

# **A GENERATION APART?**

**YOUTH POLITICS, ALIENATION  
AND DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL  
IN BRITAIN**

**Chris Bick,  
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and Jasmine Jinadu**

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# CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Summary</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>1. What is at stake in youth politics?</b> .....	<b>8</b>
The shifting terrain of youth politics.....	9
<b>2. The myth and reality of youth politics</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Three assumptions about youth politics vs the reality .....	11
<b>3. The pain points of the youth engagement paradox</b> .....	<b>20</b>
The background conditions for political engagement: retreat from digital spaces and the need for ‘third spaces’ .....	20
Knowing how, feeling able: the barriers to meaningful participation .....	21
Locked out: excluded from democratic decision-making .....	22
<b>4. A new compact with young people</b> .....	<b>24</b>
Objective 1: Rebuild community infrastructure as a foundation for political engagement.....	24
Objective 2: Develop the knowledge, habits and access that democratic participation requires.....	26
Objective 3: Bring young people back into representative institutions .....	28
<b>5. Conclusion: towards a youth-focussed democracy</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>30</b>

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# FOREWORD

It is nearly two decades since the dawn of the global financial crisis. In that time, it has become widely recognised that liberal democracies such as Britain's have become 'gerontocracies', in which the interests, values and votes of older generations achieve an outsized influence over government policy and economic outcomes. In the meantime, young people get pushed to the margins.

The economic dimensions of this are well rehearsed: a housing market that locks out younger wage-earners, escalating student debt, cuts to youth services, withdrawal from a single European labour market. The cultural dimensions are more notorious: political weather made by newspapers that are primarily read by the over-50s, flag-waving nostalgia for a lost nation, and of course the constant reactionary drumbeat of sneering about younger generations accused of being 'woke' and feckless.

There is no viable future for progressive politics that does not break out of this cycle. That doesn't mean that it should now be the turn of older generations to pay, while young people's interests trump everyone else's. But it does mean reckoning with the fact that it is younger generations who have the most at stake, when it comes to the pursuit of progress. And as IPPR lay out in this report, when it comes to political attitudes and values, younger voters are the natural base for any progressive party or movement.

A familiar retort to this is that young people would get more of what they want from government, if only they would participate more in politics. Deprived of their own voice, it then falls to commentators to speculate as to what the young care about instead, which must be something other than 'politics'. This report makes an essential distinction: young people are not apathetic, but they are alienated.

Thanks to careful empirical analysis, as opposed to the usual caricature, this report shows that young people are, if anything, more politically conscious than their parents and grandparents. They are not turning against democracy, but they are disillusioned with how it works in Britain today – and who can blame them?

The message here is nevertheless a hopeful one – at least for progressives – just so long as young voices can be taken seriously, and the institutions to channel and support them receive the investment they need. Contrary to claims that young men are being radicalised en masse by the radical and far right, the evidence assembled here demonstrates deep and widespread antipathy towards the forces of political reaction. The problem is not a lack of care, but a lack of capability.

This is a crucial piece of research and policy advocacy, not just for anyone working on youth policy or services, but for anyone trying to imagine a viable economy, democracy and society beyond the next newspaper headline or election cycle.

**Will Davies**

**Professor of political economy at Goldsmiths and  
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# SUMMARY

Public debate about young people and politics is loud, contested – and largely wrong. Drawing on new analysis of British Election Study data and participatory workshops with young people from across Britain, this report challenges three dominant narratives:

- the radicalising young male cohort
- the hyper-polarised young electorate
- youth apathy.

None survives contact with the data.

The gender gap is real, but a leftward shift among young women is primarily driving this, rather than any rightward drift among young men. And on almost every issue we examined, the divide between young people and older cohorts dwarfs the gender gap entirely.

More striking than what divides young men and young women is what they share: genuine political concern alongside a profound loss of confidence that the system can act on it.

This is what we call the ‘youth engagement paradox’: high political interest and issue-based engagement, combined with deep scepticism about the value of formal democratic participation. The crisis in British youth democracy, in other words, is one of alienation, not some strange combination of extremism and apathy. Speaking with young people from across the UK, we find that this is rooted in:

- the erosion of community infrastructure
- a lack of confidence and democratic knowledge
- a pervasive sense among young people that British institutions are simply not designed for them.

These burdens are not evenly shared: class compounds every dimension of the problem, with young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds facing all the same barriers as their peers, and then some.

Addressing this alienation is a matter not just of democratic health but also of political urgency: young people remain the most progressive generation in British politics and winning back their trust should be a priority for any progressive political project.

Earning that trust back requires a new political compact with young people, resting on three pillars:

- Rebuild the community infrastructure where civic life takes root.
- Develop the knowledge, habits and access that democratic participation requires.
- Give young people genuine power, not tokenism.

We now look into these pillars in more detail, outlining the action that needs to be taken under each one.

## **REBUILD THE COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE WHERE CIVIC LIFE TAKES ROOT**

- Reverse more than a decade of disinvestment in youth services through sustained revenue funding – backed in part by revenue generated from the Digital Services Tax (a 2 per cent levy on social media platforms, search engines and online marketplaces) and fines levied under the Online Safety Act 2023.
- Embed youth provision within the Pride in Place programme, which targets funding at deprived communities, with the objective that neighbourhoods can shape their areas, by:
  - requiring that the community-led successor organisations that will replace neighborhood boards include at least one member aged under 25
  - establishing a dedicated youth engagement stream in the Network for Neighbourhoods community of practice to provide neighbourhood boards and successor organisations with dedicated support and expertise on youth engagement.

## **DEVELOP THE KNOWLEDGE, HABITS AND ACCESS THAT DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION REQUIRES**

- Give citizenship education the status it deserves, by:
  - reconceiving its content around a firm grounding in how democracy works
  - funding training for teachers at both the primary and secondary levels
  - introducing a mandatory community engagement component requiring young people to spend time in local democratic and civic life.
- Break down barriers to democratic participation by:
  - making election days public holidays
  - introducing a statutory right to time off work for civic participation
  - legislating to enable remote and hybrid council meetings.

## **GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE GENUINE POWER, NOT TOKENISM**

- Establish a youth interest committee in the House of Lords to scrutinise all primary legislation for its impact on young people, with membership drawn from both sitting peers and young people nominated through schools. This will create a direct link between democratic education and real political power.

This is not a blueprint for reinventing British democracy from scratch. It is a recognition that a democracy that persistently excludes a generation is diminishing itself – and that rebuilding young people’s trust requires not just better policies, but also a fundamentally different relationship between political institutions and the people they are supposed to serve.

The government’s recent commitments to young people – proposals to tackle the crisis relating to young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and to expand opportunities to work and travel in the EU – are welcome signals of intent. But they remain incomplete without a serious response to the crisis of political alienation that has come to define the experience of young people in Britain today. That is what this report sets out to provide.

# 1. WHAT IS AT STAKE IN YOUTH POLITICS?

Youth politics is not a peripheral sphere of democracy, but a central feature of it. And the pervasive lack of understanding of young people's politics is a significant oversight for anyone concerned with the future of British democracy in both the short term and the long term.

In the short term, young voters matter electorally. Despite typically having lower turnout rates, they represent a volatile segment of the electorate in which partisan attachment is less pronounced than in older cohorts. Fluctuations in youth turnout and partisan alignment can have substantive effects on electoral outcomes (More in Common and UCL Policy Lab 2024). And in an increasingly fractured party system, where small swings prove decisive under the first-past-the-post electoral system, even a relatively disengaged youth vote can shape who wins an election. These dynamics will become more significant still once the franchise is extended to 16- and 17-year-olds ahead of the next general election.

