked, furthering their resentment of politics and making them even less likely to vote. Thus, political inequality leads to economic inequality through the targeting of government spending; in turn, this increases political inequality as social groups, who are effectively ignored in political discussions, see little importance or value in voting. It is claimed that this disproportionate generational impact and the spiral of economic and political marginalisation has contributed towards decreasing levels of political participation amongst British youth [23,30].

The changes in many young people's economic situation has created a destabilising effect on the transition from youth to adulthood. Markers of adulthood, such as home ownership, stable employment and settled locality, have become increasingly problematic for young people to achieve. Reductions in wages and benefits for young people are compounded by the move to post-industrial forms of production under neoliberalism, which are typified by low wages and a lack of job security [2,27]. Consequently, young people are experiencing a delay in their life cycle compared to previous generations [85]. This influences young people's political participation in two ways. First, agents are more likely to engage when they feel they have a personal stake in policy proposals. For instance, a homeowner will be more concerned with changes to interest rates than a person who does not possess their own home. Second, individuals are more likely to become aware of, and engage with, political issues if they traverse settings in which concerns with social issues are shared with others. So, for instance, a settled homeowner is more likely to become involved in local and community political action and a parent more likely to be recruited into action over education [85]. While the life cycle effect has often been accompanied by the claim that young people are choosing to delay the transition to adulthood, it would be more accurate to understand these difficulties as arising from exogenous socioeconomic changes which young people are required to comply with [86].

The inequality which neoliberal policies have engendered also contributes to decreasing levels of young people's political engagement. Material inequality is particularly pronounced for young people and the resulting economic stratification forms a barrier to participation for some of those young people. Inequality reduces political participation for those who are less affluent amongst all age cohorts. Societies which have large disparities of wealth create political environments in which very rich individuals tend to dominate at the expense of those with lower incomes [87,88]. Indeed, contemporary working-class British youth are less interested in political affairs, have less confidence in their own political knowledge, are more critical of the value of elections and offer less support to democracy than their middle-class counterparts [8]. Inequality reduces political participation amongst the less wealthy because they have less access to resources or networks which facilitate or encourage engagement, they hold less influence over the direction of politics relative to those who are wealthier and they are more likely to suffer the consequences of unequal societies (such as poor health) [89]. Not only do neoliberal policies create inequality which leads to declining levels of participation, the move to replace sovereign citizens with sovereign consumers intensifies such inequalities by predicating political influence on economic power. The transition to consumer sovereignty erases the formal equality of citizen sovereignty by introducing the stratifying effect of private capital into democratic principles, which contributes to young people's disenfranchisement.

Worryingly for young people, redistributive policies which would reverse concentrations of wealth and political power are unlikely to appear if political influence is limited to those who will gain little from more egalitarian access to participation.

While thus far we have examined how neoliberal ideas have influenced the material reality of young people which subsequently leads to their scepticism over politics, it is important to understand how the contradictions between their economic conditions and notions of citizenship have influenced the ideas that young people have towards democracy. Under neoliberal hegemony, responsibility for success or failure resides within the individual and it is regarded that any form of dependency could be prevented if the agent had made the correct choice [16]. Moreover, Western societies promote a form of citizenship which should include engagement with institutionalised forms of politics. As we have seen, however, due to the increasingly difficult financial environment which young people are subjected to, they find it hard to be active citizens and have little choice in their predicament. Young people have become increasingly aware of the paradox between the expectations which surround them and the tools available to them to achieve these expectations [16,42]. Indeed, over a quarter of young people in the UK do not feel in control of their lives, a third believe that their standards of living will be worse than their parents and over 40 percent are sceptical about their ability to gain secure employment and home ownership [90].

This escalates the tension between young people and electoral politics as the former are condemned for not participating nor contributing to positive social outcomes, while experiencing neglect from their representatives and a reduction in opportunities which galvanise political engagement. The reflexivity available to young people in post-industrial societies has often been overemphasised at the expense of understanding the limits to which young people can act freely. As Furlong and Cartmel explain, “although the collective foundations of social life have become more obscure, they continue to provide powerful frameworks which constrain young people’s experiences and life chances” [59] (p. 138). While young people may be adopting new patterns of political behaviour, the claim that they are making this choice free from coercion neglects to consider the changes in socioeconomic conditions due to neoliberal restructuring which restrict or remove the options available to them.

The shifts in the socioeconomic conditions within neoliberal societies and the resulting inequalities have created barriers to young people’s political participation. Inequality has an adverse influence on the political participation of those who are in the lower wage brackets amongst all age cohorts. Young people are disproportionately represented in lower income groups due to life cycle effects and governmental decisions about budget allocations. On the one hand, young people’s exposure to spending cuts is partially the result of their low electoral turnout and of the behaviour of politicians who rationally target resources at those who will provide their parties with votes and political power. On the other hand, the removal of state support from contemporary youth and a transfer of such support to older generations undermines the formal equality of politics. It essentially disenfranchises young people by increasing their disadvantage compared to their older contemporaries. So, while young people are disadvantaged compared to the older generations in contemporary society, they are also facing more difficult circumstances than their older contemporaries were confronted with when they themselves were young and beginning adulthood—current older generations had previously received state support and had easier access to markers of adulthood when in their youth. As we can see, the material situation that neoliberalism creates effectively discourages some young people from participating. It is also possible, however, to see how the paradox between the normative and moral judgements which neoliberalism encourages about individual failure and the increased likelihood of an individual failing because of neoliberal economic policy encourages declining participation. This opens young people to question the value of their role as citizens or the necessity of engaging with politics. Indeed, it may be further evidence of the inter-connectedness of neoliberal rationalisation and the effects of neoliberal-influenced socioeconomic changes on rates of young people’s political engagement.

7. Conclusions

It would seem that neoliberalism has a particularly strong impact on young people's political behaviour and why many of them seem to feel estranged from formal electoral politics. We have sought to establish how this occurs through various and different facets of neoliberalism. The remoulding of democracy to make it compatible with neoliberalism, the subsequent change that neoliberal logic imposed on political practice, and the inequality arising from neoliberal economic policy each have demonstrable negative outcomes on the relationship between young people and institutional political engagement. Furthermore, it would be mistaken to try and understand the effects of each component we have discussed in isolation; it is only through their interdependency that we can understand how each influences youth political participation. The neoliberal critique of democracy and its prominence in mainstream consciousness have been an important element in creating dissatisfaction with contemporary politics; however, the reductions in state support and deepening inequality for young people is also a significant driver of this scepticism. Moreover, their precarious material reality combined with the dominant neoliberal value judgements over failure and avoiding dependency provide contradictory experiences of citizenship for young people. If we are to understand how neoliberalism influences young people's patterns of institutional political participation, we must attempt to understand how neoliberalism rationalises individuals into certain patterns of thought, how neoliberal values modify democracy, and how socioeconomic changes arising from neoliberalism mediate access to political participation. While there are other competing claims in understanding young people's increasing rejection of electoral politics, we have presented important reasons to suggest that neoliberalism should be included in this discussion.

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