



# **The rise of gerontocracy?**

## **Addressing the intergenerational democratic deficit**

**Dr Craig Berry**

**on behalf of the Intergenerational Foundation**

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Intergenerational Foundation, [www.if.org.uk](http://www.if.org.uk), charity no: 1142 230

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# Foreword

Debate about the implications of the ageing character of our society has so far been directed towards economic issues, including imbalances in wealth and economic opportunities across the generations. It is now time for us to start considering the civic implications of inequalities arising from Britain's ageing society.

The analysis set out in this paper by Dr Craig Berry shows that, if current trends continue, older cohorts may well come to exercise a disproportionate influence on the democratic process in future decades. We could be witnessing a fundamental reconfiguration of the electorate, which is putting more power into the hands of older people and reducing that which younger cohorts possess.

Dr Berry's paper illustrates that the life-stages of voters matter more and more in our democracy. Understanding the significance and nature of age-based inequalities should form an important part of the agenda of those committed to the cause of reforming our political system. An electorate which includes a growing number of older people generates new imbalances in terms of voter turnout, voter registration, party support and the social and generational composition of the legislature. The coalition government's proposed changes to the system of voter registration, for instance, require particularly careful scrutiny if they are to avoid making generational inequalities worse.

The paper also points to a number of signs that young people themselves are acutely aware of their growing disenfranchisement, and are adopting various attitudes and behaviours in response to it. Policy-makers, political parties and civil society organisations need to take notice of the signs that young people feel alienated and distant from political processes. Many are turned off both by the ways in which our political life is conducted, and by a pervasive sense of powerlessness in relation to the issues that are affecting their own economic and social prospects. This sense of alienation has arguably deepened during the current economic downturn, which is having an enormous impact upon the fortunes and life-chances of many young people.

The research contained in this paper ought to kick-start a debate about the political, as well as economic, implications of imbalances between the generations. It also points to the urgency, and difficulty, of the challenge this issue poses for politicians and political parties. Looking at democracy through a generational lens undoubtedly has its limitations, since this

is only one of the dimensions of 'identity' that affects our lives as citizens. And we should remember the many bonds that bring us together across the age divide.

But ignoring the ever more apparent inequalities associated with demographic change is no longer a viable option. We need increasingly to grasp and to address the reasons for the alienation of many young people from our political system. This paper suggests that generational inequality represents one of the most important of these reasons.

**Professor Michael Kenny, Queen Mary University of London**

# Executive summary

The ageing of the electorate means that there is emerging an intergenerational democratic deficit whereby young cohorts are marginalised within the democratic process – this obviously has negative implications for young people, but also the legitimacy of representative democracy more generally. While it may be premature or sensationalist to proclaim the rise of a ‘gerontocracy’, it is clear that today’s young people have become relatively disenfranchised, both by the ageing of the electorate and wider features of the democratic process that appear to favour older cohorts.

Unless the political marginalisation of young people abates, we are in danger of creating ‘generation D’, a succession of disenfranchised cohorts with little say in how their society is governed. Today’s young people (‘generation Y’ or ‘the jilted generation’) are suffering a democratic deficit, but we can expect this trend to accelerate in coming decades. The paper assesses the extent of the democratic deficit experienced by younger cohorts by calculating the political power of voters at different life-stages, now and in the future. However, it will also examine the democratic process to detail the means by which young people are relatively excluded from mainstream politics more generally, arguing that even if cohort sizes were equal, a democratic deficit would result from the inability of the UK political system to mobilise and genuinely respond to young people’s perspectives.

The first section, on democracy and intergenerational equity, considers both the role of democracy in questions around intergenerational equity, and also the relationship between generational change and democracy. It argues that demographic change matters to democracy, more than has so far been acknowledged, and that life-stage and generational identity matter to political behaviour such as voting. The disenfranchisement of younger cohorts could therefore have deleterious consequences for the legitimacy of representative democracy. This section also considers the status of future generations within democracy, that is, citizens not yet born. Despite the rhetorical commitment to protecting future generations often used by governments to justify policy decisions, the state appears to have increased its capacity and willingness to burden citizens not yet alive – perhaps inevitable given the greater numbers of people in the electorate towards the end of their life. The nature and extent of our obligations to future generations will be tested by population ageing.

The second section details the specific features of the democratic deficit, initially by analysing the ‘potential’ and ‘actual’ voting power of different age cohorts of voters. Clearly, the ageing of the electorate has already begun. At the 2010 general election, 40-somethings

were dominant at the ballot box. The youngest voters, and voters in their early-30s, were particularly disadvantaged. There were more potential voters aged 50, 51, 52 or 63 than any single age between 31 and 36, more potential voters aged 62 than any single age between 32 and 35, and more potential voters aged 50, 51 or 63 than aged 18. The potential voting power of people approaching retirement in 2010, whose life chances will be affected by electoral outcomes to a far lesser extent than younger voters, is therefore highly significant.

By 2021, 50-something potential voters will be dominant. There will be only 708,000 18 year-old potential voters, and 702,000 19 year-old potential voters (compared to a single-year age cohort average size of 902,000 for 50-somethings) – single-year cohort sizes across the age distribution will not drop below this level until age 65. Thirty years later, in 2051, there will be a particularly powerful set of cohorts aged around 60. The average single-year cohort size for people aged 58-62 will be 937,000. There will be only 825,000 18 year-old voters, and no smaller cohort up to age 68.

Due to increasing survival rates, and the ageing of the members of the large baby booms of the immediate post-war era, the overriding trend is towards an older electorate, with greater concentrations of potential voting power among people in their 50s and 60s. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, or more accurately, one we are yet to fully experience. The median potential voter was 46 in 2010. In 2021 this will rise to 47. The median potential voter will be aged 50 by 2041, and 51 in 2051. The median potential voter in 1981 was already aged 46; this fell to 44 in 1991, before rising to 45 in 2001.

Taking voter turnout rates into account shows that the democratic process was even more skewed towards older cohorts. The median actual voter was aged 49 in 2010, three years older than the median potential voter. The median actual voter will be 52 by 2021, rising to 54 by 2051.

At the 2010 general election, 40-somethings were largely successful into converting their potential voting power into actual power. But power was more skewed to people in their late rather than early-40s, and older cohorts had closed the gap significantly. Excluding 40-somethings, there were more actual voters aged 63 than any other age. Given their lower propensity to vote, 18 year-olds exercised less actual voting power at the 2010 general election than 73 year-olds. 45 year-olds exercised 84 per cent more actual voting power than 18-year olds, and 50 year-olds exercised 62 per cent more.

Furthermore, the power of older cohorts in the democratic process over the next few decades will become formidable. In 2021, 18-year olds will exercise less actual voting power than 79 year-olds. 40 year-olds will exercise 83 per cent more power than 18 year-olds, and for 50 year-olds it will be 97 per cent more. Similarly, 55 year-olds will exercise more than

double (115 per cent) more power than 18 year-olds, and 60 year-olds will exercise 95 per cent more. In 2031, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than 84 year-olds. They will be particularly disadvantaged in comparison to, for example, 40 year-olds and 45 year-olds, who will exercise 73 per cent and 71 per cent more power respectively. 65 year-olds will exercise 73 per cent more voting power than 18 year-olds, and even 70 year-olds will exercise 51 per cent more. In 2041, people aged both 50 and 55 will exercise 84 per cent more actual power than 18 year-olds, and people aged 60 will exercise 62 per cent more. Even voters in their early-70s will exercise significantly more power than 18 year-olds, that is, 56 per cent. By 2051, if turnout rates persist, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than a typical single-year cohort in their late-80s. 40 year-olds will exercise 83 per cent more power than 18 year-olds, and 50 year-olds will exercise 62 per cent more. For 60 year-olds the figure will be even larger, that is, 92 per cent.

There are interesting results concerning the influence of geography on the intergenerational democratic deficit. Combining population data disaggregated by parliamentary constituency, and results from the Voter Power Index, suggests that constituencies with the highest concentration of young cohorts are likely to hold greater sway at elections than, for instance, constituencies with the highest concentration of 50-somethings. However, this gap does not pertain when seats with a high proportion of young people and seats with a high proportion of 60-somethings. Furthermore, the apparent bias of current electoral system in favour of young people is rendered negligible or even non-existent by turnout rates, and will in any case lessen in future elections.

The second section also discusses wider features of the democratic process in detailing young people's disenfranchisement. For instance, young people are far less likely to be registered to vote – registration rates are 55 per cent for people aged 18-24, but 90 per cent for people aged 55-64, and 94 per cent for people aged 65 or over. Moves towards individual voter registration will exacerbate this problem. Young people are cynical about the formal political system, and favour forms of political participation which are not rewarded within the democratic process. In particular, the nature, internal organisation and privileged role of political parties within the democratic process serves to minimise the possibility of young people's perspectives being heard.

The third section of the paper considers a series of possible solutions to the intergenerational democratic deficit. It would of course be impossible, on the basis of the analysis here, to make strong recommendations for overcoming the intergenerational democratic deficit. The paper argues, however, that change is required across six key areas: the composition of the electorate; the voting process; encouraging participation; democratic institutions; wider reforms to governance procedures; and the protection owed to future

citizens. Potential changes within each category range from relatively conservative, piecemeal interventions to radical transformations in democratic practice. For instance, in relation to the electorate, a conservative measure would be to lower the voting age to 16, and a more radical measure would be to ensure a proportionate age distribution within each parliamentary constituency. In relation to democratic institutions, measures could range from establish forums of young people with advisory status in legislatures, to quotas of young people with voting power within legislatures, and to protect future citizens measures could range from a requirement to calculate the impact of policy decisions on future generations, to legal limits on the burden that governments can place on future citizens. The most promising ideas for addressing the intergenerational democratic deficit, as presented in this paper, include:

- ***Lowering the voting age to 16.*** The impact of this measure on the intergenerational democratic deficit would be fairly limited in aggregate terms, given the small 16 and 17 year-old cohort sizes. However, 16 and 17 year-olds are themselves unenfranchised by the current electoral system, and therefore there is an overwhelming case for votes at 16 based on human rights alone.
- ***Political training.*** Young people favour forms of participation that are not rewarded by the formal democratic process; for instance, even young people already active in politics are cynical about involvement in political parties. Other sources of training are therefore required, enabling the political activities undertaken by young people to be more impactful upon formal politics, and encouraging young activists to demonstrate leadership in encouraging more young people to get involved in politics.
- ***Forums of young people in legislatures and/or designated seats for young people in legislatures.*** For understandable (albeit regrettable) reasons, young people are less likely to be adequately represented within legislatures such as the House of Commons. Forums of young people co-opted into an advisory role would ensure that their perspective is heard within the democratic process. More radically, a small number of seats (or a single seat) could be elected only by voters under a certain age – the legislative power of members elected by this method would be negligible, but they would become the voice of young people within the democratic process. A similar mechanism could be established for the ‘oldest old’ to minimise the perception of young people being unfairly privileged.
- ***Greater support for young election candidates.*** The case for all-young people shortlists is not as clear-cut as the case for all-women shortlists. Yet even if political parties do not guarantee selection for young potential candidates, they could: guarantee that a certain number of young people are shortlisted for candidacy;



guarantee at least one young candidate in multi-member constituencies; or, ensure young people are included and highly placed within list-based electoral systems.

- ***Stronger rules ensuring that the impacts of policy decisions on young people are calculated.*** The costs and benefits of all major policy and expenditure decisions – and crucially, decisions with cross-governmental implications such as budgets and spending reviews – for all age cohorts over their lifecourse should be independently assessed. Young cohorts and older cohorts should not be combined in a single age ‘equality strand’. There may be an enhanced role for the Office for Budget Responsibility in this regard, or more radically, an ombudsman for young people.
- ***An independent commission for future generations.*** Strict limits on the burdens that current citizens may place on citizens not yet alive may not be realisable in practice. However, a permanent commission could be established, with legal authority independent of government, to adjudicate on the likely future impacts. The commission would be able to alter or reverse government decisions.

# Introduction

The political power of older cohorts risks the relative disenfranchisement of young people. An emerging 'intergenerational democratic deficit', furthermore, puts the legitimacy of the democratic process in jeopardy. Politicians' deference to the 'grey vote' has become a truism of contemporary politics; it refers principally to the fact that older people are more likely to vote, and are therefore more important to the electioneering of political parties. This is certainly the case, but this does not mean that the intergenerational democratic deficit, because it apparently derives from young people's apathetic nature, is somehow tolerable. That we have bred a generation unwilling to participate in the democratic process should be a major cause of concern, whatever the cause. Moreover, the grey vote cliché is based not only on the higher turnout of older voters, but also the open secret of demographic change: simply, the electorate has aged rapidly in recent years, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Worryingly, however, we have barely even begun to consider what the implications of population ageing will be for the foundations and operation of democracy.

The intergenerational democratic deficit does not derive simply from the fact that there are more voters, both potential and actual, among older cohorts, nor even that the wider democratic system serves to marginalise the perspective of young people. These circumstances only matters if we can establish that age matters. Crucially, therefore, recent analysis of political changes associated with the baby boomers exposes two key realities of democratic life and intergenerational relations: firstly, an individual's life-stage has a crucial, albeit not decisive, impact on their political interests and behaviour. And secondly, larger age-based cohorts have a more significant impact on culture, institutions and ultimately policy than smaller cohorts. Throughout its relatively recent history, representative democracy has operated within the context of a pyramid-shaped age distribution across the population. The people affected for longest by the outcomes of the democratic process had, at least in theory, the largest influence at the ballot box. How to maintain the legitimacy of democracy in an ageing society is a question that must urgently be addressed.

This paper argues that, unless the political marginalisation of young people abates, we are in danger of creating 'generation D', a succession of disenfranchised cohorts with little say in how their society is governed.<sup>1</sup> Today's young people ('generation Y' or 'the jilted generation') are suffering a democratic deficit, but we can expect this trend to accelerate in

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<sup>1</sup> Generation Y is usually assumed to refer to people born between 1981 and 2000, that is, today's young people. Because the youngest age cohort included in this paper's quantitative analysis will be aged 18 in 2051, we can refer to generation D (for disenfranchised) as individuals born between 2001 and 2033.

coming decades. The paper assesses the extent of the democratic deficit experienced by younger cohorts by calculating the political power of voters at different life-stages, now and in the future. However, it will also examine the democratic process to detail the means by which young people are relatively excluded from mainstream politics more generally, arguing that even if cohort sizes were equal, a democratic deficit would result from the inability of the UK political system to mobilise and genuinely respond to young people's perspectives.

The first section explores the foundations of the paper's analysis. It considers both the role of democracy in questions around intergenerational equity, and also the relationship between generational change and democracy. It argues that demographic change matters to democracy, more than has so far been acknowledged, and that life-stage and generational identity matter to political behaviour such as voting. The disenfranchisement of younger cohorts could therefore have deleterious consequences for the legitimacy of representative democracy. This section also considers the status of future generations within democracy, that is, citizens not yet born. The ability and willingness of democratically elected governments to burden future citizens financially, therefore restricting their democratic freedoms, appears to have increased dramatically in recent years.

The second section details the specific features of the democratic deficit. It begins by analysing the 'potential' voting power of different age cohorts of voters, from 1981 to 2051. The ageing of the electorate is evident, with the youngest voters becoming significantly disadvantaged. But the disenfranchisement of young voters is even more glaring in terms of the 'actual' electorate, that is, the citizens that actually exercise their right to vote. While it is plausible, although I argue unfair, to respond that young people are *choosing* not to vote, it is nevertheless the case that governments will continue to be elected predominantly by older voters, and that the legitimacy of the democratic process is undermined as a result.

The second section also discusses wider features of the democratic process in detailing young people's disenfranchisement, such as low registration rates among young people, the divergence in the kind of political behaviour favoured by young people and the forms of political participation rewarded with voting power, and the nature and role of political parties. The influence of geography is also discussed in this section, by disaggregating the electorate into parliamentary constituencies. Although it appears that the current electoral system actually favours young people, this bias is rendered negligible by low turnout rates, and will in any case dissipate in future elections.

The third section considers possible 'solutions' to the disenfranchisement of young people, that is, ways in which the electoral process and wider features of contemporary may be reformed to re-balance political power back towards those most likely to be affected by

decisions made by democratic institutions. Options are grouped into six categories representing aspects of democratic life in the UK: the composition of the electorate; the voting process; encouraging participation; democratic institutions; wider reforms to governance procedures; and the protection owed to future citizens. The paper argues that change is required across every category if the intergenerational democratic deficit is to be overcome, but potential changes within each category range from relatively conservative, piecemeal interventions to radical transformations in democratic practice.

As indicated above, much of the paper is based on primary, quantitative research. The main sources used for this analysis were:

- Population estimates (disaggregated by age and parliamentary constituency) published by the Office for National Statistics, including historical and projected data
- Voter turnout data published in Ipsos MORI's *How Britain Voted* series
- The Voter Power Index compiled by the New Economics Foundation
- Scott Davidson's research for Age UK on 'the grey vote' within constituencies.

The paper also involves secondary analysis based on a review of relevant literature. Much of the existing literature draws upon qualitative and quantitative studies of young people in the democratic system, such as the British Election Survey, small-scale studies undertaken by Matt Henn and Nick Foard, and Janine Dermody et al, a large-scale internet survey on political behaviour undertaken by Paul Whiteley, and my own research into the Labour Party's youth sections. Findings from research undertaken by the Electoral Commission, particularly on voter registration, have also been incorporated. For the most part, the analysis draws upon evidence from the UK, but evidence on young people in other countries is included where appropriate. The discussion of possible solutions is based primarily on original political and policy analysis, but also uses the data sources listed above to assess the impact of lowering the voting age, and where appropriate draws upon the existing literature on some of the ideas discussed.

# 1. Democracy and intergenerational equity

At the most basic level democracy means 'one person, one vote'. Each citizen has as much right as everybody else to input into the processes through which society is governed, and as such democracy is the ultimate expression of political equality.

We know, however, that this principle is refracted in practice by innumerable factors related to the cultural, economic and institutional context within which any system of democracy is established. The central question in this regard is whether or not citizens' inputs are made directly, or via the election of representatives. As such, virtually all democracies are today representative democracies. And within the parameters of representative democracy, myriad complexities remain, such as:

- the nature and role of political parties;
- the process for electing representatives, including how the electorate is defined and which electoral system is adopted;
- the nature and role of the media, through which the electorate obtains information about the democratic process; and
- the nature and functions of the institutions, both legislative and executive, into which representatives are elected;
- the levels of governance, both domestic and international, at which political decisions are made; and
- the separation of powers between elected representatives and other constitutional bodies, such as the monarchy, the judiciary and the civil service.