Perhaps more important, however, are the long-term implications of young people's uncertain engagement with democratic politics. Political orientations and habits of participation formed in youth tend to endure across the life course (Serra 2024). This means that the political trajectories established among today's young people will shape democratic politics for decades to come. A system that persistently alienates young voters risks something more serious than short-term electoral volatility – it risks fracturing the intergenerational compact on which democratic stability depends. Democratic societies rest on the assumption that each new cohort will sustain sufficient faith in democratic norms and institutions, to continue the cycle of participation and mutual consideration (Thompson 2011; White 2024). If that faith weakens, so too does the system's long-term health.

There are signs that this is already happening. Survey research in some European countries finds declining confidence among younger cohorts in democratic institutions and their ability to deliver meaningful change (Stanley et al 2022; Barnes and Loose 2025; Justino 2025). In some cases, far-right movements have capitalised on this, successfully mobilising younger voters who express scepticism towards liberal-democratic norms (Abou-Chadi 2024). New cohorts of voters are entering the electorate under political conditions markedly different from those that previous generations faced – and their political attitudes have until recently remained comparatively under-examined.

Recent months have seen a renewed push for robust empirical evidence of how young people in Britain understand politics in their own words: what they believe, what shapes their participation and how they make sense of the political world around them (Barnes and Loose 2025; Gamote and Hyman 2025; The Electoral Commission 2025). This report contributes to that growing body of research – examining how youth politics is shaped by a political system that too often shuts young people out of meaningful participation and, as a result, fails to understand the challenges they face on their own terms.

## THE SHIFTING TERRAIN OF YOUTH POLITICS

The changing context in which young voters are coming of age heightens the urgency to address political alienation among young people. As noted above, the political environment facing today's young people differs significantly from what their predecessors experienced. What Jäger (2026) describes as an era of “hyper-politics” – marked by high issue salience, rapid cycles of mobilisation and engagement organised around specific causes rather than long-standing institutions – has replaced the relative apathy that characterised earlier generations, particularly before the financial crisis of 2008.

Some of this disconnect has to do with the information environment in which young people have come of age. Digital platforms now play a central role in shaping political identity and participation, altering the relationship between citizens and formal democratic institutions (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2024). This has prompted particular concern about young people, whose lives are digitally mediated to a far greater extent than older cohorts (Murray 2026; Sky News 2026).

These shifts have coincided with a serious deterioration in the material conditions underpinning the social contract. Most young people in Britain have no experience of sustained economic security: depending on their age, the financial crisis, austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic or the cost-of-living crisis, or some combination of the four, has shaped their formative years (Bell et al 2022). The consequences are tangible. The number of 16–24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) has recently passed 1 million and shows little sign of slowing. For those who can find work, low pay, insecure contracts and soaring housing costs make long-term stability feel out of reach (Atwell et al 2026). Attempts to improve earning potential through higher education frequently mean taking on debt levels so onerous they have prompted a Treasury committee inquiry (Stewart 2026).

These pressures drive not only social dislocation but also democratic disaffection. This is weakening trust in institutions and eroding confidence that the political system can deliver security or fairness, while sharpening awareness of, and anger at, the injustices shaping British and global society.

This dynamic creates both risk and opportunity. The risk is that alienation, left unaddressed, hardens into something more corrosive: disaffection that breeds nihilism and weakens commitment to shared political futures. The opportunity lies in the fact that we see little evidence of this happening at scale – yet. Young people care deeply about politics and retain a strong normative commitment to democracy, but they are increasingly losing confidence in democratic institutions as they currently function. The challenge for institutions and political actors is to earn back their trust – by reforming the conditions of participation and responding credibly to the material concerns driving their alienation in the first place. Doing so first requires understanding young people's relationship to politics on their own terms.

## 2. THE MYTH AND REALITY OF YOUTH POLITICS

Given the stakes, it is hardly surprising that youth politics has become a growing focus of public debate. Yet much of the received wisdom shaping how commentators, politicians and policymakers discuss young people in Britain is weakly evidenced, resting on a series of assumptions that our research directly challenges.

Much of this commentary has focussed on the possibility of radicalisation. The perception that young men and young women are pulling apart politically, with young men moving sharply to the right, is driving this (Burn-Murdoch 2024; Horowitch 2024; Lawford 2026; Maguire 2026). But as set out below, our analysis suggests a more nuanced picture: a leftward shift among young women is primarily driving the emerging gender divide. We also find little evidence for the more long-standing assumption that young people are politically apathetic. On the contrary, they are engaged with many of the same concerns as the wider electorate, and are at least as likely as older groups to say that democratic participation matters (Uberoi and Johnston 2022). What they doubt is whether formal politics can actually deliver on those concerns.

The result is a ‘youth engagement paradox’: high political interest and issue-based engagement, combined with deep scepticism about the value of translating those concerns into formal democratic participation. The underlying crisis is one of alienation, not some noxious combination of extremeism or apathy.

We explore each of these points in turn after our note on methodology, comparing three common assumptions about youth politics against the reality.

### A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This report draws on two complementary strands of evidence: new quantitative analysis of British Election Study (BES) data, and a programme of qualitative participatory workshops conducted with young people from across Britain between 15 February and 15 March 2025.

The workshops involved 28 participants from a range of ethnic and class backgrounds. Recruitment was designed to capture variation in both gender and political experience. In terms of gender, 15 participants identified as women, 11 identified as men and two identified as gender fluid. To ensure breadth of experience, 19 participants were recruited through a national sample stratified by frequency of political discussion and voting behaviour. The remaining nine were recruited through the Advocacy Academy, a London-based youth organising centre, on the basis that their direct experience of civic engagement would provide a sharper account of the structural barriers to participation that the research sought to understand.

Workshop discussions were conducted in participants’ own words, and thematic analysis of transcripts was used to identify recurring patterns across groups. Where quotations are presented in this report, they have been lightly edited for clarity without altering their meaning. Findings from the workshops are presented as qualitative evidence of how young people understand and experience British politics. They should be read alongside the quantitative British Election Study analysis rather than being considered nationally representative in themselves.

## THREE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUTH POLITICS VS THE REALITY

### Assumption 1

Young men are moving to the populist right of the political spectrum

VS

### Reality

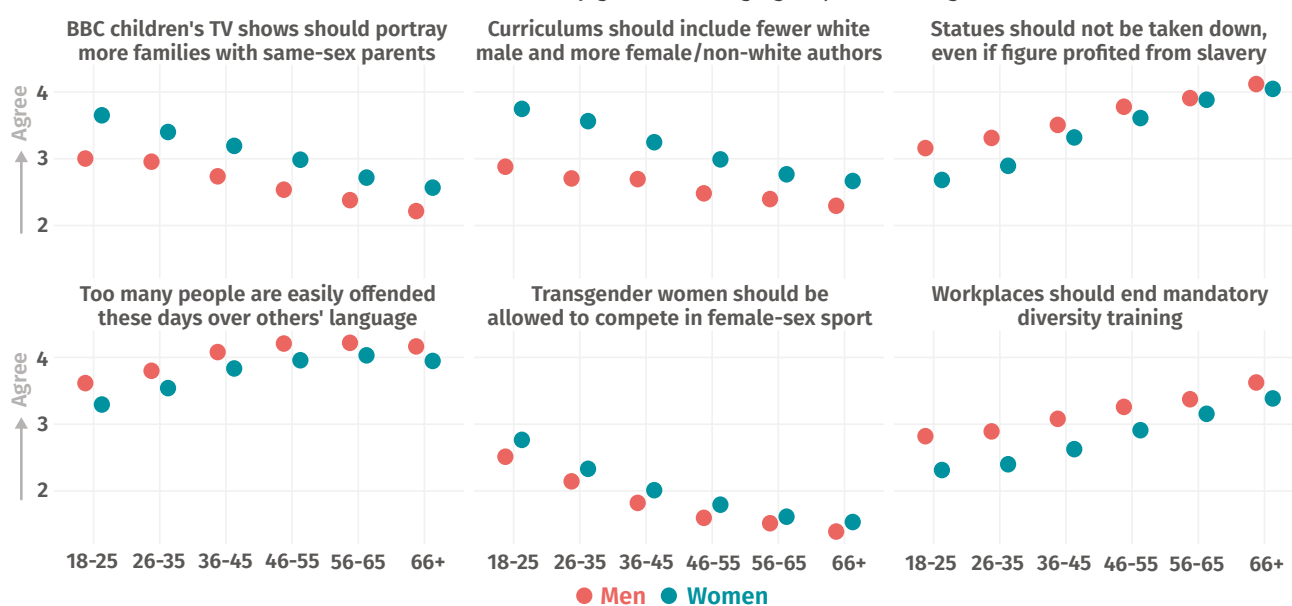
Young men remain more progressive than older cohorts

