

A disconnected political class, poor communication from politicians, and inadequate political education continue to put young people off politics

By Democratic Audit UK

*One of the defining democratic challenges of our time is the detachment of young people from the political process. **Martin Price**, who manages Warwick University's youth political engagement project MyPlace, who here presents a video in which young people express their thoughts on the problem, argues that a disconnected political class, the inadequate communication of politicians, and below-par political education are all at fault.*



Credit: *The People Speak!* CC BY 2.0

Evidence from the [MYPLACE project](#) (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) suggests that interest in politics, political attitudes and behaviour varies according to dimensions such as locality, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and age. In other words, political interest and engagement links closely to a young person's economic, social and cultural capital. This sets significant challenges for policy makers and suggests the need for a differentiated policy approach that takes account of social structural inequality and diversity.

If the good news is that, on the whole, young people have a fairly substantial interest in politics and political issues, the bad news is that this does not translate into comparable levels of engagement with formal politics and the political system. The most important reasons to emerge from the research to date are low levels of trust and high levels of cynicism in most of the MYPLACE countries towards politics, politicians and the political system. While there is general support for democracy as a system, many young people seem to feel that it is not working well for them. A significant number believe that politicians are corrupt, and there is an overriding feeling that politicians are not interested in young people 'like them'.

"Not My Place" is a short film that draws on the MYPLACE research data and explores some of the key findings on political participation with a group of young people who are active and engaged in local political issues and youth democracy. Further comment and insight is provided by elected politicians and practitioners. Through the film, we hope to pull out some of the policy implications of the findings through the reflections of young people and policy makers, and also to suggest some constructive ways forward to address the challenges that the findings present.

While the interviews in the film do not, of themselves, constitute robust or nationally representative research evidence, the film does build on the substantial body of work from the MYPLACE project. MYPLACE has used a combination of survey, interview and ethnographic research instruments to not only measure young people's participation, but also to capture and explore the meanings they attach to it.

The young people in the film are drawn from a local youth council and from a particularly successful service users' forum. They are certainly not 'apathetic', having engaged successfully with local government and youth democracy, and it is this that makes them a valuable group with whom to explore the MYPLACE finding that young people are not disengaged and apathetic, but have a specific disaffection with formal politics and political institutions. Their messages can be taken from the film itself, but it was reassuring that the sentiments and reactions on show were very much in line with the findings of the main research project.

What, then, are the key points to take away from the film? Viewers are, of course, encouraged to draw their own conclusions. However, I would suggest that the key messages are threefold: representation, communication and education.

Representation

From the UK research in MYPLACE, carried out in Coventry and Nuneaton, and again throughout the film, there is a very strong sense that young people feel that politics, which they almost universally associate with Westminster institutions, is something that is done by people who do not understand, or care about, their lives. This theme actually comes out of the MYPLACE research across Europe, with many young people feeling that politics is controlled by the rich. However, respondents in the UK were more likely to talk about this disconnect in terms of class. This is something that the film respondents often raised, with the public school system being seen as inextricably linked with the formation of a political class.

Communication

It is clear, both from MYPLACE and the film, that young people do not feel that politicians communicate well with them. Interestingly, this concern is shared by the politicians themselves. From the young respondent's point of view, the language used in politics is often seen as confusing, but there is also a clear sense that politicians simply don't talk about the issues that are of most concern to young people. For their part, many of the politicians themselves feel that it is hard to reach *any* voters directly, and that this is perhaps doubly true for younger voters.

The growing importance of social media, which politicians are often not comfortable using, and the sense that the news media act as a barrier to direct communication are key issues. It could however be suggested that with more support and guidance, social media could offer a partial answer to the problem of media-controlled communication with voters. This is something we have alluded to in *Not My Place*, and is perhaps worthy of further investigation. Above all, the clear message to politicians was simple: Listen. Whether it be on the doorstep or through social media, young people want to be listened to, not broadcast at.

Education

Education is the topic that was most often raised among the young people we interviewed for the film. Each of them felt that they had received inadequate education in politics and government. In many cases this was cited as the primary reason for not voting. A clear impression emerged that the young people feel the importance of voting, but that the weight of the decision leaves many of them feeling that they lack the information and education to make it. It is important here to be clear about the type of education being asked for – this was not simply about the logistics of registering and casting a vote, but more deeply about where to find information about the issues, and how to interpret that information in order to make an informed choice at the ballot box.

The notable absence from the dialogue in the film was that of the electoral registration process and electronic voting. The implication is that it is not the capacity to register to vote and to cast a vote that is lacking. Rather it is the inspiration to vote, and the social capital needed to make a truly informed choice. This is not to suggest that modernising of the electoral system is a bad thing, but is a note of caution that there are, perhaps, bigger issues that need to be addressed. There is even a danger that making voting too easy could mask a wider lack of

engagement. There are no quick fixes for any of this, but I think there are perhaps lessons to be taken from the Scottish Independence referendum, that young people (and in reality, older people too) can and will go out and vote in large numbers when there is something to vote for that they understand, and a sense that their vote really counts.

I hope you find watching the film as interesting as I found making it. Any comments or suggestions are always welcome.

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