Population ageing presents a challenge to almost every social and economic practice, nowhere more so than countries like the UK. What is rarely considered, however, is the impact that ageing may be having on the democratic process. We assume that democracy, in its ideal form, is blind to demographic characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity – although there are many exceptions to this in current practice – but given the scale of population ageing, this may no longer be a viable position. Clearly, ageing impacts how many of the attendant features of representative democracy operate in practice. It may be, moreover, that even the basic principle of 'one person, one vote' is challenged when the individual voters in question are more likely to be older than at any other point in the modern history of democracy.

Perhaps the central objection to the notion that democratic mechanisms should take into account the relative size of age cohorts within the electorate, is that cohorts do not vote as

generational blocs, or based solely on their age. While it may be possible to show that people in a single social class, gender, ethnicity or even locality tend to favour policies that promote their interests, so the argument goes, this is not the case with age. Mounting evidence suggests, however, that age does impact upon political preferences. Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel's research based on the British Election Survey 2009/10 demonstrates some key differences in how different generations conceive of the priorities for policy-makers. When asked to list what they think are the three most important political issues, around three-quarters of all age groups surveyed included 'the economy', the most popular answer for every age group. However, while 57 per cent of female members of 'generation Y', and 49 per cent of male members, also listed 'unemployment', only a third of women and a quarter of men in 'the silent generation', and 40 per cent of women and a third of men among 'baby boomers' identified this issue. Both the silent generation and baby boomers were more likely to identify 'health care' as a priority rather than unemployment; moreover, men in the silent generation were also significantly more likely to list 'immigration', and about as likely to list 'the war in Afghanistan'.<sup>2</sup> Furlong and Cartmel therefore point to a tendency for selfishness on the part of generations, including today's young people, and conclude that generational differences in political priorities partly justify 'young people's claim that older people tend to marginalise their core concerns'.<sup>3</sup>

In more general terms, recent analyses of intergenerational conflict by Ed Howker and Shiv Malik, in *Jilted Generation*, and current government minister David Willets, in *The Pinch*, demonstrate the close correlation – most apparent in the 1980s and 1990s – between the relative size of age cohorts and political decisions which favour the largest cohorts. While Howker and Malik refer to the ideological orientation of the baby boomers in particular, which to some extent permitted the pursuit of a selfish agenda, Willets presents such intergenerational conflict as an endemic feature of social and political life.<sup>4</sup> That generations can act, more or less coherently, to bring about change in social structures was a proposition first put forward by Karl Mannheim in 1923. Mannheim, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, believed that generational change was one of the main driving forces of

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<sup>2</sup> In Furlong and Cartmel's study, the silent generation are those born between 1925 and 1945, baby boomers are those born between 1946 and 1964, generation X are those born between 1965 and 1980, and generation Y are those born between 1981 and 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Furlong, Andy & Cartmel, Fred (2012) 'Social change and political engagement among young people: Generation and the 2009/10 British Election Survey' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 13-28.

<sup>4</sup> Howker, Ed & Malik, Shiv (2010) *Jilted Generation: How Britain Has Bankrupted Its Youth* (London: Icon); Willets, David (2010) *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Stole Their Children's Future* (London: Atlantic).

political change. Strangely, this key precept of the discipline of sociology seems to have been largely overlooked by the study of democracy by political scientists.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean we should assume that the voting patterns of members of generations or age cohorts are perfectly aligned. Rather, it means we should recognise that people at the same life-stage ‘share formative experiences and develop common perspectives’ – and that political parties use this knowledge in forming electoral strategy.<sup>6</sup> People of the same generation may well vote for different political parties, and their political preferences may change over time, but generally speaking generational perspectives will influence the broad political agenda within which all parties seek to garner support – this assumption is fundamental to the analysis of both Willets, and Howker and Malik. In crude terms: left and right still matter, but what left and right mean differs between generations. Furthermore, it is not difficult to accept that, at the individual level, a person’s stage of life and generational membership has an impact upon how and whether they engage with the democratic process. They act, politically, on the basis of their generation. People at the same life-stage, or of the same generation, may interpret their interests in an entirely different way – although the evidence suggests they do not – but this does not mean that *perceptions* of their generational interests are not crucial to their political behaviour. The assumption underpinning this paper’s analysis of the electorate and democratic process, therefore, is that if voters are prone to generational selfishness, then significant discrepancies in the political power of different cohorts – represented in both cohort size and actual contributions to the democratic process – are harmful to democracy.

By definition, young people are more affected by the outcomes of the democratic process than other cohorts. Most obviously, their youth means that by and large they will live with the consequences of political decisions for longer. The nature of public policy, especially on issues that impact directly on intergenerational fairness such as the pensions system and infrastructure investment, is such that even where policy decisions are ostensibly ‘reversed’, the impact of the initial decision cannot be fully eliminated. Furthermore, young people are at a crucial life-stage – undertaking education and training, embarking on careers, forming families – where the impact of political decisions will have a decisive and cumulative effect on their socio-economic circumstances and life chances across their lifecourses. This is not to discount the impact of decisions on older cohorts, nor the importance of other life-stages, but nevertheless it remains that young people occupy a unique status within the democratic process. Indeed, for most of its history, representative democracy has functioned within a

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<sup>5</sup> Mannheim, Karl (1952; orig. 1923) ‘The problem of generations’ in Mannheim, Karl (ed.) *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

<sup>6</sup> Furlong & Cartmel (2012) ‘Social change...’

pyramid-shaped age distribution across the population. While 'one person, one vote' is the basic principle of democracy, that young people – the age group most likely to be affected by the outcomes of the democratic process for the longest period of time – have been more populous than other age groups may in fact be one of the unwritten foundations of modern democracy. The kind of intergenerational conflict documented by Willets, and Howker and Malik, may be an early indication that an ageing society is unravelling the legitimacy of the democratic process. It is necessary to consider therefore whether the practice of democracy needs to evolve in tune with demographic change.

It is perhaps because young people have traditionally been the most populous cohorts that representative democracies have been reluctant to grant them full status as citizens. Voting age in the UK did not fall to 18, from 21, until 1969. Suffrage for women, granted in 1918, did not apply to anybody aged under 30, although the voting age was equalised, at 21, ten years later. The age at which people can become a Member of Parliament was lowered to 18, from 21, in only 2006. There is, it seems, a longstanding paternalistic attitude towards the political representation of young people. In 2011, public health minister Anne Milton advised that people under 45 should not enter politics. The comment gained attention because the Prime Minister was, at the time, aged 44 – but it perhaps speaks more widely to the perception that the possession of life experience based solely on age matters more than each individual's right to contribute to the democratic perspective based on their own judgement and values.<sup>7</sup> As Furlong and Cartmel argue:

when issues emerge that have a core relevance for young people, they are often tackled from a paternalistic and condescending 'we know what's best for you' perspective or are addressed in ways that prioritise the interests of older generations. Hence, the debate about student finance was framed from an older tax payer, rather than from a contemporary consumer, perspective; discussion of the national debt crisis rarely addresses the immediate impact of reducing public spending on youth jobs or training; while unemployment policy tends to focus not so much on creating opportunities, but on tackling a perceived skill deficit and motivating young people who are presented as feckless and even as 'inadequate citizens'.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in 2009, the Ministry of Justice published a 'young people's guide' to the green paper on the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities planned by the previous government. In the

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<sup>7</sup> Trigg, Nick (2011) 'Under-45s should not enter politics, minister says', *BBC News*, 12 April 2011, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-13053341](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-13053341).

<sup>8</sup> Furlong & Cartmel (2012) 'Social change...', citing Harris, Anita et al (2010) 'Beyond apathetic and activist youth: "ordinary" young people and forms of political participation' in *Young* 18(1), pp. 9-32.



opinion of academics Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge, 'its focus was instructive, prioritising young people's responsibilities ahead of rights, with scant acknowledgement of their political citizenship'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the document endorses the view that, while children and young people have the right to be heard in decisions that may affect them, their opinions must be given 'due weight' in accordance with their age and maturity.<sup>10</sup>

The experience argument is a strong one, but ultimately the perspective of young people within the democratic process is inimitable. Older cohorts will, of course, have been young once – but in almost all cases, in very different conditions from contemporary young people. That older people, in Milton's words, 'sort of know stuff', is therefore not a valid justification for the partial exclusion, whether formally or informally, of young people from the democratic process.

As noted above, the literature on intergenerational conflict suggested that the state has in the last three decades placed undue financial burdens on today's young people; we can speculate that this may be a direct result of the disenfranchisement documented here. Just as important for the future of democracy may be the position of future generations of voters – both children, and people not yet alive. The state's ability and willingness to burden future generations of voters (that is, *the unenfranchised*) appears to have increased dramatically in recent years. Public sector financing arrangements such as the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) ensure that current public services are delivered at the expense of future generations, and a financial crisis which occurred during the stewardship of the UK's second (and final) baby boomer Prime Minister, resulted in enormous increases in government borrowing.<sup>11</sup> Unlike regular borrowing, PFI debts are held off the public sector balance-sheet – but both ensure that future voters, and taxpayers, are funding benefits enjoyed by today's voters, both young and old.

The coalition government's austerity agenda has, of course, been explicitly prefaced by the need to protect future generations from the burden of public debt.<sup>12</sup> However, in his 2012 Budget, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne proposed the introduction of 100-year or even perpetual government bonds, which by definition would be serviced by future

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<sup>9</sup> Mycock, Andrew & Tonge, Jonathan (2012) 'The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 138-161.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Justice (2009) *Young People's Guide to the Green Paper on Rights and Responsibilities*, available at [dera.ioe.ac.uk/205/1/right-responsibilities-young-people.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/205/1/right-responsibilities-young-people.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> On PFI, see Parker, David (2012) *The Private Finance Initiative and Intergenerational Equity* (The Intergenerational Foundation), available at [www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PFIs-and-Intergenerational-Equity.pdf](http://www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PFIs-and-Intergenerational-Equity.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> HM Treasury (2010) *Spending Review 2010*, available at [cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010\\_completereport.pdf](http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010_completereport.pdf).

generations, in some cases for eternity.<sup>13</sup> It is of course impossible today to assess decisively the democratic status of future citizens, and it would therefore be impossible to recommend reconstituting the democratic process on their behalf. Nevertheless, it is surely inconsistent with democracy that the statecraft of future citizens will be directly constrained, at least to some extent, by decisions taken today. This is not to say that the decisions on public sector finance taken by successive governments in recent decades are without merit and entirely illegitimate. Nor is it possible in this paper to seriously examine the principal justification for burdening future generations, that is, that society tends to become wealthier over time, and therefore these burdens will prove not to be as great as they appear today. Nevertheless, even if this assumption is sound, it is difficult to accept logically that it is sufficient justification for creating the *risk* that current practices will jeopardise the political citizenship of future generations.

There seem to be solid grounds, therefore, for the judgement that as a psephological characteristic, age is not equivalent to other demographic characteristics such as social class, gender, disability, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Although some aspects of the wider democratic system do seek to advantage certain 'minority' groups in this regard, at the level of basic principle, and certainly in terms of the formal voting process, it is deemed correct that democratic mechanisms should be blind to these characteristics. Can differences based on age be treated in the same way? Logically, while there are few, if any, reasons to assume that political relations between people of different genders, ethnic identity, class, etc. will be fundamentally determined by the nature of these differences, age-based differences are probably ineradicable.

Precisely this dilemma confronted renowned philosopher John Rawls in his attempt to construct and justify the social contract underpinning liberal democracies. Rawls imagined that behind a 'veil of ignorance', individuals with no knowledge of themselves, society or their role and status within it, would be enabled and indeed compelled to create a just social order. What he recognised, however, was that even if individuals could be imagined to exist beyond virtually every identifying characteristic, it was impossible to imagine individuals existing outside the passage of time. Related to this is the question of whether the parties to the social contract are all of the individuals alive at a given moment of time, or instead all individuals that have ever lived or that will ever live; in essence, Rawls is grappling with the dilemma of how people of different generations can be expected to co-exist in a just order, and of how people alive today should treat future generations. Rawls' highly unsatisfactory solution was to decree that, behind the veil of ignorance, we are not simply abstract

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<sup>13</sup> Curtis, Polly (2012) 'Budget 2012: will 100-year bonds work?' in *The Guardian*, 14 March 2012, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/reality-check-with-polly-curtis/2012/mar/14/budget-2012-100-year-bonds](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/reality-check-with-polly-curtis/2012/mar/14/budget-2012-100-year-bonds).

individuals, but rather ‘heads of families’. He anticipated that the head of a family would have not only their own generation’s welfare in mind when drafting the social contract, but also those of younger and future generations. Rawls therefore resorted to the paternalistic attitude criticised above: the disenfranchisement of young citizens, and citizens not yet alive, is justified solely by the greater experience of the passage of time of older citizens.<sup>14</sup>

Every individual, at any moment in time, is at a particular life-stage (including those not yet alive). This life-stage influences not only how they choose to make use of their rights as citizens to input into the democratic process, but also the very nature of their citizenship. The third section of this paper will discuss what can be done to ensure that young people, given the unique nature of their status within democracy, are fully included in the democratic process. It would be wrong to assume, of course, that young people are a single bloc of voters who should somehow be simply weighted against other age-based blocs within the democratic process. Similarly, even where they occupy a similar life-stage, young people will perceive of the implications of this life-stage in different ways – as well as, more generally, upholding different values and policy positions. For these reasons, seeking to reconstruct almost a century’s worth of practice of mass democracy on the basis of an intergenerational democratic deficit would be unwise. However, it is vital the relations between and relative power of different generations in the democratic process is studied in greater detail, to enable the evolution of the democratic process in conjunction with demographic change. Strangely, while age-based differences matter far more to democracy, as argued above, than differences based on other demographic characteristics, they appear to have been studied far less. Rectifying this, albeit to a limited extent, is the task of the next section.

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<sup>14</sup> Rawls, John (1999; orig. 1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

## 2. The intergenerational democratic deficit

### The potential power of different age cohorts

As discussed in the previous section, while the principle of one person, one vote is fundamental to democracy, the centrality of our stage of life to the way that we perceive our interests – and therefore what we expect and demand from public authorities – means that there is something profoundly *undemocratic* about the concentration of voting power in a small number of age cohorts.

At the 2010 general election, weight of numbers meant that potential voting power resided with people aged in their 40s, reflecting the baby boom of the 1960s.<sup>15</sup> The median voter was 46 years old, and average single-year cohort size for people aged 40-49 was 920,000, compared to an average single-year cohort size of 673,000 for the electorate in general.<sup>16</sup> In terms of potential voting power, people in their early-20s in 2010 were not that far behind – there was a mini-boom in the early-1990s – with an average single-year cohort size of 862,000, significantly above the overall average. There were fewer voters in their late-20s (average cohort size of 850,000), but people in their early-30s were particularly disadvantaged in comparison to people in their 40s and early-20s (average single-year cohort size of 778,000).

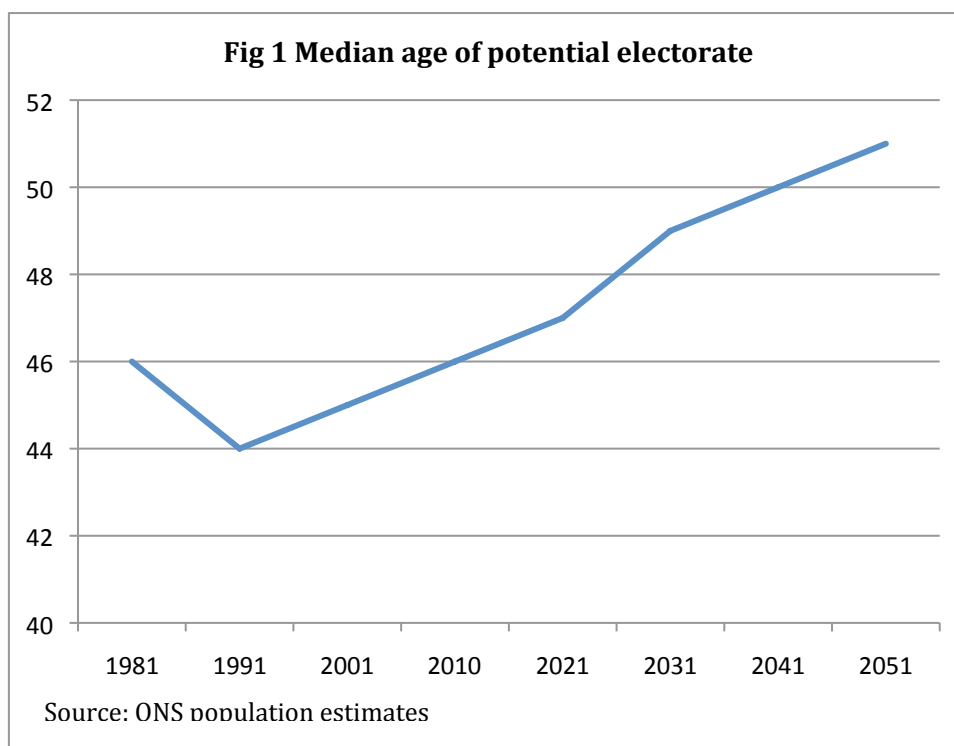
Given that survival rates decline as cohorts age, it is to be expected that people in later life have lower cohort sizes – the average single-year cohort size is negatively affected by the relatively low average cohort sizes for people in their 70s (447,000) and 80s (242,000). Despite this, the impact of earlier baby booms means that many older cohorts retain significant potential voting power. In 2010 there were more voters aged 50, 51, 52 or 63 than any age between 31 and 36, and more voters aged 62 than any aged between 32 and 35. Furthermore, the cohort aged 18 (808,000) was smaller than the cohorts aged 50, 51 and 63. As such, the potential voting power of people approaching retirement in 2010, whose life chances will be affected by electoral outcomes to a far lesser extent than younger voters, remains significant.