One of the most pervasive narratives in recent political debate concerns the potential radicalisation of young men towards the populist right. This draws on a broader pattern across advanced democracies, where young men in several countries have shifted rightwards in both preferences and voting behaviour – most visibly in the electoral success of parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany and the National Rally in France (Heinze and Scheuer 2025; Lynes 2025). Combined with the growing visibility of ‘manosphere’ influencers<sup>1</sup> and several high-profile incidents of violence against women (Barnes and Karim 2026; Nowell 2026), concern about a rightward turn among young men is understandable.

However, the available evidence suggests that this narrative overstates the extent to which young men as a whole are drifting towards reactionary politics. Across the policy domains most salient in right-populist discourse – so-called ‘culture war’ issues (see figure 2.1), immigration (see figure 2.2) and sexism and misogyny (see figure 2.3) – young men are the most progressive male cohort, holding positions slightly more liberal than men in other age groups. While this does not preclude a rightward shift on these issues – young men could be moving right while remaining the most progressive cohort – they do not appear to be out of step with the population at large in doing so.

FIGURE 2.1

Across all ‘culture war’ variables, young men represent the most progressive male cohort  
Attitudes towards ‘culture war’ issues, by gender and age group, 2025 (weighted means)



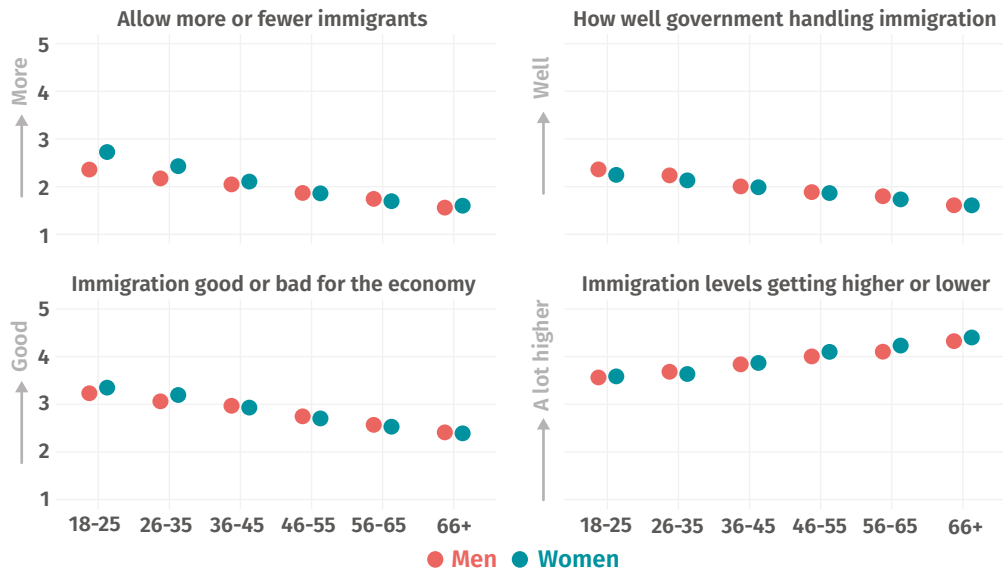
Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

1 The ‘manosphere’ is a loose online ecosystem of male-oriented communities, including men’s rights activists, pick-up artists and ‘red pill’ groups who articulate a sense of male victimisation in modern society. The manosphere ranges from relatively benign discussions of gym culture and finances to more extreme misogynistic ideologies, but tends to share broadly anti-feminist views and often frames masculinity as under threat.

**FIGURE 2.2**

**Young men also represent the most progressive male cohort on questions related to immigration**

*Attitudes towards immigration, by gender and age group, 2025 (weighted means)*



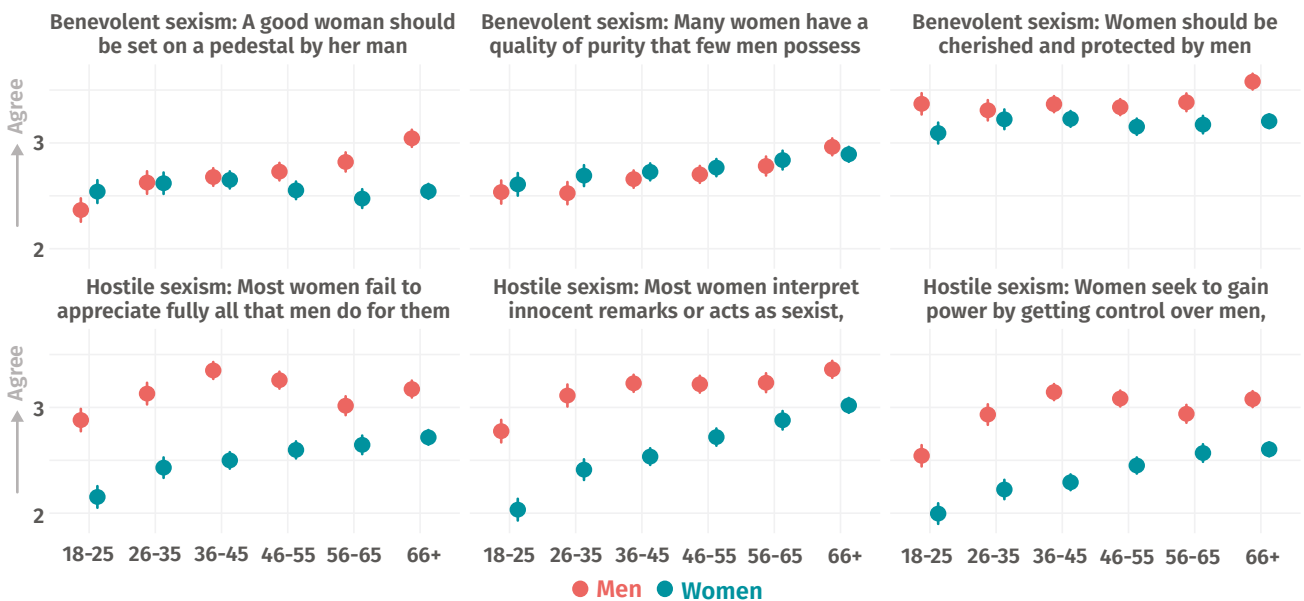
Note: All figures linearly rescaled to be on a 1–5 scale to facilitate comparison. Error present but very small, represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

**FIGURE 2.3**

**Young men are the most progressive cohort across most variables that measure sexist attitudes**

*Attitudes towards benevolent and hostile sexism, by gender and age group, 2025 (weighted means)*



Note: Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

This should not be taken to minimise the very real threats that certain right-wing subcultures such as the manosphere pose. These are cohort-level findings, and they do not rule out the possibility that a minority of young men are shifting more sharply rightwards through exposure to radical ideas in digital spaces – or that radicalisation might be decoupling from coherent, measurable ideological beliefs altogether (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Ayad 2023). Even small numbers of radicalised individuals can cause serious harm.