And population ageing means that these trends will persist and strengthen. In 2021, the median voter will be a year older than in 2010, 47 years old. Generally speaking, potential

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<sup>15</sup> The 1960s baby boom was not as large as that immediately following the Second World War – but people born in the late-1940s and early-1950s are less likely to have survived to their late-50s and 60s than people born in the 1960s are to have survived into their 40s.

<sup>16</sup> People aged 90 or over are treated as a single cohort. In 2010 there were 476,000 people aged 90 or over, compared to, for instance, 153,000 people aged 89.



voting power will have transferred to people in their 50s (the cohorts that had been in their 40s at the 2010 general election) – they have an average single-year cohort size of 902,000, compared to 728,000 for the electorate in general.<sup>17</sup> This is actually lower than the figure for people in their 30s in 2021 (average cohort size of 939,000) – the early-1990s baby boomers again, buttressed by immigration – but the youngest voters, people in their late-teens and early-20s, will be particularly disadvantaged, with an average cohort size of 735,000 for people aged between 18 and 22. There will be only 708,000 18 year-old and 702,000 19 year-old potential voters; cohort size does not drop below these levels across the age range until age 65.

In 2031, the median voter will have aged a further two years to 49. For the first time, really significant potential voting power will be exercised by people in their 60s, that is, the 50-somethings from a decade before. Potential voters in their early-60s will have an average single-year cohort size of 861,000, compared to an electorate average of 780,000. The most populous cohorts will, however, be in their early-40s and to a lesser extent late-30s. For the first time, there will be more voters aged 90 or over (1,256,000) than in any single-year age cohort.

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the Office for National Statistics does not release projections of single-year cohort sizes for the ages of 85 and above, although projections for five-year cohort groups have been published. This, however, has no impact on the calculation of average single-year cohort size for the electorate in general (although see note 2).

By 2041 the median voter will have reached the age of 50. Cohorts of voters in their early-50s will be particularly powerful, with an average single-year cohort size of 964,000, compared to 830,000 for the electorate in general. Reflecting the immigrant-led baby boom expected over the next few years, however, cohorts in their late-20s (with an average size of 999,000) will have the most potential voting power. The youngest voters will be disadvantaged: there will be only 842,000 18 year-olds – cohort sizes do not drop below this figure until the age of 59.

By 2051 the median voter will be 51. The late-20-somethings of 2041 will carry their potential voting power into their late-30s (average single-year cohort size of 1,032,000, compared to 867,000 for the electorate in general). There will, however, be a particularly powerful set of cohorts aged around 60; people aged between 58 and 62 will have an average single-year cohort size of 937,000. The position of the youngest voters remains poor: there will be only 825,000 18 year-olds, and no smaller cohort size across the age range until the age of 68.

Given more recent and expected baby booms, it is certainly not the case that, in terms of potential voting power, young people will always be significantly disadvantaged compared to older cohorts. There will be elections in upcoming decades when some cohorts of 20-somethings and 30-somethings will represent a significant bloc of potential voters (although this is not the case for the very youngest voters, who will live with the outcomes of elections for the longest). We should be wary of the dominance of any cohort within the democratic process, young or old. However, due to increasing survival rates, and the ageing of the members of the large baby booms of the immediate post-war era, the overriding trend is towards an older electorate, with greater concentrations of potential voting power among people in their 50s and 60s. As such, figure 1 charts the ageing of the median voter, and table 2 shows the relative potential voting power of selected younger and older voters over time.

This is a relatively recent phenomenon – or perhaps more accurately, one we are yet to experience. In 1981, the median voter was the same age as in 2010, 46 years old. While there were a large number of voters aged around 60, reflecting the baby boom that followed the First World War, the largest cohorts were in their early-20s and early-30s.<sup>18</sup> We can quite plausibly therefore refer to an early-1980s electorate as having potential voting power more concentrated in younger cohorts than today. The most populous single-year cohort was 34 (948,000, compared to an average across the electorate of 574,000), but the second and third largest were 18 year-olds and 19 year-olds (939,000 and 927,000 respectively),

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that historical population data released by the Office for National Statistics does not disaggregate that population aged 85 or above. This, however, has no impact on the calculation of average single-year cohort size for the electorate in general (although see note 2).

**Table 2 Relative sizes of selected single-year cohorts**

Age cohort	1981		1991		2001		2010	
	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort
18	164	150	120	118	114	105	120	110
30	133	125	147	135	143	130	124	114
50	111	102	97	89	118	111	124	114
65	96	88	94	86	87	80	97	89
	2021		2031		2041		2051	
	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort	% average cohort size	% average working-age cohort
18	97	93	111	110	101	102	95	98
30	135	129	108	108	119	119	116	119
50	123	117	109	109	119	119	98	101
65	95	91	111	111	85	85	102	105

Source: original calculations based on ONS population estimates

Figures correct to nearest per cent. For the purposes of comparison working-age is constant at 18-64.

therefore foretelling the concentration of potential voting power among 40-somethings that we see today.

By 1991, because longevity gains had yet be realised in full – therefore there were far fewer 70-somethings than there had been 60-somethings a decade before – the age of the median voter had actually fallen by two years to 44. As we would expect, ten years on from 1981, potential voting power was concentrated among people in their late-20s and early-40s. In 2001 the median voter was 45 years old. Potential voting power was concentrated among people in their 30s, with an average single-year cohort size of 922,000, compared to 627,000 for the electorate in general. But there was also a concentration of potential voter power among people in their early-1950s: they had an average cohort size of 804,000, and the cohort aged 54 was more populous than any other cohort outside the 30-somethings. There were fewer potential voters aged 18 or 19 than any other age up to 56.

Generally speaking, the young voters of twenty or thirty years ago were not out-voted to any significant extent by older voters. In terms of potential voting power, with limited exceptions, it is today's generation of young voters, and even more so *tomorrow's* generation, that are experiencing or will experience a democratic deficit.

## The actual electorate

The formal power wielded by different age cohorts within the democratic process is dependent of course not on potential voting power, but rather on actually voting. Other things being equal, it is bad for democracy that potential voting power at the 2010 general election was concentrated among 40-somethings. However, taking voter turnout rates into account shows that the democratic process was even more skewed towards older cohorts.<sup>19</sup> An appendix to this report addresses the objection that ‘young people *choose* not to vote’, but it suffices to say here that, even if differences in ‘actual’ voting power data are not deemed to constitute a ‘democratic deficit’, it remains important to determine the age distribution of the actual electors to whom elected governments are beholden.

At the 2010 general election, the actual median voter was three years older than the potential media voter, 49 years old. As in the potential electorate, voting power in the actual electorate is concentrated among 40-somethings, albeit to a lesser extent, and given that turnout increases with age, skewed towards people in their late-40s rather than early-40s. The average single-year cohort size for actual voters aged 40-44 was 611,000, and for actual voters aged 45-50 the figure was 630,000 – this compares to an average single-year cohort size of 437,000 for the electorate in general. Unlike the potential electorate, average single-year cohort size for actual voters in their 20s (424,000) was below the overall average, and moreover, significantly below the average for actual voters in their 50s (536,000) and even 60s (497,000). Excluding 40-somethings, there were more actual voters aged 63 than any other single-year cohort.

Given their lower propensity to vote, 18 year-olds exercised less actual voting power at the 2010 general election than 73 year-olds. 45 year-olds exercised 84 per cent more actual voting power than 18-year olds, and 50 year-olds exercised 62 per cent more. Even people approaching retirement (that is, a typical single-year cohort in their early-60s) exercised 54 per cent more actual voting power than 18 year-olds.

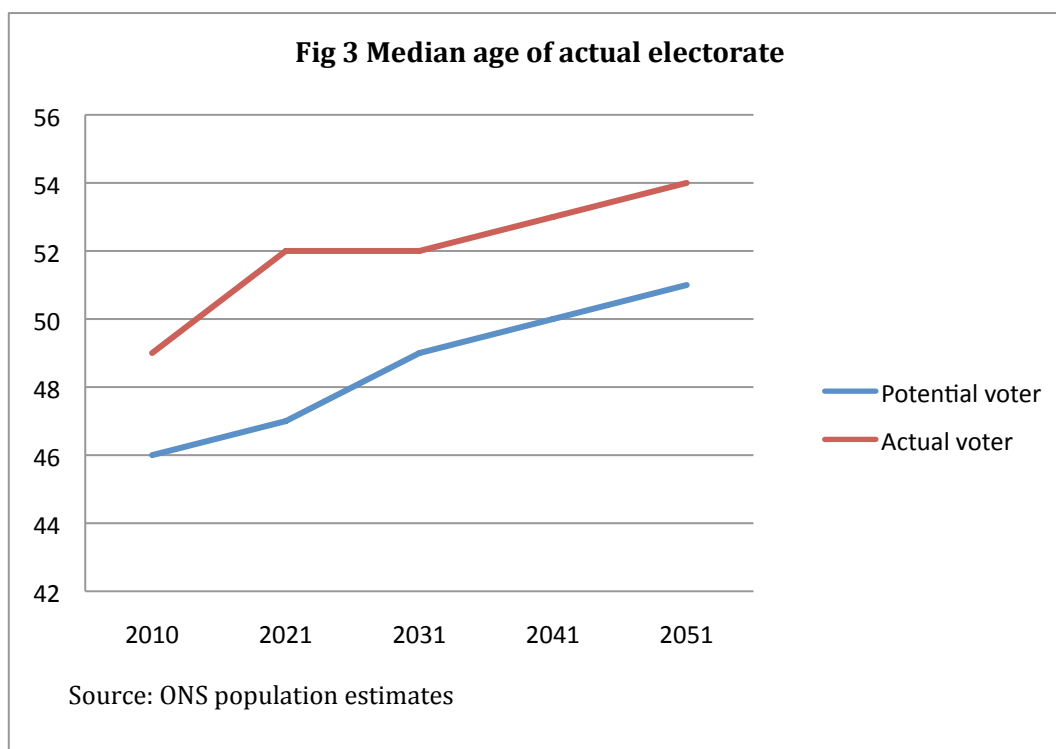
Obviously it would be inappropriate to apply turnout rates to historical population data (age-based differences in turnout have only recently been recorded by polling companies; they are not recorded by any public authority). However, it is reasonable to imagine the implications of similar turnout rates persisting in future elections.<sup>20</sup> If turnout rates remain

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<sup>19</sup> Election turnout increases significantly with age. According to Ipsos MORI, turnout rates for the 2010 general election were: 18-24 year-olds – 44 per cent; 25-34 year-olds – 55 per cent; 35-44 year-olds – 66 per cent; 45-54 year-olds – 69 per cent; 55-64 year-olds – 73 per cent; people aged 65 or over – 76 per cent. Overall turnout was 65 per cent.

<sup>20</sup> Having said this, it is also worth considering that the intergenerational democratic deficit may have a lifecourse impact on today’s young people, that is, they will remain disengaged from the democratic process





stable as the electorate ages, the actual median voters age will rise from 49 in 2010 to 52 in 2021. It will rise again to 53 in 2041, and then to 54 by 2051.

Voting power in the actual electorate of 2021 will be concentrated among 50-somethings. The average single-year cohort size of actual voters aged between 50 and 59 will be 640,000 compared an average for the overall actual electorate of 473,000. Their closest challengers, the 30-somethings – theoretically powerful in the 2021's potential electorate – have an average single-year cohort size of 566,000. This is only just above the figure for people in their early-60s (565,000). The single-year average cohort size for the youngest actual voters (aged between 18 and 22) will be alarmingly low, that is, 323,000 – significantly lower than even people aged between 75 and 79 (383,000).

Voting power in the actual electorate of 2031 will be concentrated in two main age groups: 40-somethings and 60-somethings. People aged 40-49 will have an average single-year actual voters cohort size of 632,000, and for people aged 60-69 the figure will be 631,000 – the average for the actual electorate overall will be 507,000. People in their late-30s (622,000), 50s (561,000), and even early-70s (526,000) will not, however, be significantly far behind these groups. In contrast, actual voters aged between 18 and 22 will have an

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throughout their lives rather than increasing their voter turnout as they get older. This will be explored more below.

average single-year cohort size of 382,000. Based on 2010 turnout rates, in 2031 there will be more voters aged 84 than any single age between 18 and 22, or aged 24.

The turnout rate means the potential voting power of people in their late-20s in 2041 will be largely forgone. They will have an average single-year cohort of actual voters of 549,000, around the average for the actual electorate in general (540,000). Actual voting power will be concentrated in people aged around 50: there will be an average of 646,000 voters at each age between 45 and 49, and 665,000 for ages between 50 and 54. Actual voters in their early-70s will have an average single-year cohort size of 594,000 – outstripping 20-somethings, 30-somethings and even 60-somethings. Alarmingly, there will be fewer actual voters aged 18 than any other age until 84, and similarly, fewer actual voters aged 24 than any other age until 82.

Voting power in the actual electorate of 2051 will be concentrated among people in their late-30s, with an average actual voter single-year cohort size of 681,000, compared to an overall average of 564,000. Actual voters in their late-50s (670,000) and early-60s (677,000) will, however, follow very closely behind. Actual voters in their early-50s and late-60s will also be powerful in terms of actual voting power, in contrast with actual voters in their early-30s (559,000) and late-20s (535,000). The most disadvantaged group, however, will be the youngest voters, aged between 18 and 22: their average cohort size of (375,000) is below that even of people in their late-80s (388,000).

There is little doubt that, given their higher turnout rates, the power of older cohorts in the democratic process over the next few decades will be formidable. In 2021, 18-year olds will exercise less actual voting power than 79 year-olds. 40 year-olds will exercise 83 per cent more power than 18 year-olds, for 45 year-olds it will be 69 per cent more, and for 50 year-olds it will be 97 per cent more. Similarly, 55 year-olds will exercise more than double (115 per cent) the power of 18 year-olds, 60 year-olds will exercise 95 per cent more, and 65 year-olds will exercise 68 per cent more. In 2031, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than 84 year-olds. They will be particularly disadvantaged in comparison to, for example, 40 year-olds and 45 year-olds, who will exercise 73 per cent and 71 per cent more power respectively. 50 year-olds will exercise 55 per cent more actual power than 18 year-olds, 65 year-olds will exercise 73 per cent more, and even 70 year-olds will exercise 51 per cent more.

These trends will persist into subsequent decades. In 2041, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than 83 year-olds in the democratic process. People aged both 50 and 55 will exercise 84 per cent more actual power than 18 year-olds, and people aged 60 will exercise 62 per cent more. Even voters in their early-70s will exercise significantly more power than

**Table 4 Relative sizes of selected single-year actual voter cohorts**

Age cohort	2010		2021		2031		2041		2051	
	% average AV cohort size	% average working-age AV cohort	% average AV cohort size	% average working-age AV cohort	% average AV cohort size	% average working-age AV cohort	% average AV cohort size	% average working-age AV cohort	% average AV cohort size	% average working-age AV cohort
18	81	69	66	61	75	70	69	65	64	62
30	105	89	73	105	92	85	101	96	98	94
50	132	112	130	120	116	108	126	120	104	100
65	113	96	111	102	130	120	99	95	119	114

Source: original calculations based on ONS population estimates

AV = actual voter. Figures correct to nearest per cent. For the purposes of comparison working-age is constant at 18-64.

18 year-olds, that is, 56 per cent. By 2051, 18 year-olds will exercise less actual power than a typical single-year cohort in their late-80s. 40 year-olds will exercise 83 per cent more power than 18 year-olds, and 50 year-olds will exercise 62 per cent more. For 60 year-olds the figure will be even larger, 92 per cent, and for 70 year-olds it will be 60 per cent.

It should be noted that these results are likely to overestimate the actual voting power of the youngest voters, and underestimate the voting power of people in their late-60s. As such the democratic deficit between younger and older cohorts could be greater than reported here in quantitative terms. Voter turnout rates are only established in broad age groups; a typical 18 year-old is probably less likely to vote than a typical 24 year-old, but they belong to the same statistical category. Similarly, everyone aged 65 or over is included in the same age group, yet it is probably fair to assume that people in their late-60s vote in greater numbers than people in, for example, their 80s and 90s. Given that we do not know likely the 'oldest old' are to vote, it is probably unfair to compare their actual voting rates with younger cohorts; yet equally, the inclusion of everybody aged 65 or over in a single age category means that comparisons between young cohorts and most older cohorts are probably unfavourably weighted towards the latter.

Furthermore, the 2010 turnout rates in particular may also exaggerate the actual voting power of the youngest voters. While people aged 18-24 remained far less likely to vote than other age groups, their turnout in 2010 was 7 percentage points higher than the 2005 figure of 37 per cent (the 2001 figure was 39 per cent). Turnout increased across the age distribution in 2010, but no age group had a larger increase than 18-24; for example, the 55-64 turnout increased by only 2 percentage points, and the 65+ turnout increased by only 1 percentage point. It remains to be seen whether the turnout for younger voters declines, in

accordance with recent trends – if so, the democratic deficit will be greater than reported here.

Turnout rates based on age are recorded neither precisely nor systematically by any public body. Given the increase in the intergenerational democratic deficit we are likely to experience, there is a strong case for rectifying this.

Age-based turnout rates for local and European elections, in particular, are not recorded with any degree of regularity. Based on information published by the Electoral Commission, we know that turnout at the 2009 European parliamentary elections in the UK was 13 per cent for people aged 18-24, and 74 per cent for those aged 65 or over. As such, despite having a much smaller cohort size, people aged 65 exercised over 4 times the power that people aged 18 exercised. We also know that turnout in 2009 local election, in areas where elections were being held, was only 10 per cent for people aged 18-24, but 85 per cent for people aged 65 or over. This means that 65 year-olds exercised almost 7 times the power that people aged 18 exercised.<sup>21</sup>

## **The influence of geography**

Using the Voter Power Index (VPI), it is possible to determine whether young people are more likely to be located in safe or marginal parliamentary constituencies, and in constituencies with low or high VPI scores.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, the results suggest, initially, that young people are more likely to be concentrated in more marginal constituencies, and constituencies with higher VPI scores.

According to 2010 ONS population estimates, the fifty parliamentary constituencies in England and Wales with the highest concentration of people aged between 15 and 19 had an average VPI score of 0.362, compared to an average across all constituencies of 0.255. Only 38 per cent of these constituencies were classed as very safe or ultra safe, compared to 60 per cent across all constituencies. 42 per cent of constituencies were classed as

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<sup>21</sup> The Electoral Commission (2009) *The European Parliamentary and Local Government Elections June 2009: A Report on the Administration of the 4 June 2009 Elections*, available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/81483/047-elections-report-final-web.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/81483/047-elections-report-final-web.pdf). Again, these figures are likely to overestimate the turnout of 18 year-olds, and underestimate the turnout of 65 year-olds.

<sup>22</sup> The VPI website lists both the degree of marginality of each constituency, and its VPI score (with is based on both marginality and size of constituency).

**Table 5 Marginality and VPI score of constituencies with high concentration of selected age groups**

Seats with highest concentration of...	VPI score	% constituencies marginal or very marginal	% constituencies very safe or ultra safe
15-19 year-olds	0.362	42	38
20-24 year-olds	0.298	36	42
25-29 year-olds	0.296	30	56
30-34 year-olds	0.282	32	60
50-54 year-olds	0.220	18	68
65-69 year-olds	0.354	36	48
<i>All seats</i>	<i>0.255</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>60</i>

Source: original calculations based on ONS population estimates and VPI data.

Highest concentration = the fifty constituencies in England and Wales with highest proportion of given age group. Figures for 'all seats' includes some constituencies not located in England or Wales.

marginal or very marginal, compared to only 19 per cent across all constituencies.<sup>23</sup>

Generally speaking, this effect declines with age, although the trend is evident across all constituencies with a relatively high concentration of young people. The fifty parliamentary constituencies in England and Wales with the highest concentration of people aged between 20 and 24 had an average VPI score of 0.298. 42 per cent of these constituencies were classed as very safe or ultra safe, and 36 per cent were classed as marginal or very marginal.

The fifty parliamentary constituencies in England and Wales with the highest concentration of people aged between 25 and 29 had an average VPI score of 0.296. 56 per cent of these constituencies – close to the proportion across all constituencies – were classed as very safe or ultra safe, but 30 per cent – far above the proportion for all constituencies – were classed as marginal or very marginal. The fifty constituencies with the highest concentration of 30-34 year-olds had an average VPI score of 0.282. 60 per cent of these constituencies, the same proportion as across all constituencies, were classed as very safe or ultra safe, although unlike the general results, the majority of these are classed as very safe. 32 per cent of these constituencies are classed as marginal or very marginal.

In contrast to the constituencies with the highest proportion of young voters, the fifty constituencies in England and Wales with the highest concentration of people aged between 50 and 54 had an average VPI score of 0.220, below the average for all constituencies of

<sup>23</sup> Not all Scottish constituencies are included in the VPI. As such, only population estimates for English and Welsh parliamentary seats are used, although references to 'all' constituencies refers to all constituencies included in the VPI.

0.255. 68 per cent of these constituencies were classed as very safe or ultra safe, compared to only 60 per cent across all constituencies, although around the same proportion were classed as marginal or very marginal as across all constituencies. However, this trend does not appear to apply to across the age distribution, with constituencies with the highest concentration of 65-69 year olds enjoying a VPI score of 0.354, significantly above the average for the constituencies with the highest concentration of people aged 20-24, 25-29 or 30-34. Moreover, only 48 per cent of these constituencies were classed as very safe or ultra safe, and 36 per cent as marginal or very marginal.

More research is necessary to establish whether trends identified here can be generalised across the electorate. Yet it is certainly possible to say that constituencies with a high concentration of young people seem to hold greater sway at general elections, under the First Past the Post, single-member constituency electoral system (FPTP). This result appears to offer an important caveat to the overall findings regarding the intergenerational democratic deficit based on population data and turnout rates, and suggests that any move towards a more proportional electoral system could harm younger voters.

However, applying turnout rates to constituency data renders the impact of the bias towards young people in FPTP is negligible or even non-existent in practice. Scott Davidson's research demonstrates that at the 2010 general election, more than half of MPs (319 seats) were elected by constituency electorates within which more than half of actual voters were aged 55 or over.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, 102 MPs were elected in constituencies where more than 40 per cent of voters were 65 or over, and 368 MPs were elected in constituencies where more than a third of voters were 65 or over.

The 2010 general election accelerated trends first witnessed in 2005. In 2005, 268 MPs were elected in constituencies where more than half of voters were aged 55 or over, and 287 MPs were elected in constituencies where more than a third of voters were aged 65 or over. Only in 45 highly urbanised constituencies did the proportion of voters aged 65 or over fall below a quarter. Davidson shows, furthermore, that these trends will persist and intensify in future elections. He projects that in 2025, 478 MPs will be elected in constituencies where more than half of voters are aged 55 or over, and 179 MPs elected in constituencies where more than 60 per cent of voters are in this age group.<sup>25</sup> 294 MPs will be elected in

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<sup>24</sup> Davidson, Scott (2009) *Quantifying the Changing Age Structure of the British Electorate 2005-2025: Researching the Age Demographics of the New Parliamentary Constituencies* (Age UK). It should be noted that Davidson's research, although based on 2010 constituency boundaries, uses 2005 turnout rates. We now know that turnout rates increased across all age groups by 2010, especially among young people, so Davidson's results slightly exaggerate the power of 'the grey vote'.

<sup>25</sup> The ONS does not publish projections of constituency populations; Davidson translated local authority-based projections to assess 2025 parliamentary constituencies.

constituencies where more than 40 per cent of voters are aged 55 or over, and 466 MPs will be elected in constituencies where more than a third of voters are aged 55 or over. Davidson's research was commissioned by Age UK, who subsequently proclaimed 'electoral power is firmly in the hands of older voters'.<sup>26</sup>

The influence of geography on the intergenerational democratic deficit is not clear-cut. Firstly, although young people seem to be concentrated in constituencies with greater marginality and higher VPI scores, compared to all constituencies and constituencies with the highest concentration of 50-54 year-olds, Davidson's research demonstrates decisively that young people's low turnout at elections means that this potential power is being squandered. Furthermore, if young people did vote in greater numbers, it could in fact *alter* the marginality and VPI scores of the constituencies in which they are concentrated; indeed, research on the 2001 general election has demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between low turnout and the proportion of young people in a constituency.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, constituencies with the highest concentration of 65 year-olds were even more likely to be more marginal, and had a higher average VPI score, than most 'younger seats'. This result therefore intensifies the pensioner power identified by Davidson.

Thirdly, even if FPTP theoretically favours younger voters, intergenerational fairness surely dictates that the electoral system should favour no particular age-group. Furthermore, we should not necessarily expect this bias to persist into future elections: Davidson did not utilise the VPI, but did include marginality in his analysis, and suggested that the concentration of young people in the most marginal constituencies will decline over the next 15 years as 'the grey vote' becomes more geographically dispersed. And finally, while the results for the impact of geography noted here are interesting, and worthy of further exploration, initial analysis suggests that most parliamentary seats in England and Wales contain a spread of age groups broadly consistent with the population in general – few seats have exceptionally high concentrations of any age group. Having said this, it is worth noting that not a single constituency in the 'top fifty' lists for the concentration of young people features in the top fifty list for people aged 50-54 or 65-69, therefore indicating a degree of age apartheid within the FPTP system – there is certainly an urban/rural dimension to this divide, with young people concentrate in more urban seats.

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<sup>26</sup> Age UK (2010) 'Electoral power is in the hands of older voters', available at [www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/new-research-shows-that-electoral-power-lies-firmly-in-the-hands-of-older-voters/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/archive/new-research-shows-that-electoral-power-lies-firmly-in-the-hands-of-older-voters/).

<sup>27</sup> Whitely, Paul (2001) 'Turnout' in Norris, Philip (ed.) *Britain Votes 2001* (Oxford University Press).

## The democratic process

Understanding the formal power possessed or exercised by young people in the electoral system is vital, but understanding the intergenerational democratic deficit requires also attention to young people's relationship with the actual process of democracy more generally. Unless these challenges are addressed now, today's young people may become a permanently disenfranchised generation, disengaged from the democratic process even as they get older. Certain features of the democratic process may of course help to explain why young people are less likely to vote. However, just as important for our purposes is the possibility that the democratic process serves to disenfranchise young people even if they do vote.

### *Voting methods*

There is evidence that young people are less supportive of traditional methods of voting than older cohorts. Electoral Commission research in 2002 found that people aged 18-24 were significantly more likely to support telephone voting, internet voting, 24-hour polling stations and voting at the weekend than people aged 25 or over. However, given that only a small minority in both age groups supported these measures, the impact of voting methods on the democratic deficit should not be exaggerated.<sup>28</sup> Similar findings emerged from the 2003 Nestlé Family Monitor, which surveyed around 1000 people aged between 11 and 18. 37 per cent of those surveyed stated that voting in person was their preferred method of voting (although this would not discount the possibility of weekend or 24-hour voting), but 36 per cent said that SMS or internet voting would be their preferred method. 10 per cent preferred postal voting. Of those eligible to vote at the following general election (2005), 42 per cent preferred voting in person, and 35 per cent preferred SMS or internet voting.<sup>29</sup>

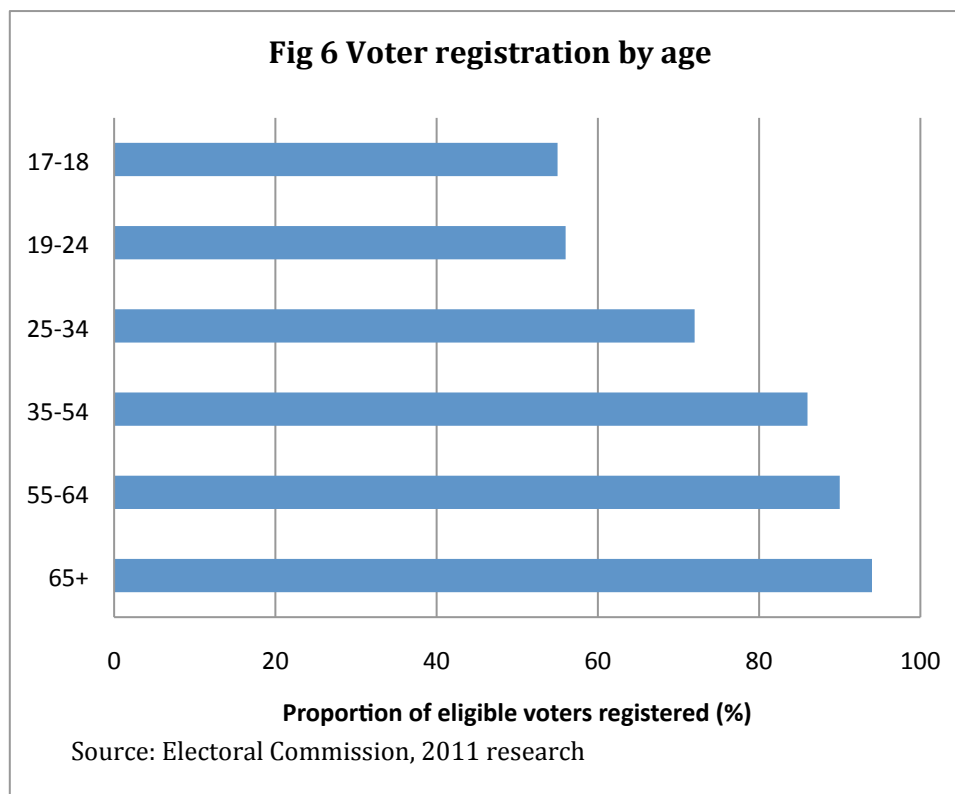
It is normal to expect support for traditional methods to grow as people age, and become more familiar with these methods. Yet this does not mean that other methods should not be explored – particular given that our main concern should be first-time voters who, by definition, will always be unfamiliar with traditional methods and therefore permanently disenfranchised to some extent. Certainly, further research on this issue would be justified on this basis.

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<sup>28</sup> Electoral Commission (2002) *Voter Engagement and Young People*, available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/electoral\\_commission\\_pdf\\_file/0019/16093/youngpplvoting\\_6597-6188\\_ENSW.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/electoral_commission_pdf_file/0019/16093/youngpplvoting_6597-6188_ENSW.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Nestlé Family Monitor (2003) *Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics*, available at [moriireland.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/nfm16.pdf](http://moriireland.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/nfm16.pdf).





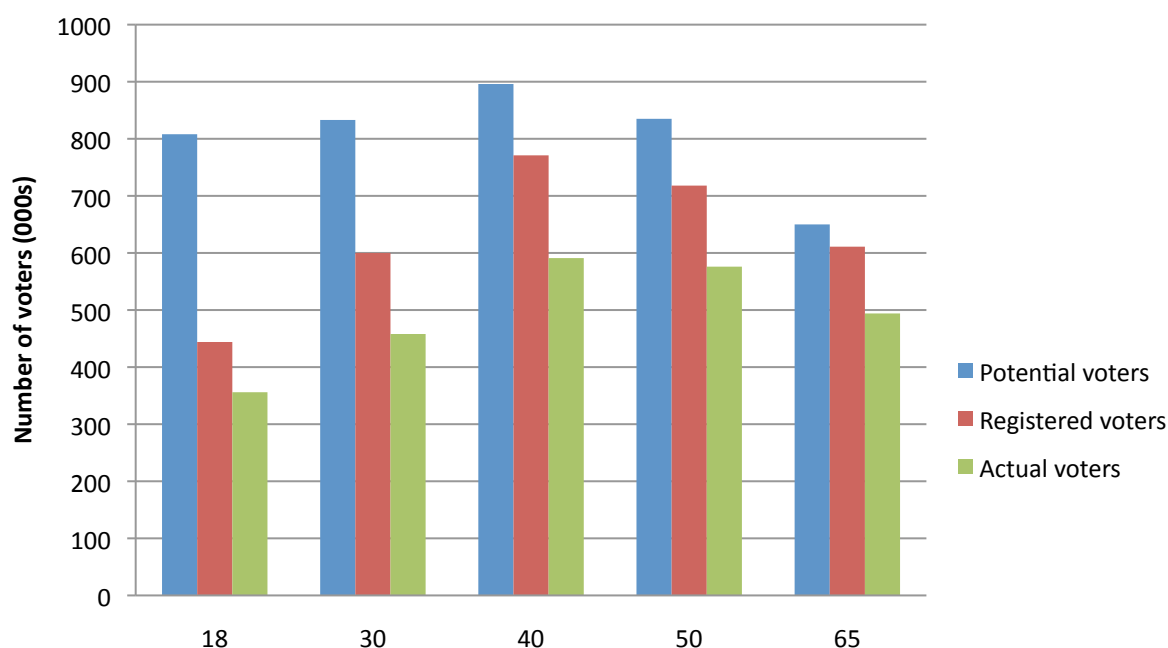
### *Voter registration*

Voter registration has an even more significant impact on young people. 2011 research into Britain's electoral registers by the Electoral Commission discovered some alarming results regarding the variability of voter registration by age, as figure 6 demonstrates. Whereas people aged 65 or above (94 per cent) or between 55 and 64 (90 per cent) have very high levels of registration among eligible voters, only 55 per cent of people aged 17 or 18, and 56 per cent of people aged between 19 and 24, are registered to vote. The figure for people aged 25-34 is 72 per cent.<sup>30</sup> Age-based differences are far more pronounced than class-based or ethnicity-based differences.

Registration rates are an important dimension to the findings on the potential electorate presented above. Registration rates have no impact on results on the actual voting power of young people – because turnout rates are based on surveys of both registered and non-registered voters – but nevertheless provide further evidence of the misleading nature of using data on the potential electorate alone to gauge the intergenerational democratic

<sup>30</sup> Electoral Commission (2011) *Great Britain's Electoral Registers 2011*, available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/145366/Great-Britains-electoral-registers-2011.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/145366/Great-Britains-electoral-registers-2011.pdf).

**Fig 7 Potential, registered and actual voters at selected ages, 2010**



Sources: ONS population estimates; original calculations based on ONS population estimates; Electoral Commission

All figures to nearest 1000. Registration rates refer to 2011.

deficit. The median potential voter in 2010 was aged 46. Information on 2011 registration rates suggests that the median registered voter was aged 49 at the 2010 general election, three years older than the median potential voter.<sup>31</sup> As figure 7 indicates, there were only 444,000 18 year-olds registered to vote. This is fewer than any other single age until 74. Analysing the impact of registration rates does not significantly reduce the potential voting power of 40-somethings at the 2010 general election, but it does allow other age-groups, notably people in their early-60s, to catch up to some extent. People aged between 60 and 64 had an average registered voter single-year cohort size of 678,000, compared to an average of 554,000 for the registered electorate overall. The youngest voters, aged between 18 and 22, had an average cohort size of only 467,000.

Clearly, non-registered voters are concentrated among young people. One of the most worrying aspects of the Electoral Commission's research on registration was 44 per cent of people not on the electoral register do not realise they are not registered. This is indicative of

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that figures for 'potential' voters include all individuals, not only those eligible to vote, but registration rates are based on eligible voters. However, given that virtually all individuals aged 18 or over are eligible to vote, the impact on the analysis here is negligible.

one of main explanations for non-registration: moving home. People tend not to realise they need to re-register when they move. Only 26 per cent of eligible voters who have lived in their current residence for less than one year are registered to vote. This rises to 76 per cent for residency of 1-2 years, but even this remains significantly below the figure for residency of over 5 years, that is, 91 per cent. Similarly, type of tenure has a significant impact on voter registration. Only 56 per cent of eligible voters renting from a private landlord are registered to vote, compared to 78 per cent of social housing tenants, 87 per cent of people living in their own home with a mortgage, and 89 per cent of people who own their own home outright. Young people are more likely to move residence frequently, and more likely to be private tenants rather than owner-occupiers – it therefore appears that existing methods of registering voters discriminate against young people.

The problem of non-registration may in fact undermine the apparent bias of the FPTP electoral system in favour of young people. We can speculate that the kind of young people living in the highly urbanised constituencies with a high concentration of young people are also those in private rented accommodation who move home fairly frequently. Certainly, further research on this possible correlation is urgently required. Furthermore, non-registration among young people problematises the boundary changes planned in advance of the next general election, given that calculations of constituency size are based on registered voters.<sup>32</sup> Young people may lose altogether the bias in potential voting power afforded to them by FPTP.