Nor do these findings rule out the possibility that misogynistic views will become more prevalent in the future. A recent Movember report found that nearly 63 per cent of 18–25-year-old men across Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom regularly engage with online masculinity influencers - a substantial channel through which such attitudes can spread (Fisher et al 2025). The same report found that this group is significantly more likely to believe they must fix their own problems without seeking help: an ethos of self-reliance that sits uneasily with the collective, mutually dependent disposition civic life depends on.

These concerns notwithstanding, the broader picture at present is a relatively positive one: young men as a cohort remain more progressive than their older counterparts in their attitudes towards most ‘culture war’ issues, immigration, and sexism and misogyny. The manosphere is almost certainly already influencing young British men, but not yet on a scale large enough to drive significant changes in cohort-level data. And while there is some evidence that young men are moving to the right on some issues, they are not doing so in a way that is disproportionate to the British population in general.

Data on party support and voting intention corroborates these findings. As figures 2.4, 2.5 and 2.6 show, support for Reform UK in the 2024 general election was concentrated primarily among older cohorts – an age gradient that 2025 vote intention data suggests is unlikely to shift significantly in the near term. While men across all age groups are more likely than women to support Reform, the increase among men aged 18–25 is notably less pronounced than among older male cohorts, including millennials.

**FIGURE 2.4**

**Young men were the least likely male cohort to vote for Reform UK in the 2024 general election and the most likely to vote for the Green Party**

*Vote in the 2024 general election, by party, gender and age group (weighted proportions)*



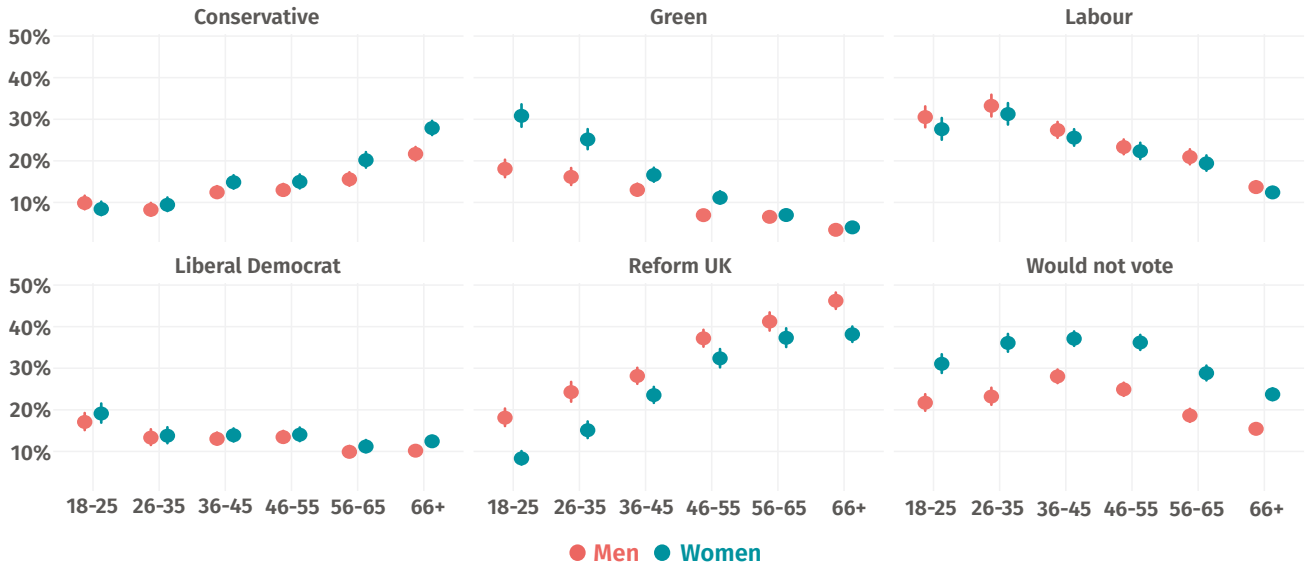
Note: Voting preferences for political parties are expressed as proportion of all who voted, whereas non-voters are expressed as a proportion of the total population within each age group. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

**FIGURE 2.5**

Trends from the 2024 general election continued in reported 2025 vote intention. Young men were the least likely male cohort to intend to vote for Reform UK in 2025 and the most likely to vote for the Green Party

*Voting intention in 2025, by party, gender and age group (weighted proportions)*



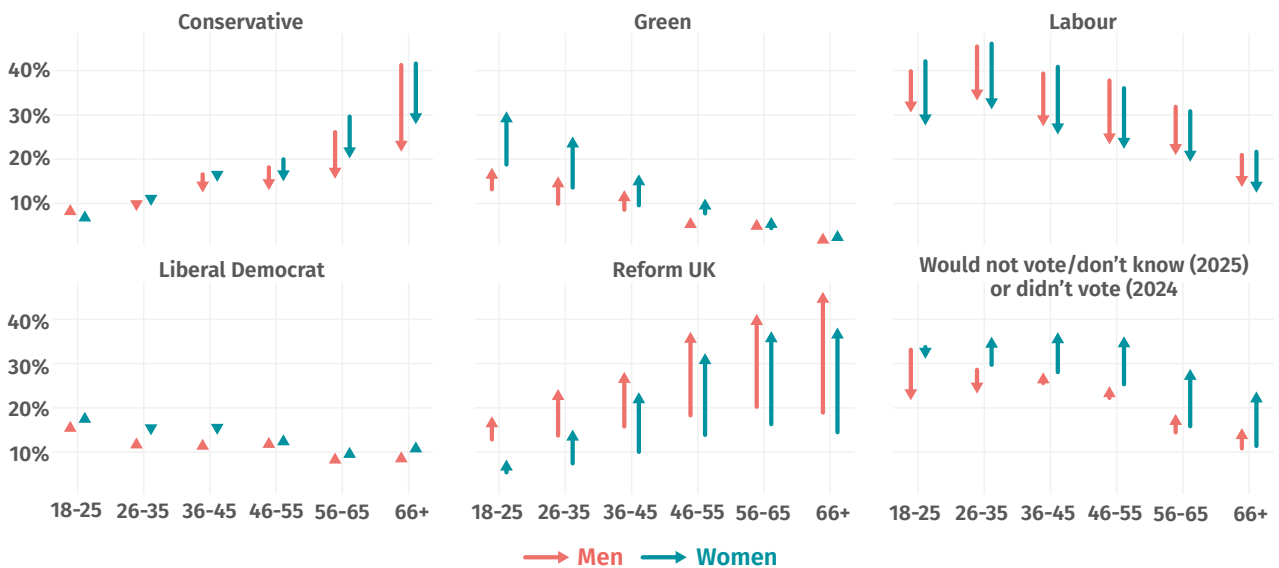
Note: Voting preferences for political parties are expressed as proportion of all who voted, whereas non-voters are expressed as a proportion of the total population within each age group. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

**FIGURE 2.6**

While all gender and age cohorts have moved towards Reform UK, young men have done so at lesser magnitude than any other male cohort