It would be easy to dismiss non-registration, like non-voting, as a 'choice' made by young people. However, non-registration is certainly less of a conscious choice than non-voting, given that moving home means that some people may miss the relevant canvass, and that registration usually takes place long before the electoral process begins to receive significant media attention, which may act as a prompt. Moreover, the fact that many young people are not registered to vote clearly undermines, to some extent, the notion that even non-voting is a choice – principally because non-registration means they are unable to vote, but also because a failure to register means they do not receive a formal prompt in the form of a polling card.

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<sup>32</sup> Wintour, Patrick & Syal, Rajeev (2011) 'Six million voters not registered, says Electoral Commission', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2011, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/dec/14/six-million-voters-unregistered](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/dec/14/six-million-voters-unregistered).

### *Political participation*

The formal procedures of the democratic process seem to discriminate against young people unduly. However, academic research suggests in addition that the nature of participating in elections conflicts with the way that young people envisage meaningful political action, precisely because it is not participatory enough. A study by Matt Henn and Nick Foard suggests in fact that young people are highly politicised, but perceive more informal forms of political participation, such as protesting and organising campaigns exogenous to the party system, as more influential and worthwhile than the electoral process.<sup>33</sup> Unseating an incumbent government is seen as less relevant, to many young people, than targeting more directly particular organisations and practices deemed to be a threat to or inconsistent with their values. Of course, this does not mean that today's young people are right in this regard. This paper is not the place to adjudicate on the most impactful forms of political participation; it suffices to assert the premise that voting *does* matter in the British political system, and that young people are not benefiting from democratic life if they are not exercising voting power at elections.

It is worth noting, however, that Henn and Foard find that young people are supportive of the *notion* of elections. 61 per cent of 18 year-olds agreed that voting in a general election is an effective way of influencing the government – a far higher proportion than actually voted in 2010. Remarkably, 53 per cent agreed that voting in a local election was an effective form of influence too. This seems to correlate with research by Janine Dermody, Stuart Hanmer-Lloyd and Richard Scullion. Addressing the notion that today's young people are apathetic about politics, they undertook qualitative interviews with over 1,000 potential first-time voters after the 2005 general election. They discovered that young people are certainly cynical about politics, but not uninterested in the electoral process. In fact, the researchers discovered a 'monitorial' interaction between young people and voting, with many having followed the election but made a decision, more or less consciously, to abstain.<sup>34</sup>

Related to this is the fact that today's young people do not feel a duty to vote. In their analysis of the 2009/10 British Election Survey, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel find that, while around 80 per cent of older people said they would feel guilty if they did not vote, just over half of young people shared this view (which, again, is a greater proportion than actually voted in 2010).<sup>35</sup> Various studies reinforce this finding.<sup>36</sup> While many young people

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<sup>33</sup> Henn, Matt & Foard, Nick (2012) 'Young people, political participation and trust in Britain' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 47-67.

<sup>34</sup> Dermody, Janine et al (2010) 'Young people and voting behaviour: alienated youth and (or) an interested and critical citizenry' in *European Journal of Marketing* 44(3/4), pp. 421-35.

<sup>35</sup> Furlong, Andy & Cartmel, Fred (2012) 'Social change and political engagement among young people: generation and the 2009/10 British Election Survey' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 13-28.

feel strongly about the need to act politically in support of their values, this is not associated solely or even predominantly with voting. While this may be regrettable, it is also grounds for considering the formal procedures of the democratic process, if the intergenerational democratic deficit is to be overcome.

### *Alienation or apathy?*

This hints at one of the recurring themes of the academic literature on young people and politics: that young people are alienated from politics, but not apathetic.<sup>37</sup> In his book *Why We Hate Politics*, Colin Hay argues persuasively that too much attention has been given to the *demand* for politics, and not enough to the *supply* of politics. In terms of young people, we need to consider not merely the fact that young people are less engaged with formal politics, but what it is about formal politics that discourages full participation.<sup>38</sup>

It is worth considering the study by Henn and Foard, who make the point that young people may in fact be more politically active than older cohorts, despite low turnout rates, in more detail here. Henn and Foard surveyed 1,025 18 year-olds in 2011.<sup>39</sup> 63 per cent claimed to be interested in politics, and only 13 per cent said they were not. But a sense of hesitancy, powerlessness and mistrust pervades 18 year-olds' perspective on politics. 46 per cent said they did not know enough about politics to participate in elections, and 50 per cent said they did not understand enough. 1 in 4 respondents had actually undertaken a GCSE in Citizenship Studies, but 63 per cent of these said that this education had little or no impact on their knowledge or understanding of politics.

In terms of powerlessness, over half of 18 year-olds agreed that 'young people like me have no say in what the government does' (with 14 per cent disagreeing), and 61 per cent agreeing that they had little or no influence on decisions made on their behalf by governments (with 6 per cent disagreeing). 61 per cent believe there are not enough opportunities for them to influence political parties (with 7 per cent disagreeing). Only a third believe that voting helps to change the way the UK is governed – 29 per cent were more positive about the impact of voting, but the large number of 'don't know' answers indicates again a lack of understanding of the electoral process. In terms of mistrust, over half of 18 year-olds believe that governments treat young people unfairly (with 15 per cent

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<sup>36</sup> Electoral Commission (2005) *Social Exclusion and Political Engagement*, available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/63835/Social-exclusion-and-political-engagement.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/63835/Social-exclusion-and-political-engagement.pdf); Farthing, Rys (2010) 'The politics of youthful anti-politics: representing the "issue" of youth participation in politics' in *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(2), pp. 181-95.

<sup>37</sup> Marsh, David et al (2007) *Young People and Politics in the UK: Apathy or Alienation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

<sup>38</sup> Hay, Colin (2007) *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge: Polity).

<sup>39</sup> Henn & Foard (2012) 'Young people...'

disagreeing), and two-thirds believe that governments tend to be untrustworthy (with 15 per cent disagreeing).

As discussed above, we must recall that many young people are intimately engaged in political activity, albeit rarely mainstream, conventional politics focused on elections and political parties. This has led to concerns of a divide among young people between the politically active and inactive, with the former more likely to be university-educated, and therefore generally more affluent. This class divide certainly matters: research on youth politics in the United States has associated low levels of engagement with formal politics with the protracted transition to adulthood now experienced by most young people, meaning that they many are excluded from forms of early political socialisation associated with the workplace and engagement with local community activities. Crucially, young people in higher education experience an alternative form of political socialisation, while those not attending college now miss out entirely.<sup>40</sup> However, it would be wrong to infer a significant difference in attitude between activists and non-activists in any simplistic sense. James Sloan's research, which used an in-depth qualitative study to compare activists and non-activists aged between 18 and 24, found similar attitudes to politics across the two groups. The activists were very different *social* animals in terms of their engagement and appreciation of civil society. They were far more likely to vote, but also explicit in their opinion that more informal forms of political participation are more effective in bringing about change. However, the non-activists were not opposed in principle, or uninterested in, such activities. Crucially, activists and non-activists shared a frustration with what they perceive as politics, that is, elections and parties. Non-activists were actually reluctant to describe their activities as political, for fear of association with the formal political realm.<sup>41</sup>

It is on the basis of this kind of evidence that Rys Farthing describes today's young people as 'radically unpolitical'. Young people are indeed averse to politics – especially so if even young activists are reluctant to describe their activities as political – but this in-itself is a political position. They refuse to endorse what they see as the political realm, but in this disavowal lies a political consciousness in search of expression.<sup>42</sup> If we are concerned about the intergenerational democratic deficit, it is not enough to implore young people themselves to alter their behaviour or attitudes – because these are bound up, as with all generations, with their experience of social and economic life more generally. The practice of democracy must evolve too. Although this paper is primarily interested in the exercise of power through

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<sup>40</sup> Flanagan, Constance et al (2012) 'Political incorporation and the protracted transition to adulthood: the need for new institutional inventions' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 29-46.

<sup>41</sup> Sloan, James (2007) 'Rebooting democracy: youth participation in politics in the UK' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 60(4), pp. 548-67.

<sup>42</sup> Farthing (2010) 'The politics...'.

formal democratic processes, it is necessary also to find ways to involve more young people in the kind of informal political activities to which they appear more suited, and to empower this form of political participation. This is a vital task, but ultimately, what matters in a representative democracy is voting, parties and legislatures – we must not allow the notion that young people prefer to voice their opinion by non-traditional or more oppositional means to undermine efforts include young people in the formal democratic process.

## Political parties

As alluded to above, one of the main supply-side issues related to young people's alienation from the democratic process is the nature and role of political parties. As the main 'agents' of democracy it is vital that the parties reflect the perspectives of young people in order to alleviate the intergenerational democratic deficit. The most obvious starting point is the age profile of party memberships. We know that in 2010 the median potential voter was aged 46. According to a large-scale internet survey of 18,706 voters (including 1,230 political party members) undertaken by Paul Whiteley – the UK's leading authority on party membership – in 2008, the average (mean) age of a party member in the UK is 49.4, compared to an average age of non-members of 44.6. This includes an average age for Labour Party members of 47.4 and for Liberal Democrats of 48.5, both significantly above the average age for non-members. The oldest party, however, is the Conservative Party, with an average age of 51.9.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, this estimation of the Conservative Party's average age, and therefore the overall average age of party members, may be an underestimation. A study of the Conservative Party by Tim Bale published in 2011 reported that the party's average age was 55, with two-thirds of members above this age.<sup>44</sup> The Conservative Campaign for Democracy estimated in 2010 the party's average age as 68, having risen from 64 in 2005.<sup>45</sup> A 2011 poll of Conservative Party members, conducted by telephone and online and funded by Michael Ashcroft, reported that more than 60 per cent of respondents were aged 65 or over.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Whiteley, Paul (2009) 'Where have all the members gone? The dynamics of party membership in Britain' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 62(2), pp. 242-57.

<sup>44</sup> Bale, Tim (2011) *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron* (Cambridge: Polity).

<sup>45</sup> Strafford, John (2010) 'Allowing and encouraging meaningful participation is the key to reviving the Tory grassroots' in ConservativeHome, 18 November 2010, available at [conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2010/11/john-strafford-allowing-and-encouraging-meaningful-participation-is-the-key-to-reviving-the-tory-gra.html](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2010/11/john-strafford-allowing-and-encouraging-meaningful-participation-is-the-key-to-reviving-the-tory-gra.html).

<sup>46</sup> Ashcroft, Michael (2011) *Project Blueprint: Winning a Conservative Majority in 2015*, available at [lordashcroft.com/news/14052011\\_winning\\_a\\_conservative\\_majority\\_in\\_2015\\_by\\_lordashcroft.html](http://lordashcroft.com/news/14052011_winning_a_conservative_majority_in_2015_by_lordashcroft.html). We can estimate, imprecisely, the average age of Ashcroft's respondents as 58.9. The published results disaggregate members into age groups of 18-54 (66 respondents), 55-64 (88) and 65 or over (246). The calculation is

**Table 8 Attitudes of 18 year-olds towards political parties**

	% agree	% disagree
I am likely in the future to give money to any of the political parties	6	76
I would in the future be prepared to work for a political party	8	70
I would consider in the future convincing someone else how to vote	22	50
Political parties do a good job of finding suitable people to run for parliament	22	29
Political parties do a good job of listening to people's concerns and responding to them positively	12	51
Political parties are effective organisations for changing the lives of people for the better	21	31
There is often a big difference between what a party promises it will do and what it does when it wins an election	75	3
Political parties are more interested in winning elections than in governing afterwards	65	9
Political parties do more to divide the country than unite it	47	12
In elections, political parties don't tell people about the really important problems facing the country	48	16
Political parties aren't interested in the same issues that concern young people	64	7
The main political parties do not offer voters real choice in elections because their policies are pretty much all the same	40	18

Source: adapted from Henn & Foard (2012) – see note 30

Young people's attitudes towards political parties reflect their attitudes to politics in general. Henn and Foard's 2011 study of 18 year-olds, cited above, contains information relevant to this issue – presented in full in table 8. Arguing that, despite generally supporting the electoral process, 'today's generation of young people cannot bring themselves to actually support the main political parties in practice', Henn and Foard show that 57 per cent of the youngest voters have little or no trust in political parties, with only 8 per cent reporting some or a great deal of trust. Their results profile a generation of citizens frustrated by political parties, and unwilling to contemplate significant engagement with parties in the future.<sup>47</sup> As Eldin Fahmy argues, young people do not see political parties as vehicles for participatory

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therefore based on the assumption that all respondents aged 65 or over are in fact aged 65 – extremely likely to be an underestimate – and that all respondent aged 18-54 or 55-64 are located at the mid-point of their age group – extremely likely to be an overestimate in the case of the former. We can speculate therefore that Ashcroft's polling profiles a governing party with an average age significantly above 60.

<sup>47</sup> Henn & Foard (2012) 'Young people...'.



politics, but rather as part of the traditional political system geared around electoral campaigning and adversarial politics.<sup>48</sup>

In their analysis of 'the party politics of youth citizenship', Andrew Mycock and Jonathan Tonge argue that in seeking to address the political disaffection of young people, the main political parties have concentrated on *civil* rather than *civic* engagement. In other words, they perceive young people as 'not-yet-citizens' and entreat them to adopt the norms of 'good' citizenship, rather than promoting the rights of young people as members of a democratic society to have an impact on how they are governed. Therefore

[t]he programmes of youth engagement initiated by the Labour and Coalition governments... have not however sought to empower or emancipate young people politically or socially. The stress on responsibility and duty underlines the replicative underpinnings of how citizenship is understood by the Coalition government, with young people expected to limit their claims to social rights enjoyed by previous generations and to fill in emergent gaps in public welfare provision left behind by a rapidly withdrawing state... The failure to acknowledge the limitations of the existing party-based political system, both in its limited appeal to young people and its exclusory internal structures, has resulted in the adoption of youth citizenship agendas whereby culpability is misguidedly youth centric. This lack of introspection of political parties will continue to undermine youth initiatives to encourage political participation.<sup>49</sup>

The reference here to the lack of introspection, and neglect of internal structures, indicates the charge that the youth sections of the main political parties are at least partly culpable in the alienation of young people from formal politics. Mycock and Tonge argue that, through fear of embarrassment, the main parties have sought to prevent the empowerment of their youth sections – they are organisationally subservient, and used principally to train future elites or to generate positive publicity for the party leadership.

The youth sections are therefore worth examining in more depth. The general trends, across all main parties, is for youth sections to be relatively powerless within the main party structures, under-resourced, and dominated by university students. Unlike the Labour Party's youth sections, Conservative Future and Liberal Youth have the creditable distinction of being internally democratic. Yet these organisations do not provide a formal platform for young members to influence the party, and the party leaderships offer few resources to support the youth sections in this regard. Both Conservative Future and Liberal Youth are, in fact, amalgamations of their respective party's youth and student wings, and therefore

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<sup>48</sup> Fahmy, Eldin (2006) *Young Citizens: Young People's Involvement in Politics and Decision Making* (London: Ashgate).

<sup>49</sup> Mycock & Tonge (2012) 'The party politics of youth citizenship and democratic engagement' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 138-61.

formally establish the domination of students over non-student members through the organisational and financial advantages of the affiliation of university branches to students' unions.<sup>50</sup>

The Labour Party's youth sections are far more complicated, given the divide between Labour Students and Young Labour (although student members aged under 27 automatically become Young Labour members too). Crucially, Labour does seek to provide a platform for young members to formally influence party policy – although the current structure is palpably failing to achieve this objective. Young Labour is led in theory by the National Executive Committee Youth Representative. Young members therefore have a seat on the party's ruling body. However, unlike the other main parties, this leadership position is elected only at the annual Young Labour conference, which is very poorly attended, rather than by a ballot of young members in general. Furthermore, it is an unpaid post – the incumbent does not even receive expenses remittance. With three full-time, salaried National Officers, financed by the party leadership (and supported by students' unions), Labour Students receives virtually all of the financial resources available to the Labour Party's youth sections. And despite being elected only by student members, these National Officers are automatic members of Young Labour's executive committee. There are also youth representatives on the party's National Policy Forum but, perhaps most absurdly, these positions are selected not by young members themselves but by a plenary session of Labour's annual conference.<sup>51</sup>

It seems likely that political parties exacerbate the intergenerational democratic deficit. Even if today's young people had the opportunity and inclination to engage significantly with formal democratic processes, the nature of parties and the party system means that they

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<sup>50</sup> Russell, Andrew (2005) 'Political parties as vehicles of political engagement' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 58(3), pp. 555-69.

<sup>51</sup> Berry, Craig (2008) 'Labour's lost youth: young people and the Labour Party's youth sections' in *The Political Quarterly* 79(3), pp. 366-76. My research into Labour's young members suggests that the vast majority of young people in the Labour Party, despite having chosen to join a political party (which, at the time, was the governing party) do not differ radically in their opinions about politics to young people in general. Most young members who participated in the research, including highly active members, were strongly critical of the Labour Party's approach to young people and as such the organisation of the party's youth sections. See Bruter, Michael & Harrison, Sarah (2009) 'Tomorrow's leaders? Understanding the involvement of young party members in six European democracies' in *Comparative Political Studies* 42(10), pp. 1259-91 for an analysis of the rise of 'professionally-minded' young members in political parties across political spectrums in several countries in Europe, including the UK. While forming the minority of young members, these career-focused and politically astute young activists tend to fill the leadership positions within youth sections before becoming representatives or employees of the party later in their career, and act mainly to serve the main party leadership rather than represent young members in general. This suggests that the attitudinal divide among young people is neither between activists and non-activists nor even party members and non-party members, but rather between those opposed to how the democratic process operates, and those willing to accept the status quo in return for a future career in politics.

have little influence in the process of selecting prospective candidates for election, nor in shaping the policies that will be put to electorates and ultimately enacted in government.