*Aggregate change in voting choice/intention, 2024–25 (weighted proportions)*



Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

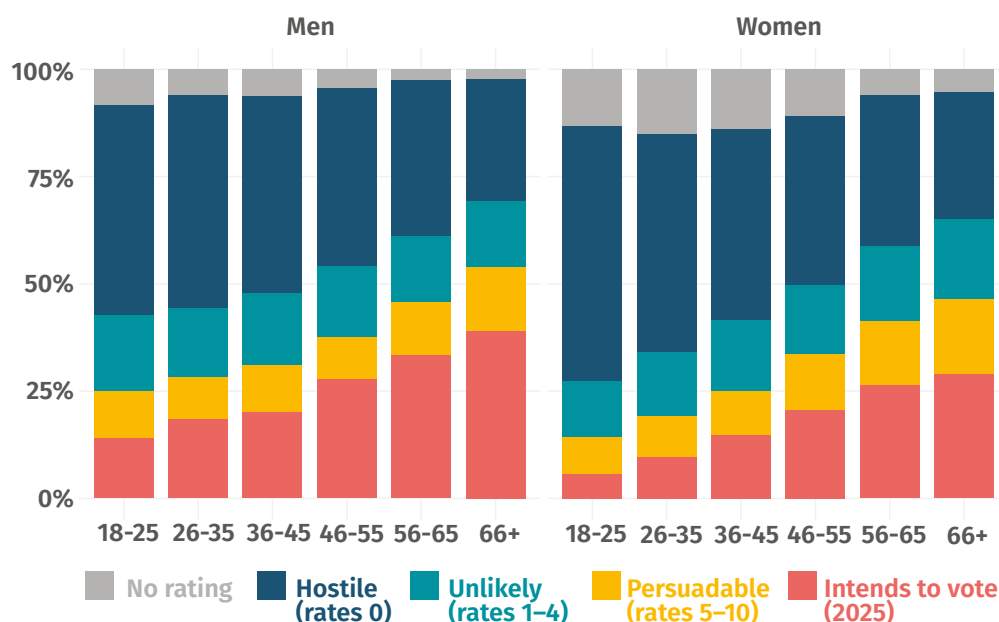
Self-reported favourability data tells the same story: in 2025, young men were the male age group most likely to be ‘hostile’ to Reform – registering 0 out of 10 on favourability – and the least likely to express an intention to vote for the party (see figure 2.7).

In short, consolidation among older voters has largely driven Reform’s recent gains – not disproportionate gains among young voters. This matters, considering comparative evidence showing that the mainstreaming of far-right parties can, over time, increase their appeal among younger voters (Mondon and Winter 2020; Heinze and Off 2026). That young men appear considerably more resistant to these ‘normalisation’ dynamics than older cohorts is, in this context, significant – it suggests that young people, regardless of gender, represent an important base of support for progressive politics, and one that should not be taken for granted.

**FIGURE 2.7**

**Young men are most likely to be hostile towards and least likely to intend to vote for Reform UK2**

*Change in party favourability towards Reform UK, 2024–25 (weighted proportions)*



Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

**Assumption 2**

Young men and young women are deeply polarised in relation to politics



**Reality**

The gender gap is real – but the generation gap is bigger

The second pervasive assumption about young people and politics builds on the first: that a rightward shift among young men has produced a growing political divide between young men and young women. If young men are understood to be moving sharply to the right, any divergence between the sexes is easily interpreted as a consequence of this. But a closer look at the data suggests that this narrative is focussed on the wrong dynamics.

The gap between young men and young women is real, but a pronounced leftward shift among young women is primarily driving it, not a rightward drift among young

men (see also Maguire 2026). This is consistent with comparative international analysis, which finds that the UK exhibits a small but growing gender gap that is both smaller than in many comparator countries and shaped by a dynamic in which young women are moving leftward at a faster rate than a relatively static cohort of young men (Nennstiel and Hudde 2025).

This matters, because framing the story in terms of gender divergence obscures a far more significant dynamic: the polarisation between young people and older age cohorts. On almost every issue polled in the British Election Study, the gap between young and old dwarfed the gap between young men and young women.

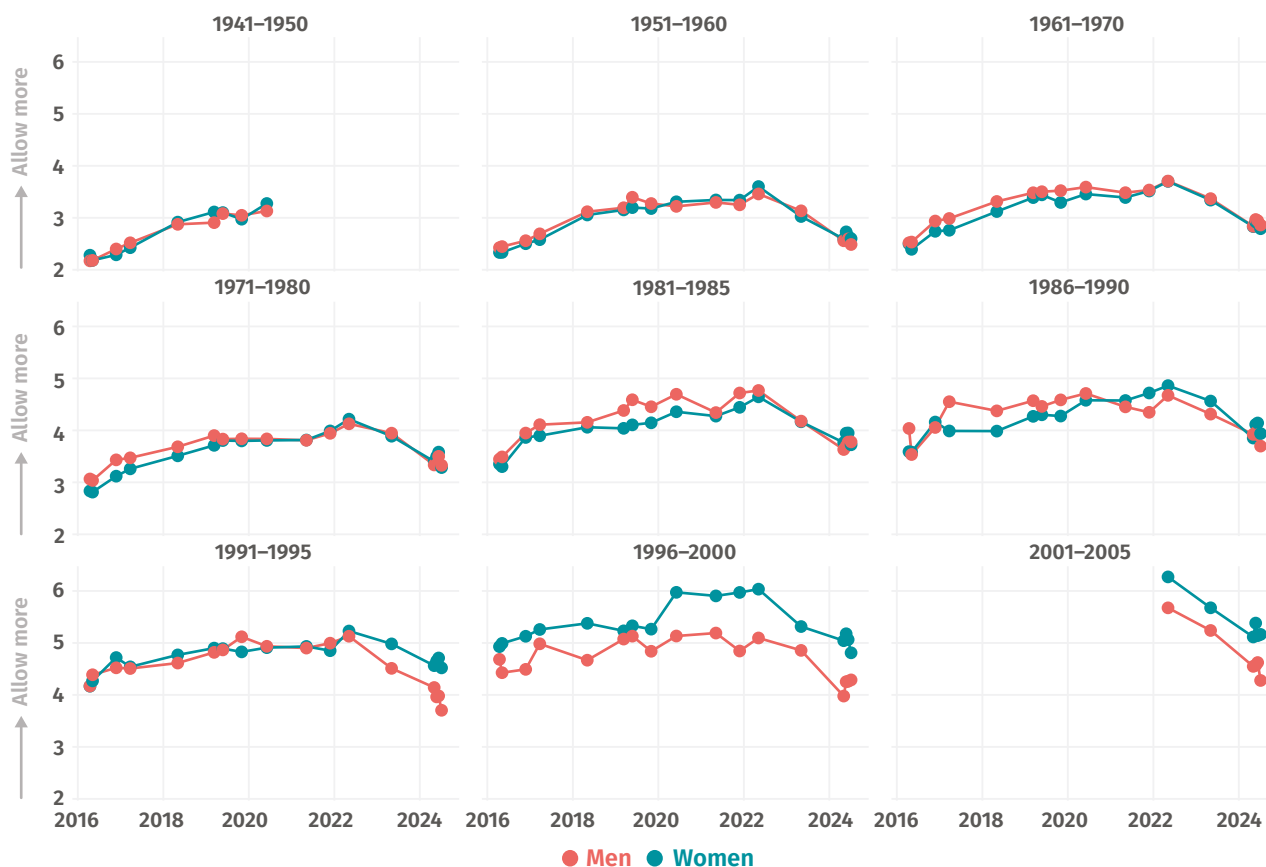
Attitudes towards immigration illustrate both dynamics clearly. We observe a general drift towards anti-immigrant sentiment across all genders and age cohorts, alongside a notable divergence between young men and young women, which is driven by young women’s leftward shift. But these differences pale against the gap between younger and older cohorts – age is a much stronger predictor of attitudes towards immigration than gender (see figures 2.8 and 2.9).

The overarching picture is clear: focussing too closely on gendered splits risks obscuring more fundamental age-based polarisations in British politics.