### 3. Solutions?

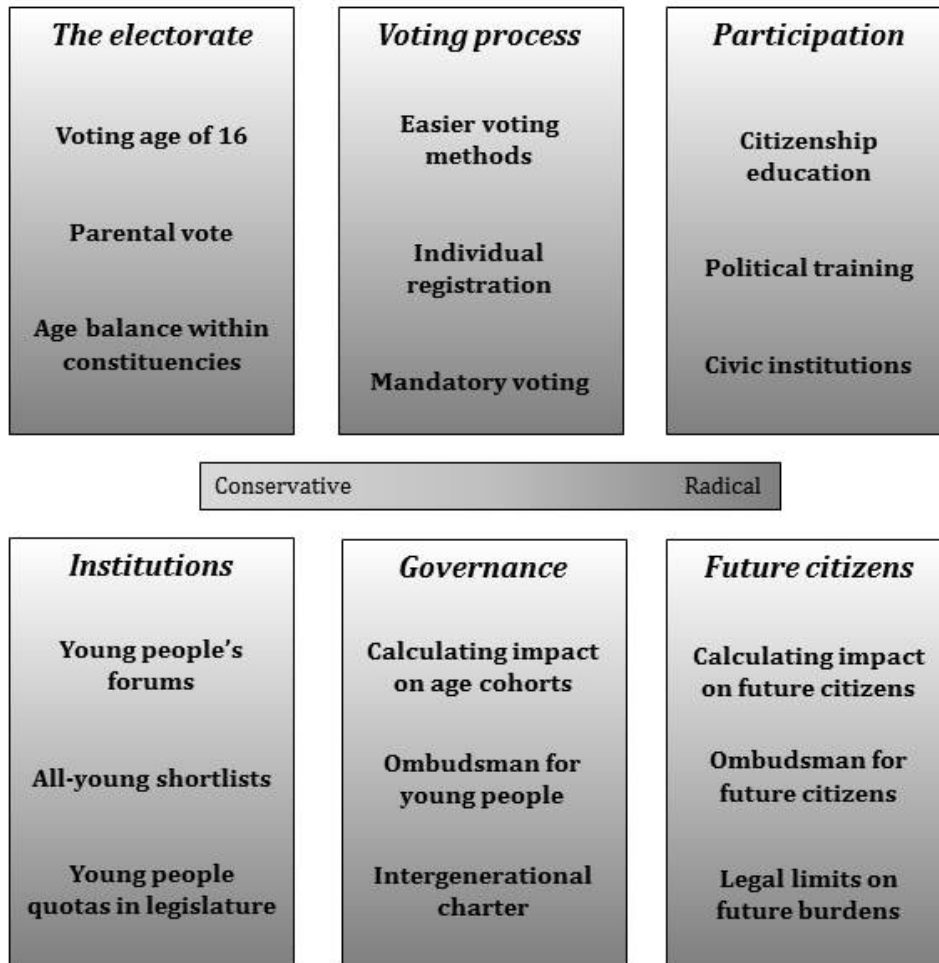
The previous section established the existence of an intergenerational democratic deficit – evident today, but highly likely to intensify in coming decades. The ageing of the potential electorate will move democracy away from its traditional demographic foundations, and exposes the persistent trait in the UK's system of representative democracy to treat young people as not-yet-citizens. When factors such as voter registration, the actual exercise of power by different age cohorts, and features of the democratic process such as the party system, are considered, the democratic status of even today's young people appears highly disadvantaged.

We should be worried therefore about 'generation D', tomorrow's young people whose relative disenfranchisement seems almost inevitable. But we should worry no less about 'generation Y', today's young people who are experiencing now the rebalancing of the democratic process in favour of older cohorts. The continuing legitimacy of representative democracy may be at stake. This section therefore considers ways in which the electoral process and wider features of contemporary may be reformed to re-balance political power back towards those most likely to be affected by decisions made by democratic institutions. Potential 'solutions' are grouped into six categories representing aspects of democratic life in the UK:

- the electorate
- the voting process
- encouraging participation
- democratic institutions
- wider reforms to governance procedures
- protecting future generations

It is argued here that change is required across every category if the intergenerational democratic deficit is to be overcome, but potential changes within each category range from relatively conservative, piecemeal interventions to radical transformations in democratic practice.

**Fig 9 Range of possible changes to democratic system**

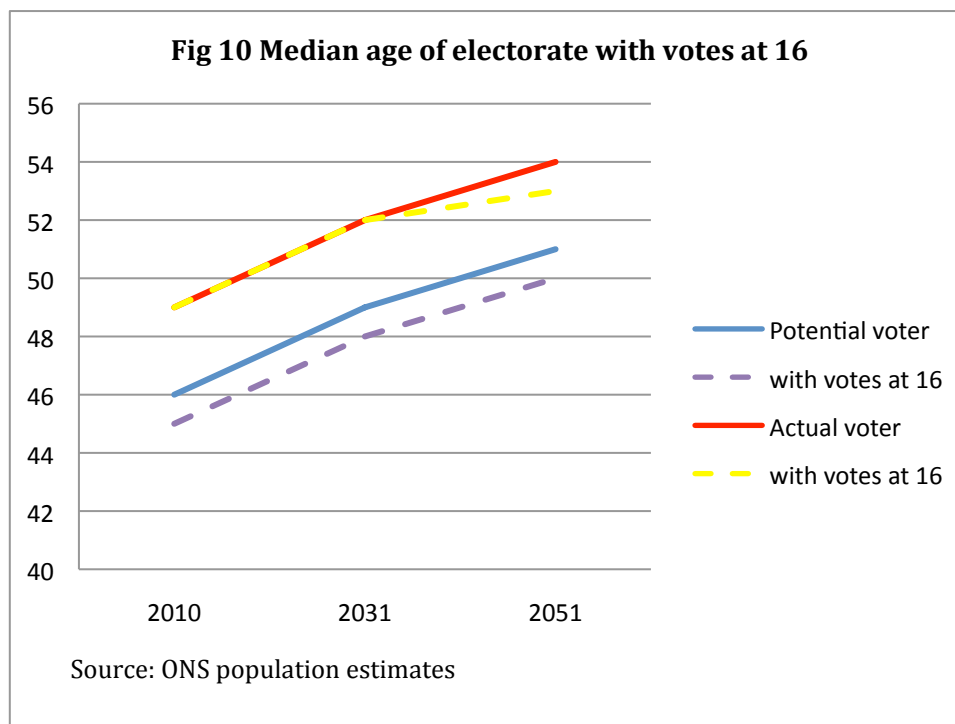


## **The electorate**

### *Lowering the voting age to 16*

The argument for lowering the voting age in the UK to 16 is usually made, understandably, on the basis of the human rights of people aged 16 and 17. We think it is generally correct that children cannot vote, so the voting age question is really one of where childhood ends and adulthood begins. Answers to this question will always, to some extent, be somewhat arbitrary. However, given the kind of entitlements and obligations now upheld by 16 year-olds in the UK, it is not credible that they do not also possess the right to vote. Most obviously, a society that has decided not to protect 16 year-olds from military service cannot deny this age group the vote and still satisfy in full the criteria of democracy.

The second most common justification for lowering the voting age is that it would send a powerful message to all young people that their contribution to the political system is



welcomed, even required.<sup>52</sup> 16 and 17 year-olds would be invited into the potential electorate, but the change could encourage more young people in general to join the actual electorate.

Both arguments are highly persuasive. However, for the purposes of this paper, the most important consideration is the impact that lowering the voting age might have on the intergenerational democratic deficit. What would be the impact on the balance between age cohorts in the electorate as a whole? In 2010, the cohorts aged 16 and 17 were small (758,000 and 774,000 respectively). The impact on the voting power of 40-somethings would have been minimal. If we assume that 16 and 17 year-olds would have voted at the same rate as people aged 18 (remembering that the turnout rate for 18 year-olds is likely to be an exaggeration), the impact on the actual voting power of people in their late-40s, and older cohorts more generally, would have been negligible. The median potential voter would have been 45 rather than 46. The presumed unwillingness of 16 and 17 year-olds to actually vote means that the median actual voter would have remained age 49.

This limited impact is also evident in terms of future electorates. In 2031, the median potential voter would, again, be one year younger at 48. The median actual would, again, be the same age at 52. The pattern largely persists into the 2051 electorate: the median potential voter would be 50, rather than 51, but the median actual voter would also be a year

<sup>52</sup> Knight, Melissa Jane (2012) *Votes at 16: Where's the Problem?* (The Intergenerational Foundation), available at [www.if.org.uk/archives/1889/votes-at-16-wheres-the-problem](http://www.if.org.uk/archives/1889/votes-at-16-wheres-the-problem).

younger, that this, 53 rather than 54. This is not to suggest that the voting age should not be lowered to 16, both on the basis of human rights and because it may in practice encourage higher rates of actual voting. However, the fact that the impact on the overall intergenerational democratic deficit would be limited or even negligible, may help to explain why campaign for votes at 16 enjoys such significant support among existing political elites, albeit seemingly not at the centre of government.

### *Votes for parents*

The electorate could also be increased by offering additional votes to parents. As noted above, it is considered legitimate within all democratic systems to restrict children from voting. However, they – and their futures – will inevitably be affected by the outcomes of the democratic process. Furthermore, it is likely that votes cast on behalf of the youngest members of society will be broadly in tune with the votes of the youngest adults in society; this measure could therefore alleviate the democratic deficit faced by young people, as well as serve the interests of future voters. While not currently established in any political system, the ruling party in Hungary, Fidesz, proposed votes for parents in 2011 – and the law is expected to pass given the party's significant majority in the legislature.<sup>53</sup>

There are, however, several difficulties with the notion of votes for parents. Would parents have an additional vote for each child? In Hungary, parents are only permitted one additional vote, irrespective of the number of offspring. What if parents are divided in their political preferences (that is, in theory, divided in their perception of their children's best interests)? Under the Demeny system, developed by American demographer Paul Demeny in the 1980s, each parent would have half a vote, enabling their child's vote to be split. The Hungary proposal, on the other hand, would grant parental votes only to mothers. Both the Hungarian and Demeny system – leaving aside the caveats – offer a full vote to the parents of a child. But it may be fairer, from some perspectives, to offer less than a full vote to children. Clearly, answers to these questions will always be arbitrary, and governed perhaps by practicalities rather than principle.

Perhaps the most serious objections relate to the nature of representation rather than logistical issues. Can parents really be expected to vote on behalf of their children's interests? If so, it begs the question of why the system would be needed in the first place. Most members of older age cohorts within the electorate are parents (or grandparents);

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, Leigh (2011) 'Hungarian mothers may get extra votes for their children in elections' in *The Guardian.co.uk*, 17 April 2011, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/17/hungary-mothers-get-extra-votes](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/17/hungary-mothers-get-extra-votes).

indeed, most members of younger cohorts are future parents. If individuals are deemed capable of voting on behalf of future citizens, can we not simply expect them to take into account the interests of future citizens in deciding upon their own preferences? A related problem is that votes for parents may be discriminatory against individuals who choose not to have children, or are unable to have children. Should these circumstances mean their vote is worth less? If there were a way to *guarantee* that parental votes were genuinely cast based on the child's interests, it would of course be unfair to say that the votes of non-parents are worth less; in practice, such guarantees are illusory.

### *Age balance within constituencies*

In practical terms, ensuring that each parliamentary constituency has an age distribution (roughly) proportionate to the electorate in general would be a significant transformation of the existing electoral system (especially if also introduced for local authorities). Yet in terms of the principle of one person, one vote this change would probably be less disruptive than parental votes. While this system would not significantly assist in overcoming the intergenerational democratic deficit as experienced by young people – as it would simply reflect the ageing population – it would reinforce the case that an age-blind democratic process is illusory.

We know that there is minimal overlap between the constituencies with a high concentration of young voters, and those with a high concentration of older voters. It may be highly challenging logistically, therefore, to achieve a proportionate age distribution in all or even most parliamentary seats – especially given the urban/rural dimension to this trend. The most radical remedy to this dilemma would be to adopt larger, multi-member constituencies. By covering wider geographical areas, it is more likely that constituencies can be designed to enable a proportionate age distribution, but a significantly smaller number of parliamentary constituencies would necessitate more than one representative serving each area (as for the European Parliament). A more conservative approach would simply be to mandate the Electoral Commission to take into account the desirability of – or even prioritise – a proportionate age distribution when reviewing constituency boundaries.

## **The voting process**

### *Easier voting methods*

The second section of this paper discussed the possibility that traditional methods of voting discouraged young people from voting. It is not clear that traditional voting methods are a



significant barrier to voting for young people, and therefore do not constitute a substantive aspect of the intergenerational democratic deficit. However, it is also clear that at least some young people would prefer to cast their vote by less conventional methods: over the internet, by SMS, at the weekend, at 24-hour polling stations, etc. Furthermore, even small increases in turnout rates for young people would result in substantial increases in actual voting power, and therefore the representativeness of governments actually elected within the UK political system. At the level of principle therefore there are few, if any, justifications for not experimenting with 'easier' methods of voting.

### *Individual voter registration*

One of the main reasons that young people are registered to vote is that they tend to move home more frequently than other age groups. Ostensibly therefore the planned move to individual voter registration, to be introduced before the next general election, should enable the disassociation of voter registration from residence. However, the current plans do not achieve this objective: residence will still matter, perhaps even more so than under the current system. The planned system is designed to move away from collective voter registration, within households, which is deemed archaic and vulnerable to fraud. Yet even with voters now registering as individuals, residence will still be a vital factor in identifying and verifying eligible voters – to break the link to residence would mean the new system would be similarly vulnerable to fraud.<sup>54</sup>

The House of Commons' Political and Constitutional Reform select committee has reported therefore that the move to individual voter registration is even more likely to disenfranchise young people.<sup>55</sup> Overall, as many as 10 million people are expected to disappear from the electoral register – which will then form the basis of further boundary changes after the 2015 general election. Electoral experts have warned that, as well as young people, those becoming non-registered voters are likely to be concentrated among those already less likely to be registered to vote: ethnic minority groups, people on low-incomes, and Labour supporters. The apparent tendency of FPTP to favour young people – which is of course already undermined by low registration rates in urban areas – could also be wiped out by the plans: the chairman of the UK's Electoral Registration Officers, John Stewart, has said that

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<sup>54</sup> The Electoral Commission (2012) 'Individual electoral registration', available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voter-registration/individual-electoral-registration](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voter-registration/individual-electoral-registration).

<sup>55</sup> House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (2011) *Individual Electoral Registration and Electoral Administration*, available at [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpolcon/1463/146306.htm#a3](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpolcon/1463/146306.htm#a3).

non-registration rates will increase far more in inner-city areas than ‘the leafy shires’ where older voters tend to be concentrated.<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, individual voter registration is the only long-term future for electoral registration; the UK (or, more precisely, Great Britain, as Northern Ireland has already implemented the change) is the only major Western democracy that retains collective, household-based registration methods. However, in order to empower rather than further disenfranchise young people, a way of enabling voting to stay on the electoral register even if they move home (or at least make it easier to inform the relevant authorities if they move home after the final canvass before an election) must be found.

### *Mandatory voting*

Changes to the electorate, discussed above, would be largely superfluous in terms of the intergenerational democratic deficit (albeit not human rights) if the turnout rates of young people were to significantly increase. Mandatory or compulsory voting may be the most effective way of achieving this. However, the prospect is undermined by several problems both in principle and in practice.

The most appropriate example of a political system with mandatory voting is Australia. Non-voting in Australia is a criminal act, penalised with a small fine, and potentially community or custodial sentences in the event of non-payment. However, voting is only compulsory for registered voters, and while registration is in theory also compulsory, non-registration is not in practice criminalised. Herein lies the difficulty in terms of overcoming the intergenerational democratic deficit: according to 2005 research, around 1 in 5 Australians aged between 18 and 25 are not on the electoral register, compared to around 1 in 25 of all eligible voters.<sup>57</sup>

In the Australian system, there is no abstention option on the ballot paper. Failing to vote for one of the actual candidates or parties standing for election is illegal, although of course many voters take advantage of secret ballots to submit invalid ballot papers. In terms of addressing the democratic deficit experienced by young people, it does not seem credible to forbid abstention – taking young voters seriously means listening to their protests against the existing political system.<sup>58</sup> Of course, even with an abstention option on the ballot paper,

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<sup>56</sup> Wintour, Patrick (2011) ‘Shocked MPs told electoral plan could remove 10 million voters’ in *The Guardian*, 15 September 2011, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/sep/15/shocked-mps-electoral-register-shake-up](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/sep/15/shocked-mps-electoral-register-shake-up).

<sup>57</sup> Farthing, Rys (2010) ‘The politics of youthful antipolitics: representing the “issue” of youth participation in politics’ in *Journal of Youth Studies* 13(2), pp. 181-195.

<sup>58</sup> The question then becomes what happens in the event that a selection such as ‘none of the above’ receives the most votes. Should these votes be treated as valid votes, therefore requiring a by-election? And would the by-election also offer an abstention option?

mandatory voting compels young people (or any voter) to participate in an electoral process that they may not support; a formally registered abstention could be interpreted as simply 'undecided' and therefore perceived as a form of support for the system in general, if not any particular candidate. The most important objective, surely, is to ensure that young people's perspectives are heard within the democratic process. This will probably be achieved by higher turnout rates – but perhaps only superficially, if higher turnout is itself achieved through compulsion.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, even higher turnout rates will become increasingly ineffective as the potential electorate continues to age in coming decades.

## Encouraging participation

### *Citizenship education*

The second section noted Matt Henn and Nick Foard's finding that most students that have undertaken citizenship education at secondary school claim that it has not improved their understanding of politics. Rys Farthing argues that citizenship education is an adult-centric approach to solving the problem of young people's disaffection with politics, adding that political elites should focus on the *supply of* rather than *demand for* politics.<sup>60</sup>

However, more detailed research produces a more equivocal conclusion. Ben Kisby and James Sloam's study of citizenship education in the UK finds that, while there is significant room for improvement in the teaching of citizenship in secondary schools, in general its introduction has improved political knowledge and efficacy among students.<sup>61</sup> Jonathan Tonge, Andrew Mycock and Robert Jeffrey agree: they argue that political engagement improves as a result of citizenship education, but criticise its treatment as a 'politicised panacea' envisaged as the answer to every social ill. Murray Print's study of citizenship education in Australia makes the fascinating point that the 'informal curriculum' is just as important as the formal curriculum in producing the kind of outcomes desired from citizenship education. As such he notes the importance of democratically organised student organisations, including student government, as well as student newspapers, debating, fundraising activities, etc. According to Print, engagement in these activities is positively correlated with civic and political engagement as an adult. However, too often schools treat

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<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Australia's Youth Electoral Study shows that, while most final-year secondary school students intend to vote when they reach voting age, barely half would do so if voting were not compulsory. See Print, Murray (2007) 'Citizenship education and youth participation in democracy' in *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55(3), pp. 325-345.