**FIGURE 2.8**

**While there is a gender gap in attitudes among the youngest age cohort towards allowing more or fewer immigrants, this difference is smaller than the gap between this cohort and their older counterparts**

*Immigration attitudes, by gender, survey year and age cohort (year born), 2016–2024: ‘Allow more or fewer immigrants’ (score 1–10, high = allow many more) (weighted means)*

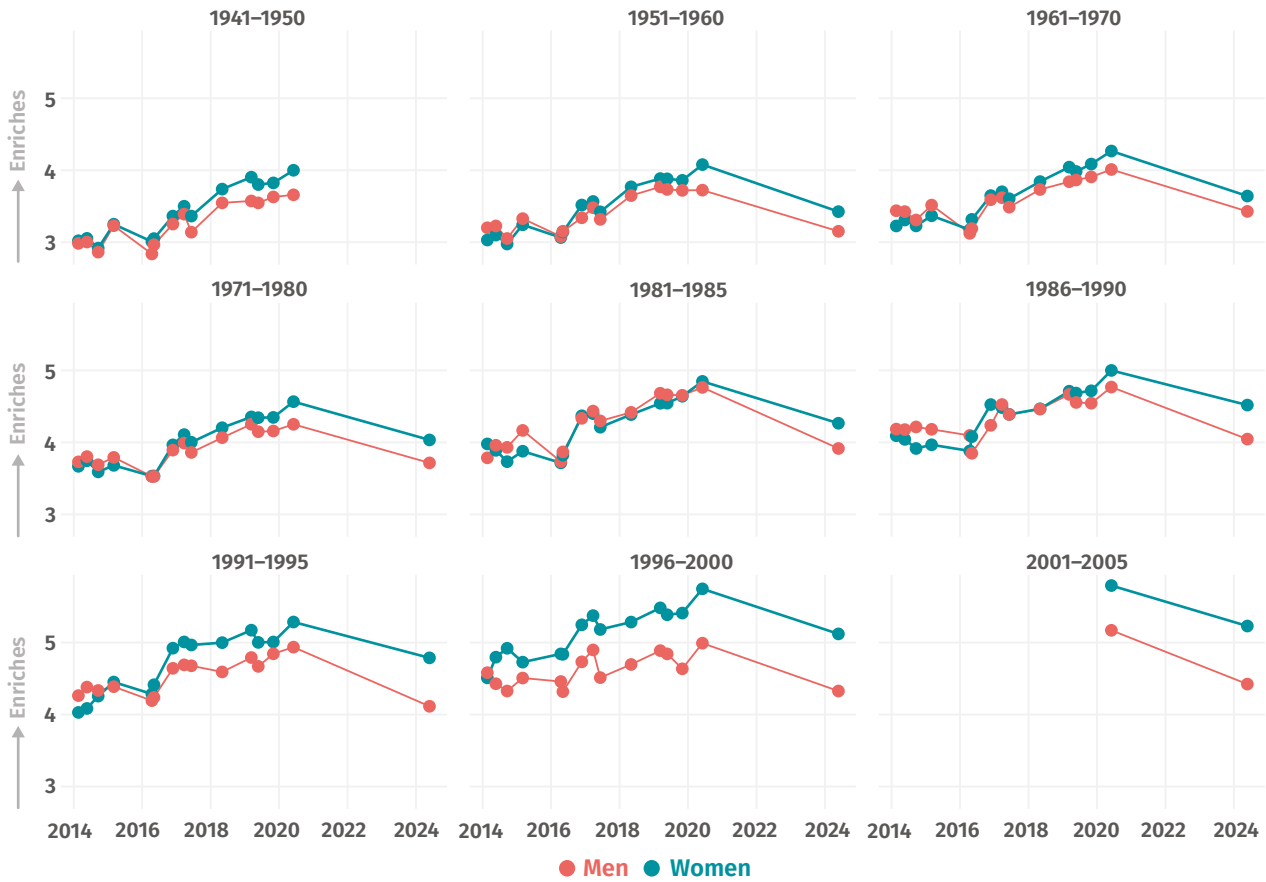


Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

**FIGURE 2.9**

**When asked about the impact of immigration on British culture, the gap between young men and young women is again smaller than that between young and old cohorts**

*Immigration attitudes, by gender, survey year and age cohort (year born), 2014–24: 'Immigration undermines or enriches cultural life' (score 1–7, high = enriches) (weighted means)*



Note: Question omitted between 2020 and 2024.

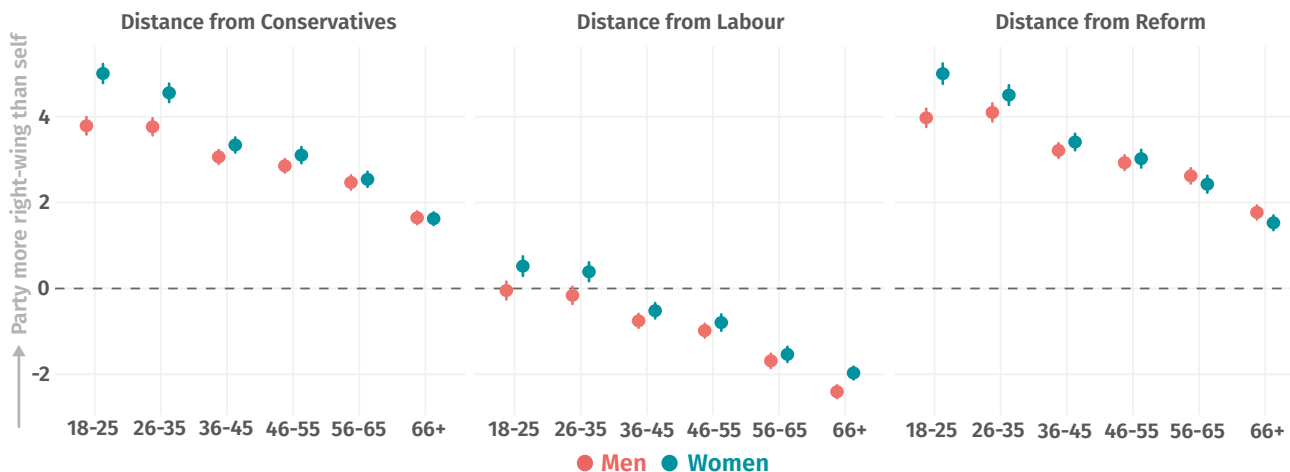
Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

Further, this age split is essential for understanding emerging patterns of partisan support. Young women are more likely than any other cohort (including young men) to support the Green Party, and more likely to view the other major parties as sitting to their right (see figures 2.5 and 2.10). But the more dramatic split in voting intention runs across age cohorts: older generations are far less likely to support Labour or the Green Party, considerably more likely to support Reform and more likely to perceive Reform as closer to their own redistributive preferences.

**FIGURE 2.10**

**Young people are more likely to see Reform as ideologically distant and Labour as ideologically proximate to themselves on the question of redistribution compared with older counterparts**

*Perception of parties' redistribution stance relative to self, by gender and age range, 2024 (higher values = respondent thinks party is more right-wing than themselves) (weighted means)*



Note: Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

### Assumption 3

Young people are politically apathetic

VS

### Reality

Young people care deeply – they just don't trust the institutions asking for their participation

A third common claim is that young people are politically apathetic. On the surface, this is understandable: by most conventional metrics – voter turnout, willingness to stand for office and party membership – the engagement gap between young and old Britons is striking (Sloam et al 2026), and in many cases larger than in European peer countries (Sloam 2016).

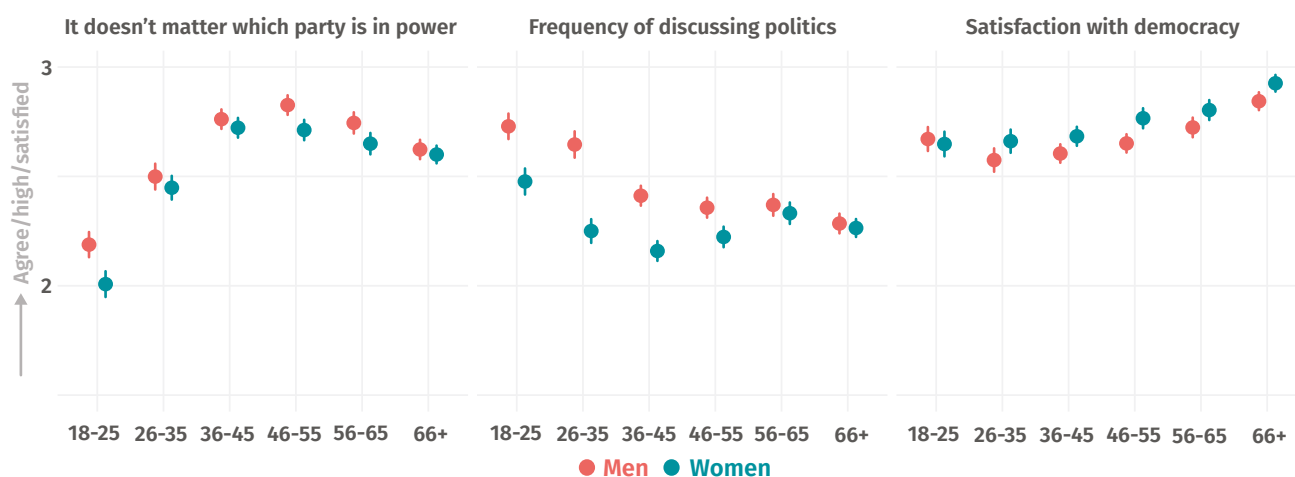
Beneath these headline figures, however, the evidence tells a more complex story. Young people exhibit high levels of political interest and engagement – just not through traditional channels. Work by the John Smith Centre finds that nearly three-quarters of young people have engaged in some form of political activity when defined broadly. Yet this falls sharply when it comes to organised politics: only 35 per cent say they would consider getting involved, against 62 per cent who would not (Barnes and Loose 2025).

Our own research supports this perspective, and it is this tension that lies at the heart of the youth engagement paradox. Young people are less likely than older cohorts to say that voting does not matter, and more likely to discuss politics regularly, and yet they are less satisfied with democracy as it currently operates (see figure 2.11). In our workshops, politics was described as part of everyday life, and young women in particular were keen to describe participation as something close to a civic obligation.

**FIGURE 2.11**

**Young people are much less politically apathetic and much more likely to talk about politics regularly than older cohorts – but this engagement paradoxically translates into lower satisfaction with democracy**

*Measures of apathy, alienation and disaffection, by gender and age group, 2024 (weighted means)*



Note: All figures linearly rescaled to be on a 1–5 scale to facilitate comparison. Error bars represent 95 per cent confidence intervals.

Source: IPPR analysis of the British Election Study

This normative commitment to democratic engagement, however, sits alongside deep scepticism towards the institutions through which it is supposed to be practised. Around 65 per cent of young people believe the political system is broken, only one in five feel satisfied with how it functions and nearly two-thirds say they do not feel listened to by those in power (Deo 2024). It is thus not indifference to politics, but frustration with political institutions, that defines young people’s relationship with contemporary politics.

Finally, while gender and age are the primary axes of division that this report examines, class compounds both: young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face all the same barriers to democratic participation as their peers – and then some, with fewer resources to navigate a system that was not designed for them to begin with (Romero-Vidal and Talukder 2025).

Whatever their differences, then, young men and young women share a common frustration: a political system that feels closed, unresponsive and incapable of acting on the issues shaping their lives. That shared alienation is the dominant feature of youth politics in Britain today – and it is where any serious political response must begin.

### 3.

## THE PAIN POINTS OF THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PARADOX

We should hardly be surprised that young people are rethinking what politics means to them. Rising living costs, insecure work, stretched public services and the growth of social media have sharpened their awareness of the injustices shaping their lives – while deepening their scepticism about whether existing institutions can do anything about them. Across both gender and levels of political engagement, the message from our research was consistent: a more engaging democracy cannot be built on top of deep and persistent insecurity. It is this realisation that lies at the heart of the government’s incipient but welcomed offer to young people in the wake of the Milburn Review, with new funding for apprenticeships, youth hubs and a limited jobs guarantee all on offer (DWP 2025).

Yet addressing these material concerns, however necessary, is ultimately insufficient for resolving the youth engagement paradox. This is because those material concerns are at least in part downstream of a deeper problem: a democratic power imbalance that for too long has seen young people deprioritised in the formation of government policy.

The young people we spoke to almost always juxtaposed their economic anxieties with a sense of political powerlessness – a feeling that the system’s failure to address their material concerns was not accidental but structural. As one young woman put it:

*“I feel like young people are not high on the ladder of importance. Politics is geared towards older generations rather than the youth – it’s getting harder and harder for young generations, but the way politics works means there’s nothing we can do about it.”*

It is to this sense of democratic deficit that this chapter now turns, not because material concerns are peripheral – they are not. But because breaking the doom loop between limited political power and adverse material outcomes requires addressing the upstream conditions that generate political alienation in the first place.

### THE BACKGROUND CONDITIONS FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: RETREAT FROM DIGITAL SPACES AND THE NEED FOR ‘THIRD SPACES’

Young people today feel increasingly cut off from the kinds of shared civic life that meaningful political participation depends on – and our research suggests they are actively looking for a way back in. Perhaps the most consistent theme across our discussions was a desire to spend less time online and more time engaging with communities in person. What lay beneath this was something more fundamental than a shortage of political information: a sense of social atomisation and a felt absence of the genuine interpersonal connection that meaningful participation requires.

Young people are not actively choosing digital life over real-world engagement, but many feel they have little alternative. Participants in our research widely saw social media as a poor substitute for real connection: emotionally draining, difficult to trust and prone to generating antagonism without meaningful resolution (see also Delvin 2025; The Electoral Commission 2026). Many participants described online spaces as an important source of political information – but that engagement was widely experienced as passive, and many felt it actively inhibited the more meaningful social and political connections they were looking for. One young woman, reflecting on her growing disillusionment with TikTok, put it plainly:

***“There’s no way to form actual connection in TikTok comments – you get all worked up and argumentative but it doesn’t do anything.”***

What was missing, in their eyes, was any means of extending engagement beyond close personal networks into a broader sense of community and public life. It was in this context that many young people – and young women in particular – reached, unprompted, for the language of ‘third spaces’: the informal public places outside home and work where community life is built and sustained. As one young woman put it:

***“Third spaces are really important for getting people more engaged. But they are not being built or sustained anymore, so there’s no place for young people to go.”***

That this language emerged in our workshops without prompting is itself significant. As one young woman put it: “You need to create space to create community.” Yet the evidence suggests that space is increasingly hard to find. The erosion of community infrastructure is not accidental but bound up with the long-term hollowing out of local social spaces, a dynamic that is particularly acute in working-class and deprived areas (Hilhorst 2025). Moreover, a longstanding body of research links this decline of community spaces to a broader erosion of civic life and democratic vitality (Putnam 2000; Oldenburg 2023). Meaningful political engagement, in this sense, does not emerge in a vacuum: it takes root where people have regular opportunities to gather, build relationships and develop a sense of common purpose.

These findings are echoed in the government’s own national youth strategy, which identifies rebuilding community spaces as a central pillar of its offer to young people (DCMS 2025). Our research adds weight to that agenda – showing that repairing local community infrastructure is important not only for young people’s wellbeing, but also for revitalising democratic attachment and the long-term health of our collective democratic life. Investing in local civic infrastructure that brings young people into community life may therefore be one of the most important steps towards resolving the youth engagement paradox.

## **KNOWING HOW, FEELING ABLE: THE BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION**

Many young people feel they lack the confidence, knowledge and skills needed to engage meaningfully with formal politics – a concern that crystallised, across our workshops, around two related dynamics: inadequate political education and the structural barriers that the practices and culture of institutional politics itself creates.

On education, participants felt their schooling had not adequately prepared them for active political citizenship. As one young man put it simply: “We were never taught how politics works.” Several from England referred to the statutory citizenship course, but there was a widespread sense that it had fallen short –

schools were felt not to take it seriously, other subjects crowded out time for civic education and formal instruction did little to explain how politics works in practice.