<sup>60</sup> Farthing (2010) 'The politics...'.

<sup>61</sup> Kisby, Ben & Sloam, James (2012) 'Citizenship, democracy and education in the UK: towards a common framework for citizenship lessons in the four home nations' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 68-89.

the informal curriculum in this regard as low-value, which infects students' valuation of these activities.<sup>62</sup>

### *Political training*

The main agents for training young people in the skills required for political participation are political parties; whether they succeed in this regard, judged on their own terms, is arguable. Furthermore, political training and socialisation offered exclusively via the party system seems not to chime with young people's attitudes towards political participation. It may be, therefore, that other sources of passing on political skills and expertise are required. Farthing argues such training is vital to empowering young people – simply educating young people about existing political structures and process is insufficient.<sup>63</sup>

There are useful examples of political training for young people in the UK. For example, the Citizenship Foundation's Youth Act, which aimed to help people aged between 11 and 18 to build political campaigns within their local communities, the Carnegie Young People Initiative (CYPI), and the work of the British Youth Council.<sup>64</sup> We can refer also to the work of Citizens UK and London Citizens in training for 'community organisers'; although this is not explicitly targeted at young people there are clearly affinities with the way that young people tend to approach political participation.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly, the objectives among such programmes vary, and overlap. They can be said to be focused on enabling participation by young people in new forms of political participation, enabling the political activities undertaken by young people to be more impactful upon formal politics, and perhaps most importantly, encouraging existing young activists to demonstrate leadership in encouraging more young people to get involved in political activity. The impact of training in these forms on the democratic deficit is of course unclear, but it is hard to dispute the argument that such training is valuable in its own right.

### *New civic institutions*

The second section cited the research of Constance Flanagan et al on the impact of protracted transitions to adulthood on political engagement in the United States, which found that young people not in higher education are excluded from forms of early political

<sup>62</sup> Print (2007) 'Citizenship education...'.  
<sup>63</sup> Farthing (2010) 'The politics...'.  
<sup>64</sup> See [www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?69](http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/main/page.php?69),

[www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/77dc4dc5-22aa-4232-8b4b-7b9916a2f7f9/Empowering-Young-People.aspx](http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/getattachment/77dc4dc5-22aa-4232-8b4b-7b9916a2f7f9/Empowering-Young-People.aspx) and [www.byc.org.uk/training-and-services/training.aspx](http://www.byc.org.uk/training-and-services/training.aspx).

<sup>65</sup> See [www.citizensuk.org/training/](http://www.citizensuk.org/training/).

socialisation associated with the workplace and engagement with local community activities. They also conducted research of AmeriCorps, a new institutional form designed to increase the involvement of Americans in providing services at the local level, in return for training. While not intended solely for young people, the overwhelming majority of participants are aged between 18 and 30. Participants are employed for a year on a full-time basis, and receive a small stipend for living expenses and an award towards future or previous educational expenses. While not designed to increase political engagement directly – associated legislation forbids AmeriCorps participants from engaging in political activity – Flanagan et al found that the programme increases civic engagement and ultimately political activity over the medium-term (they also refer to specific features of the programme which have greatest effect in this regard).<sup>66</sup>

The coalition government's National Citizen Service (NCS) resembles AmeriCorps, albeit on a much smaller scale; it is aimed at only 16 and 17 year-olds, and lasts for only three weeks.<sup>67</sup> Concerns over costs are hampering a wider roll-out of the scheme.<sup>68</sup> Clearly, the NCS cannot be expected to achieve results equivalent to AmeriCorps, but as Flanagan et al point out, AmeriCorps itself is not a panacea for political socialisation during the transition to adulthood. But their research does demonstrate the importance of civic institutions for young people outside educational establishments. Organisations explicitly designed to encourage political activity may be overlooking deeper causes of young people's disaffection, that is, an absence of associational bonds.

## Democratic institutions

### *Formal role for young people's forums*

Attempts to engineer the composition of the electorate, legislatures or electorates in order to produce outcomes that mitigate the intergenerational democratic deficit will probably always face the charge, however unfair it may be, that they undermine the one person, one vote principle. However, under this option, young people are given a formal role or status within democratic institutions without being more heavily represented in formal decision-making processes than their actual voting rates would permit under the existing system. Simply, young people would have an advisory status within the deliberations of legislative functions of elected assemblies, at most or all levels of authority, including the House of Commons.

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<sup>66</sup> Flanagan, Constance et al (2012) 'Political incorporation and the protracted transition to adulthood: the need for new institutional inventions' in *Parliamentary Affairs* 65(1), pp. 29-46.

<sup>67</sup> See [nationalcitizenservice.direct.gov.uk/](http://nationalcitizenservice.direct.gov.uk/).

<sup>68</sup> King, Victoria (2011) 'Cameron's citizen service – is it working?' in *BBC News*, 11 August 2011, available at [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14325877](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-14325877).

There are perhaps strong grounds for a wide range of ‘minority’ groups in some ways under-represented in democratic life to have similar opportunities – it is not the intent of this paper to argue the case for young people ahead of other groups who may be disenfranchised. Yet it is nevertheless vital that the rapid and ongoing impact of population ageing on the traditional balance between generations within the democratic process is recognised. While there may be important barriers to the effective representation of other groups, young people by definition have not reached the life-stage at which they are likely to be in a position to, for instance, stand for election for a political party in a ‘winnable’ seat at any level. It may be for precisely this reason that a ‘quota’ system (discussed below) compelling legislatures to include young people would be inappropriate – in contrast to, for argument’s sake, the representation of women. Ensuring, more modestly, that young people’s voices are heard within the internal deliberations of democratic institutions would therefore strike a fair balance.

There would of course be ancillary benefits to democracy of this plan: firstly, the presence of young people in democratic institutions would not only ensure their voices are heard, but could also help to nurture intergenerational understanding. Secondly, the young people selected as advisers would be in a position to mobilise their peers to take an interest in formal politics.

The main difficulties lie in issues around selection and representation. Would it be desirable, most radically, for young people to have an additional vote (at all elections) through which they elect their peers onto forums which sit within legislatures, albeit without voting power? This system would be difficult and expensive for electoral authorities to administer. It also seems implausible, logistically, that mass elections of this type will produce results that are meaningfully representative of young people’s preferences. It would almost certainly require viable candidates to be supported by mainstream political parties; while this may serve to attract some young people into party membership, equally it is likely to skew the representativeness of these elections.

Despite the danger of paternalism, a process of co-option by legislatures would surely be more appropriate and feasible. There are of course many organisations that seek to represent young people, many of which incorporate the input of young people themselves into their internal governance procedures. Involving these organisations in the co-option process would be desirable – although again, as with political parties, there is the danger that young people’s forums would then simply reflect existing patterns of political engagement rather than reaching out to the unengaged. There can be no one-size-fits-all solution to these dilemmas. Rather, the design of forums should be tailored to the institution and geographical area in question. Within the House of Commons, for instances, groups

such as the National Union of Students and the British Youth Council would probably have designated seats on the advisory forum. In general, however, it would be advisable for legislatures to work with a wide range of groups in constructing young people's forums, including third sector organisations, parties, schools, universities and youth-based community groups. The composition of forums would be kept under review, with the opinions of young people themselves sought on a regular basis. There should also be an expectation that the various organisations offered a seat on the forum would select their representatives by democratic means (and the forum itself would be organised democratically for internal processes); the appointing legislature could in fact insist that democratic procedures are adhered to among the forum's constituent organisations.

### *All-young people shortlists*

The representation of women in the House of Commons has been boosted significantly by the use of all-women shortlists for the selection of candidates for parliamentary seats, although they have only been employed by the Labour Party. Clearly, there is no reason to assume that a geographical area would be represented any less effectively by a female rather than male MP, and all-women shortlists were imposed by the Labour leadership in order to circumvent the apparent bias among local parties towards selecting male candidates (albeit perhaps inadvertently, because women are less likely to be active party members in many areas – local parties have in most cases not opposed the introduction of all-women shortlists).

Unfortunately, the same logic does not apply to young people. Precisely because of the profound importance of life-stage to an individual's political preferences – which underpins this paper's analysis of the disenfranchisement of young people – it seems fair to concede that some voters would be less effectively represented if their choice of candidates was restricted to only people below a certain age.

However, it is worth reiterating that this option does not concern individuals standing for *election*, but rather standing for *selection* as their party's candidate for a given election. It is therefore entirely a matter for political parties to determine how they select their candidates (within the legal parameters of the party system, which have actually been clarified as a result of all-women shortlists). Even if a party's leadership chooses not to *impose* all-young people shortlists on an area, at least not for parliamentary seats, they could instead allow local party members to choose to select their candidates via an all-young people shortlist, if

local party leaders favoured this option.<sup>69</sup> They could, furthermore, ensure that young people are adequately represented among the available candidates for election, even if not guaranteed selection. And they could also offer far more resources to their party's youth sections to ensure, firstly, that young people are adequately represented at all levels of the party, and secondly, that existing youth sections are able to genuinely engage with young people within their communities both inside and outside the party membership.

### *Quotas of young people in legislatures*

Insisting that young people are proportionately represented in legislatures such as the House of Commons would be a radical transformation for the UK political system. Most obviously, it would be impossible to implement under the single-member FPTP electoral system. It would therefore necessitate an electoral system where outcomes are more directly proportional to the actual votes cast. This might mean larger, multi-member constituencies which would guarantee a seat in Parliament to the highest-placed young person (or several young people, dependent on the number of seats in the constituency), irrespective of their performance vis-à-vis older candidates a seat in Parliament. Alternatively, single-member constituencies may be retained, but the composition of the House of Commons would be 'topped up' by a certain number of seats elected by a more proportional system – young people would be guaranteed a certain proportion of the top-up seats.<sup>70</sup>

It would be far easier to achieve a quota of young people, whether formally or informally, in the House of Lords, where seats are awarded by appointment. Yet the influence of the young members in the political system in general would, inevitably, be far less significant. An elected House of Lords, which has been proposed by the Liberal Democrats in government, would of course take away the government's ability to appoint a quota of young members. However, it may nevertheless be more acceptable to the electorate in general (and consistent with democratic principles) that young people have a guaranteed number of seats in the second chamber, even if it is elected rather than appointed, because the second chamber's role is focused on scrutiny rather than executive functions.

Yet the difficulties associated with quotas in the House of Commons do not mean that more modest changes cannot be instituted within the main chamber to achieve some of the same

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<sup>69</sup> It would presumably be easier for party leaders to impose all-young people shortlists in multi-member constituencies, such as local authority wards and European Parliament constituencies.

<sup>70</sup> Less radically, the electoral system could insist that parties include a certain number of young people in any election where an open list is used – it would be up to the electorate to decide, young people having been given a favourable position in the selection of candidates. Or where a closed list is used, meaning electors cannot choose between candidates but only parties, the electoral system could insist that a certain number of young candidates are highly placed in parties' lists.



objectives. Alternatively, therefore, a small number of seats – or even a single seat – where the representatives were chosen only by young voters, could be established within the House of Commons.<sup>71</sup> Young people would essentially have two votes: one within their geographical constituency, and one for the young people's seats. This small group of representatives, or single representative, would inevitably become the voice of young people within the democratic system.<sup>72</sup> Of course, this would *not* mean that young people's votes were worth double that of other age groups. If we assume for argument's sake that only people aged under 25 are able to 'vote twice', in 2010 there would have been nearly 6 million electors for these seats (compared to an average geographical constituency size of under 70,000). Furthermore, this system could be used to offer the same deal to the oldest cohorts who, while not affected by the outcomes of elections for as great a portion of their life as young voters, are affected by small cohort size in terms of potential voting power. Ostensibly this compromise would undermine the value of young people's seats in Parliament, although in practice the value of this system is not in re-balancing power within the legislature, but rather in establishing a mechanism for young people's voices to be heard. A similar mechanism for the oldest voters would not undermine this, and may in fact be conducive to positive relations between different generations.<sup>73</sup>

## Governance

### *Calculating the impact of policy on different age cohorts*

The options considered in this section are not ostensibly part of the democratic process. However, they would to some extent constitute a constraint upon the politicians elected through the democratic process, therefore limit the impact of disenfranchisement on young people.

Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) are generally carried out when any significant change of policy or expenditure is announced by the government (and most local authorities). Young people *are* included in these assessments, under the 'equality strand' of age. There does not appear to be any definitive approach to defining young people across government departments, but the Greater London Authority is more precise, and assesses three age-

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<sup>71</sup> The system could be replicated at the local level.

<sup>72</sup> The benefit of this 'seat' being filled by more than one MP is that young people would potentially be able to select representatives with different party affiliations.

<sup>73</sup> It should be noted, however, that according to research published by the House of Commons Library in 2005, the number of MPs aged 70 or over is roughly proportionate to the number of voters aged 70 or over in the electorate in general. Having said this, there may be grounds for a seat, or seats, chosen only by the 'oldest old', that is, those aged 80 or over. See Cracknell, Richard (2005) *Social Background of MPs* (House of Commons Library), available at [www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/notes/snsg-01528.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/notes/snsg-01528.pdf).

based 'equality target groups' of children under 16, young people aged between 16 and 25, and older people aged 65 or over.

It is far from clear, however, that EqlAs are successful in ensuring the impact on young people is considered in policy decisions. Firstly, while EqlA analysis may be taken into account when making decisions, there is no guarantee that ministers, for instance, will heed the analysis. Invariably, as political documents compiled by officials but signed-off by ministers, there is an endemic tendency for EqlAs to downplay negative impacts on any equality group. Secondly, it is probably fair to say that EqlAs are not particularly sophisticated. The immediate impact on certain age groups may be considered, but this is not the same as considering the lifecourse implications of policy or public expenditure changes on young people at a crucial stage of life. Similarly, even if an EqlA for a measure which increases expenditure demonstrates positive implications across several equality strands, including for young people themselves, the analysis will rarely, if ever, take into account the impact on young people of funding this measure over their lifecourse.<sup>74</sup>

Fourthly, it is not clear what the implications of a conflict within the age strand are. Clearly, while we should be wary of exaggerating this possibility, some measures that have the potential to benefit older people may also have the potential to harm younger people (especially, again, if funding is considered). The age-based impact may be positive overall – but one age group will be sacrificing its interests for another. And finally, EqlAs are rarely undertaken in relation to government expenditure or fiscal policy as a whole, that is, following budgets or spending reviews. After pressure from campaigners, HM Treasury published in 2010 an extremely limited impact assessment of the spending review, which considered briefly the impact of cuts in public expenditure on women (five paragraphs), ethnic minorities (six paragraphs) and people with disabilities (seven paragraphs), but neither older people nor young people.<sup>75</sup>

It is not possible here to re-design the type of impact assessments undertaken by government. It seems clear, however, that the totality of costs and benefits (broadly defined) for all age cohorts, over their lifecourse, of every major decision taken by political authorities should be assessed and published. Certainly, the practice assessing the impact of decisions in isolation should be supplemented by a firmer commitment to assessing the impact of

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<sup>74</sup> Similarly, cost/benefit analyses undertaken by government rarely, if ever, disaggregate taxpayers when considering the 'value for money' of policy proposals.

<sup>75</sup> HM Treasury (2010) *Overview of the impact of Spending Review 2010 on Equalities*, available at [cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010\\_equalities.pdf](https://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2010_equalities.pdf). See also Campbell, Beatrix (2010) 'The Fawcett Society takes the cuts to court' in *The Guardian*, 22 October 2010, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/22/yvette-cooper-fawcett-society-cuts](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/oct/22/yvette-cooper-fawcett-society-cuts).

overall government activity; an enhanced role for the Office of Budget Responsibility may help to facilitate this approach.

### *An ombudsman for young people*

As individuals technically appointed by Parliament to represent the interests of certain groups, or to scrutinise on behalf of the public in general the activities of government, ombudsmen have a vital role in the democratic process. Currently England has a Children's Commissioner who acts on behalf of children and young people up to the age of 18 (or 21 in limited circumstances) – there are similar posts in the devolved nations – yet the Commissioner's role is focused largely on child protection issues. In terms of democracy, ombudsmen are not elected, so it is not immediately apparent that an ombudsman for young people would serve to address the democratic deficit in any direct sense. Their role could be seen as quite paternalistic, reinforcing the assumption that young people are not full citizens. However, an ombudsman would establish that, irrespective of the age profile of the electorate, the perspective of young people is vital to the democratic process and the legitimacy of the democratic system. That ombudsmen are appointed by Parliament (although generally these powers are granted to the government) means that ultimately the electorate would have the authority to determine the function of and resources available to the ombudsman for young people.

Yet there are obvious limitations to the impact an ombudsman may have on policy. The value of ombudsmen often lies in ensuring that elected politicians adhere to the law, particularly human rights law. In the case of young people, whose disadvantage is financial or economic, an ombudsman for young people may have less impact. It may be preferable therefore to establish a government minister for young people. Currently, there are limited incentives within government for ministers to take responsibility for the circumstances of young people in general. There are few rewards on offer for ministers admitting that their policies may be failing a particular age group in some way. Should there be a single minister, therefore, whose primary responsibility is ensuring that government departments take into account the current and future impacts on young people of policy and expenditure decisions? Highlighting the 'bad news' would be in their job description, and furthermore, as a government minister their identity and performance is more likely to be deliberated through the formal democratic process.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, older people's groups have often lobbied for the creation of a ministerial post for older people. (The Labour Party's front bench includes a shadow minister for care and older people, although no equivalent exists within government.) Although it would be unacceptable to establish a minister for older people without

There are (limited) precursors to the idea of a minister for young people. Ivan Lewis became the inaugural minister for young people and learning during Labour's third term in office, based in the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now Department for Education). The post has now been abolished, but in any case, it is not clear that this role would have facilitated cross-governmental action on behalf of young people. There also exists the Government Equalities Office (GEO), once an independent department but now subsumed within the Home Office, with two ministers. Theresa May combines the role of minister for women and equality with the far more demanding role of Home Secretary, and Lynne Featherstone combines the role of minister for equalities with the role of minister for criminal information. The GEO does in theory have a cross-governmental role, principally in ensuring that departments adhere to the Equality Act 2010. But it has limited resources or institutional levers, and furthermore, it is not clear that either minister has the authority, or inclination, to adjudicate on matters where the interests of different age groups may conflict.

Clearly, there are many organisational and political complexities associated with the idea of a minister for young people. An ombudsman, operating at a critical distance from government, may be better placed to achieve these objectives – although the representativeness of the position would be a permanent limitation.

### *Intergenerational charter*

Based on research on young people in Australia, academic Judith Bessant has advocated an 'intergenerational charter', a constitutional agreement between citizens with the legal and moral force of, say, a human rights declaration.<sup>77</sup> Bessant argues that political leaders in Australia have used ideas around intergenerational equity and protecting future generations to justify a neoliberal economic policy programme – including reducing public expenditure, both to reduce debt and promote growth through tax cuts – which may not in fact be in the interests of young people.

This is not the place to speculate in detail about the content of an intergenerational charter (nor does Bessant), but we can assume that any such charter would establish the basis of a decent lifecourse for individuals and families – going beyond simply proclaiming the basic tenets of a civilised society, that is, the minimalist approach of human rights charters. The charter would establish also the duties owed by each generation to others, or perhaps more precisely, how we can expect to be treated by fellow citizens at different life-stages.

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a minister for young people, establishing a ministerial post to address intergenerational issues may be workable compromise.

<sup>77</sup> Bessant, Judith (2008) 'Age and equity: a case for an intergenerational charter' in *Journal of Australian Studies* 32(3), pp. 361-373.

Crucially, Bessant argues that an intergenerational charter must be deliberative in nature, inspired by the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas. It would intimately involve each citizen, including young people, in decisions around its form and content. Moreover, deliberation would be central not only to its creation but also how it operates in practice: an intergenerational charter would guarantee an equal say in public life for different age cohorts, irrespective of their relative size within the electorate.

The main difficulty with the notion of an intergenerational charter, especially in terms of overcoming the democratic deficit, is that it does not adhere fully to democratic principles and the sovereignty of the electoral process within representative democracies.<sup>78</sup> On the one hand, this is a strength: it means that young people's perspectives are granted equal status even though young cohorts may be smaller. On the other hand, it is perhaps naïve to assume that the existence of the charter will guarantee the protection of young people's interests, given that larger cohorts remain able to protect their interests through the formal democratic process. Essentially, like a human rights charter, an intergenerational charter would be a constraint upon the decisions that democratically-elected governments can make in office. Even if the charter is created originally by democratic means, future electorates may insist on the right of elected representatives to alter the charter. Human rights are never entirely timeless, but the kind of rights and obligations associated with an intergenerational charter would presumably be so culturally and temporally specific, and highly relevant to the daily business of governance, that they would be kept under constant review – and would presumably be open to perennial legal challenge. Bessant argues in response that 'an intergenerational charter is not a radical departure from democratic principles, but is consistent with core democratic values. It can embellish the values and practices that constitute equity, participation and inclusion while helping to secure political legitimacy.'

## **Protection for future citizens**

### *Calculating the impact of policy on future generations*

The desirability of calculating the impact of policy decisions on young people, and indeed all age groups, was discussed above. Similar mechanisms for impacts on future generations can be justified on the same basis. Two additional points are worth noting here: firstly, despite the fact that governments, increasingly often, claim to be making decisions based on

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<sup>78</sup> This is a dilemma that afflicts Habermas' work on deliberative democracy more generally. Establishing that political relations should be conducted on the basis of deliberation does not overcome the fact that, eventually, elections must be held to determine which individuals and parties should hold political office. Ultimately, the largest or most resourceful groups within the electorate will be able to circumvent the deliberative process.

the interests of future generations, there are no formal mechanisms guaranteeing that future citizens' interests are considered in the policy-making process. This contrasts with existing young people, who are included in EqlAs, albeit not in a satisfactory manner.

Secondly, the difficulty associated with assessing the impacts on citizens not yet alive. For this reason, it is logical to argue that it is impossible to authoritatively gauge the impact on future citizens, and therefore determine how best to protect them. However, even if analyses of future impacts are not binding on policy-makers for this reason, it does not mean that this information (albeit imperfect) does not constitute a valuable contribution to the democratic process. Furthermore, children not yet able to vote should also be considered future citizens in this regard. It was noted above that EqlAs focus on assessing the immediate impacts of decisions. On this basis, the impacts on children today are taken into account, but not the lifecourse implications. Even if it is impossible to assess the impact on citizens not yet born, this surely applies less to citizens alive but under the voting age.

#### *An ombudsman for future citizens*

As with votes for parents, Hungary leads the world in attempting to protect the interests of future citizens. There exists in Hungary a fully functioning Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations. The Commissioner receives petitions from the public to investigate whether government decisions will negatively impact on future generations. According to Kirsty Schneeberger, writing in 2012, the Commissioner had received over 400 petitions since 2008, and had issued reports to parliament on 70 of these.<sup>79</sup> An ombudsman for future citizens may be justified on similar grounds to an ombudsman for young people, discussed above – indeed, it may again be preferable to establish a ministerial position for future citizens to enable cross-governmental action. Furthermore, while it is difficult at the level of principle – given the individualistic nature of human rights – to justify this kind of special protection for young people who, after all, are entitled to vote, this caveat may not apply to future citizens. That future generations by definition have no voice within the democratic process means that it may breach their human rights to be unduly burdened by the outcomes of today's democratic process. The question, then, becomes one of whether citizens not yet alive can be said to hold inviolable rights as human beings.

One of the reasons that Hungary has been able to establish an ombudsman for future generations is that the Hungarian constitution bestows citizens a right to a clean and healthy environment. Accordingly, most submissions to the ombudsman relate to ecological issues.

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<sup>79</sup> Schneeberger, Kirsty (2012) 'Those yet to be born: representing the rights of future generations' in Coatman, Clare & Shrubsole, Guy (eds) *Regeneration* (London: Lawrence & Wishart), pp. 188-198.

As Schneeberger points out, 'it is this right that underpins the very existence of the [ombudsman], and it is the absence of such a right that has led to some thinkers to argue that such a role could not exist in the UK'. Of course, the burdens placed on future generations, discussed in the first section, are not composed solely of ecological issues. The Hungarian ombudsman's reliance on the constitutional right to a healthy environment may therefore be seen as a constraint. As such, Schneeberger adds that

the UK is perhaps better placed to establish an ombudsman with a broader remit than the Hungarian one: it might be feasible to instead focus on building on the rights to fair tax and pensions policies, for instance, with environmental priorities a part of the ombudsman's broader portfolio.

### *Legal limits on burdens for future citizens*

As indicated by the discussion above, it will always be difficult to justify constraining the actions of democratically elected governments, solely on the basis that the interests of some groups of voters are not served by the outcomes of elections – especially if these groups have not used their vote. However, citizens not yet alive have much more justification for demanding constraints upon what governments may do in office, even if democratically elected, because they do not have a vote. There have always been boundaries to the practice of democratic citizenship, such as the inadequacy of resources, the influence of foreign powers, and more recently, the establishment of inviolable human rights. Given that political authorities, and society in general, increasingly have the capacity – and arguably, the inclination – to burden unenfranchised future generations, intergenerational equity appears to necessitate a further constraint upon democracy for the sake of future citizens.

Indeed, Judith Bessant argues that future generations should be represented symbolically in an intergenerational charter.<sup>80</sup> The charter would not only establish our duties to citizens at other life-stages, but also future citizens. Clearly, she is right about the need to protect future generations, and as such an intergenerational charter may be an important part of this protection, but that future generations cannot possibly themselves be party to this charter, which would be deliberative in nature and operation, is a more significant problem than Bessant admits. However the symbolic representation of future generations is achieved, within the political system in general as well as the intergenerational charter, there will inevitably be an element of paternalism in the efforts of current citizens to protect future citizens – and no guarantee that current citizens will agree on how the interests of future citizens are best served.

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<sup>80</sup> Bessant (2008) 'Age and equity...'.

There is of course no alternative to a paternalistic approach, rather than democratic, to protecting future citizens.<sup>81</sup> But given this reality, it suggests that a stronger set of constraints than an intergenerational charter would encompass are required, specifically for future generations. As current citizens must we compel ourselves, legally, to protect future citizens?

Agreeing to this edict, however, does not mean that legal limits on the burdens we may bestow are realisable in practice. A vast range of policy decisions may have long-term implications, even if the initial decision is eventually reversed – sometimes these implications will be inadvertent. Opinion on whether these implications are positive or negative will inevitably vary, not least because the implications are ultimately unknowable. The example of ‘extended working lives’ is an interesting case in point. If older people are required to work for longer, as a result of eligibility ages for pension provision being raised, does this benefit future generations? In the early part of their life they will, other things being equal, be required to pay less tax and lower pension contributions (depending on type of scheme) as a result of pension liabilities being reduced. But future citizens will be old one day too – they may be retired for almost as long as they are of working age. It is plausible to argue, therefore, that they too are served by a pension system based on high contributions with generous retirement provisions. Compelling older people to work for longer may have an impact on the job opportunities available to younger generations – but even if this is the case, it may in fact lead to society placing greater emphasis on education for young people, which would arguably be in the interests of future citizens, especially if it involves investment in educational infrastructure. With more older people in the labour market, the informal provision of childcare by grandparents may be reduced. This may negatively affect future generations over the very short-term, but on the other hand, is it right for society to become reliant on grandparental care rather than enabling a better work/life balance for parents themselves? And how can we possibly know what future citizens will think about these issues when they become parents, or grandparents?

Given these uncertainties, there may be a strong case for favouring the option discussed above, establishing a requirement to consider the impact of policy on future citizens, rather than legal limits on what governments may do in office. However, while any system based on legal guarantees will be open to interpretation, any system *without* these guarantees will be open to ‘abuse’ by current electorates. The fairest solution may be to establish a permanent, independent commission to adjudicate on how to protect future generations, composed of experts from a range of professions. This option is not dissimilar to the idea of

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<sup>81</sup> With the partial exception of children, that is, citizens not yet entitled to vote. Arguably parents are ideally placed to represent their children’s interests – see the earlier discussion of parental votes.



an ombudsman for future citizens, but the commission would have greater legal authority to influence and where necessary reverse government decisions. The most appropriate comparator in the current political system is not ombudsmen, but rather competition authorities such as the Office of Fair Trading, which have a quasi-judicial role in determining whether private sector firms have breached competition rules. Their work is based on a legal code, but this is only applied on the basis of detailed analysis of actual market conditions. The difference here is that, like most ombudsmen, the commission would be adjudicating on government decisions rather than market activity. The government (and local authorities, devolved executives, etc.) would have the right to challenge the commission's decisions through the formal judicial system. It would of course be naïve to assume that the commission could escape politics entirely, or adequately 'represent' future citizens in any meaningful – these dilemmas are ineradicable.

# Appendix: possible objections

This appendix addresses the likely objections, to both the notion of an intergenerational democratic deficit, and some of the ideas discussed in the third section.

**“Democracy means one person one vote”**

The principle of one person, one vote is already refracted in practice by innumerable factors related to the cultural, economic and institutional context within which any system of democracy is established, chiefly the paradigm of ‘representative democracy’. The political system must unquestionably remain based on this principle, but aspects of the wider system, and the context within which the system operates, that undermine the enfranchisement of any group must be addressed.

**“Democracy should be blind to age differences”**

The democratic process takes into account a range of demographic characteristics, both formally and informally. The validation of all-women shortlists is a recent case in point. The reality that young people will, in general, be affected by the outcomes of the democratic process for longer than any other age group is ineradicable – and should be taken into account as democracy evolves. Traditionally, democracies have operated within a pyramid-shaped demographic context; the transformation of this context must be acknowledged.

**“Young people should not be privileged within the political system”**

As a matter of principle, no age group should be unduly privileged within the political system. But a system based on one person, one vote will penalise small cohort sizes, whether of younger or older voters. By definition, young people live with the consequences of political decisions for longer; furthermore, they are at a crucial life-stage where the impact of political decisions will have a decisive and cumulative effect on their socio-economic circumstances and life chances across their lifecourses. The legitimacy of the democratic process may therefore be undermined if young people are consistently out-voted.

**“Individuals do not vote solely on the basis of their age”**

Evidence suggests age is a significant factor in political decisions, and that there is a significant correlation between cohort size and the achievement of policy outcomes that suit the interests of particular cohorts. Furlong and Cartmel directly, and JG TP in general. People of the same generation may well vote for different political parties, and their political

**“Individuals do not vote solely on the basis of their age” [cont’d]**

preferences may change over time, but generally speaking generational perspectives will influence the broad political agenda within which all parties seek to garner support. Furthermore, at the individual level, life-stage and generational identity have an impact upon how and whether people engage with the democratic process. They may interpret their interests in different ways, but this does not mean that perceptions of their generational interests are not crucial to their political behaviour.

**“Older people have greater levels of experience required for political leadership, and younger people by definition lack maturity”**

Life experience is certainly an important trait for elected representatives. But although experience *generally* increases with age, this is not *necessarily* the case. Older cohorts will have been young once – but in almost all cases, in very different conditions from contemporary young people. Greater experience of, essentially, the passage of time cannot adequately compensate for a lack of directly relevant experience of these conditions. Maturity is obviously a subjective judgement, and nevertheless, the perspective of young people is inimitable.

**“16 year olds are not mature enough to vote”**

The line between childhood and adulthood will to some extent always be arbitrary. Yet in many other walks of life, 16 year-olds are considered old enough to take responsibility for their decisions. Most obviously, a society that has decided not to protect 16 year-olds from military service cannot deny this age group the vote and claim to be democratic.

**“The extent of population ageing has been exaggerated”**

Population ageing is a very recent phenomenon; pensioners began to out-number children only in the last five years. In substantive terms, population ageing has not yet happened, but will accelerate in coming decades. There may of course be benefits to living in an older society, but the implications for democracy must be assessed.

**“Young people choose not to use their vote – disenfranchisement is their own fault”**

The idea that non-voting is a choice, and therefore an indication of apathy or even contentment, is far too simplistic. We need to consider the ‘supply’ of democratic life, such as the nature and role of political parties, as well as ‘demand’ for politics. Choosing not to participate in elections may be a profoundly political act which is not recognised by the formal democratic process. Non-voting is also complicated by the problem of non-registration. The fact that many young people are not registered to vote (as a result of moving home, rather than conscious choice) means that they are unable to vote, and do not receive a formal prompt in the form of a polling card.

**“Many young people are already engaged in politics – those not engaged have no excuse”**

The fact that many young people *do* participate in politics dispels the myth of youth apathy. But the forms of participation favoured by young people are not rewarded by the formal democratic process. Evidence suggests that the main divide within youth politics is not between activists and non-activists (as they share a distrust of formal politics) but rather between young people involved in politics as a career choice, and young people involved to advance a particular cause.

**“It is impossible to engineer the electorate to produce generationally fair outcomes”**

One person, one vote must remain the foundational principle of democratic organisation, which means ultimately larger age cohorts will always have greater voting power. But the democratic process is highly complex; there are myriad ways on enhancing the enfranchisement of certain groups without undermining this principle. Moreover, options such as votes at 16 and parental votes would send a clear message about the importance of young people to the democratic process while reinforcing this principle.

**“Increasing the election turnout out of young people would have the most significant impact on the intergenerational democratic deficit”**

Higher turnout rates among young voters would go a long way to equalising the actual power exercised by different generations within the democratic process. Yet higher turnout is not a panacea; wider biases against young people also need to be addressed, and demographic change means that even with 100 per cent turnout older cohorts will become dominant. Mandatory voting would therefore not be an effective remedy for the intergenerational democratic deficit.

**“Measures to support young people are a recipe for conflict between generations”**

The emergence of intergenerational conflict is already evident in the UK – it will worsen if the disenfranchisement of young people is not addressed. Having said this, any reforms to the democratic process must seek to maximise the possibility of sound intergenerational relations.

**“Future demographic change might mean that young people become dominant”**

The dominance of any age group within the electorate is problematic for democracy. But we can be confident that electorate will age significantly in coming decades – the trend is for life expectancy increases to be under-estimated rather than over-estimated. Given that the 18 year-olds of 2030 are already alive, so we know for certain that the age imbalance within the electorate will persist for the next two decades. Furthermore, the intergenerational democratic deficit derives from more than the relative size of age cohorts.

**“Quotas of young people in legislatures would be undemocratic”**

**“Quotas of young people in legislatures would be undemocratic” [contd]**

**“The oldest old are also under-represented”**

**“The oldest old do not vote in the same proportion as people in their 60s and 70s, so their political power is exaggerated”**

**“The government needs to borrow, and grow the economy, to invest in public services which will benefit future generations”**

**“It is impossible to assess the impacts of policy on future citizens”**

Clearly, prescribing a minimum number for any age group within democratic institutions contradicts basic principles of democracy. However, legislatures could establish forums of young people who become members in an advisory capacity. Alternatively, a small number of seats could be elected only by young people (the representatives themselves would not be required to be under a certain age). It is also possible that political parties, as independent bodies, will choose to offer more support for the selection of younger candidates – the electorate would of course retain the right not to vote for these candidates.

People aged 80 or over appear to be under-represented in democratic institutions. Clearly, 80-somethings are not equivalent to new retirees aged around 65. It may be fair to offer this age group protection within the democratic process, along the lines of any protection offered to young people.

This is almost certainly correct. It is therefore unfair to claim that people aged 80 or over, for instance, exercise political power greater than or equivalent to younger cohorts. We should study the political behaviour of the oldest old in more detail and, where necessary, protect them within the democratic process. By the same token, however, the fact that everybody aged 65 or over is assumed to have the same turnout rate means that the actual political power of voters in their late-60s and 70s is significantly under-estimated.

Whether accurate or not, economic theories do not alone justify jeopardising the democratic freedoms of future citizens. Creating obligations that will only be met by people not yet alive has always been questionable from the perspective of democracy. Yet in recent years the state's ability to burden future generations appears to have increased, despite the commitment to protecting future generations often espoused by politicians. Even if it is fair to assume that long-term borrowing, for instance, will benefit future generations, governments have offered few guarantees regarding this outcome. Furthermore, this assumption is probably not sufficient justification for creating the *risk* that current practices will jeopardise the political citizenship of future generations.

We will never be able to definitively determine what the impact of today's policy decisions will be upon future generations. However, the possibility that future citizens will be adversely affected by decisions demands far greater attention than it is currently afforded by policy-makers.