Such concerns are consistent with a broader body of evidence. Citizenship education has been statutory since 2002, yet is widely criticised as under-resourced, frequently taught by non-specialists and regularly squeezed out by competing curriculum pressures. A 2018 House of Lords report found it had “never been fully embedded into the education system” (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement 2018: 30), and the following are cited as persistent problems (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement 2018; Hecht et al 2025):

- inconsistent delivery
- inadequate teacher training
- conflation with general skills courses such as personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education
- insufficient Ofsted scrutiny.

The result is that young people feel they lack not only the knowledge to engage with formal politics, but also the self-confidence necessary to even try.

Education alone, however, is not enough if the practical barriers to participation remain in place. Young organisers in particular stressed that political participation is difficult – sometimes impossible – for those without the time, money or infrastructure to take part regularly. Meetings and consultations take place during working hours, rarely accommodate childcare responsibilities and may be held in locations inaccessible without a car. Even voting presents challenges: the persistent difficulty of maintaining voter registration through frequent changes of address means that even the most basic form of participation is harder for some than others.

These barriers, moreover, are not evenly distributed. Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are far less likely to access meaningful citizenship education, while young people in insecure employment, without stable transport or in frequently changing accommodation, face compounding obstacles to even the most basic forms of civic engagement. The democratic confidence deficit this report documents is, at root, also a class divide. A democracy serious about including young people must address this directly.

### **LOCKED OUT: EXCLUDED FROM DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING**

The practical barriers to participation speak to a deeper problem: young people today feel that formal politics is simply not designed for them. This was a recurrent theme across our workshops, regardless of participants’ gender or level of political experience. There was a sense that British political institutions have become deeply unaccountable to voters in general, and to young people in particular. Participants repeatedly described a politics that felt remote and indifferent to their concerns, populated by politicians more interested in their own advancement than the public good.

This did not, on the whole, amount to a belief that politics does not matter. Almost all of the young people we spoke to said that voting matters and that election outcomes matter. And many – especially the young women we spoke to – described political participation as a normative duty, something people should do and “know about”, even while remaining sceptical that formal engagement would materially improve their lives. As one young woman put it:

***“Even though it sometimes feels like nothing changes, I still think it matters who you vote for because it can make a huge difference to people who need support.”***

The problem was rather a sense that political institutions were so removed from young people’s everyday lives that politicians could not see themselves in them. Politicians were seen as emerging from elite circles and lacking the life experience needed to connect with or represent ordinary voters. We found a notable gender dimension in how this sense of institutional distance was articulated. Young men tended to frame it as a failure of outcomes, linking the perceived absence of meaningful policy for young people to a broader sense of political betrayal. As one young man put it:

***“They say all these things about how they’re going to help and then do fuck all but help themselves. From where I’m sitting, there’s not many politicians who I feel really relate to the youth.”***

Young women, for their part, emphasised a failure of listening and responsiveness – a sense that institutional barriers such as the first-past-the-post electoral system:

- insulated politicians from meaningful accountability
- entrenched the overrepresentation of older generations
- left young people without a real voice in the political system as currently constituted.

As one young organiser put it: “It feels like a system that isn’t designed for us. They make it really hard for us to break into that world.” Crucially, this frustration was directed at institutions, not at democracy itself. Young people were not calling for democratic institutions to be rebuilt from the ground up – they were demanding that existing institutions be made more responsive, more accountable and more open to younger generations. As one young organiser put it:

***“[Representative democracy] is necessary. Most people work 9–5 jobs and don’t have the time to think about complex political questions. So we need to have representatives – but those that can be relied on to share our values and do what they say they’re going to do.”***

However, these reformist impulses came with a clear warning: not to reproduce the tokenistic gestures that young people saw as defining previous efforts to address the youth democratic deficit – such as the UK youth parliament. Efforts to involve young people in politics that did not give their participation real influence were seen not just as inadequate but also as actively counterproductive, deepening rather than repairing democratic alienation. The aim, then, must be not to give young people symbolic inclusion, but to bring them into the formal power structures of British democracy.

## 4.

# A NEW COMPACT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Following an initial round of workshops exploring young people's frustrations with British politics, participants were invited back for a second round focussed on developing solutions. They were presented with a series of proposals developed through an expert roundtable, and asked to critique, refine and, in some cases, reject them. The result was an iterative process in which expert knowledge and lived experience were brought into dialogue, with young people themselves acting as the final arbiters of what was worth pursuing.

The outcome is a youth-centred programme for reinvigorating British democracy, grounded in the recognition that disengagement among young people is not a symptom of apathy but of a political system that has failed to meet them where they are – in their communities and their everyday lives – and address their concerns. Young people of all genders converged on broadly similar answers, and the platform set out here reflects that. It has been developed in a spirit of universalism, because reforms that treat young people as a generation with shared interests are more likely to build the broad coalition that lasting change requires.

Taken together, what follows amounts to a new political compact with young people. Its terms are straightforward – in exchange for young people's re-engagement, political institutions must:

- meet young people where they are
- give them genuine rather than symbolic power
- demonstrate that democracy can act on the concerns that shape their lives.

Many of the proposals closely parallel those in the government's national youth strategy research (DCMS 2025). This suggests that they could be folded into planned reforms without significant political resistance. But their democratic implications must be treated as central, not as an afterthought.

The interventions are organised around three broad objectives:

- rebuilding the community spaces that make political engagement possible
- building the capacity for meaningful political participation
- making representative democratic institutions more accessible and accountable.

Together, they reflect a vision of democratic renewal that is simultaneously social, personal and institutional – one that recognises that reforming formal political structures alone is insufficient, and that the conditions shaping how young people engage with their communities and the confidence they feel in themselves matter just as much.

## **OBJECTIVE 1: REBUILD COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE AS A FOUNDATION FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

The case for investing in community infrastructure is not just about wellbeing – it is also about democracy. As the previous chapter documented, young people are not disengaged from politics by choice, but rather feel cut off from the spaces where civic life develops and political confidence is built. Reversing that requires treating community infrastructure as democratic infrastructure – and investing in it accordingly.

### ***Build 21st-century youth centres and other community spaces where young people can connect***

Local authority spending on youth provision fell by more than 70 per cent in real terms between 2010 and 2020, with around 4,500 youth centres closing over the same period (Maddocks 2021). Young people we spoke to were acutely aware of this legacy – as one young organiser put it:

***“We’re not asking for anything unprecedented. What we really need is just to replace the youth spaces that were closed down during austerity.”***

The government’s £350 million Better Youth Spaces Fund and the £15 million it has allocated for youth worker recruitment are welcome, but insufficient. Most of the capital funding spans just three to four years – enough to build or refurbish up to 250 facilities, a figure that pales against the 4,500 that closed. The shortfall in funding for youth workers is even more acute. It is skilled, consistent staff, not buildings alone, that make youth services work – and without sustained, ring-fenced revenue funding, local authorities cannot employ the youth workers they need or maintain programming over the long term (Duda 2025; Harman 2025). This must be reflected in future spending reviews.

To find additional revenue to meet these funding requirements, the government should look to the digital platforms that young people told us they want to spend less time on. The Digital Services Tax – a 2 per cent levy on social media platforms, search engines and online marketplaces – raised £944 million in 2025–26 and is projected to reach £1.4 billion by 2030–31 (HM Treasury 2025). Fines levied under the Online Safety Act 2023, which sets out the obligations that tech companies are required to meet to protect internet users from harm, provide a further potential funding stream. These platforms derive their value, in significant part, from the attention and data of young people. Hypothecating a share of their revenue to build the 21st-century community spaces that those same young people are crying out for would be a fitting use of their proceeds.

### ***More fully integrate youth provision into the Pride in Place Programme (PiPP)***

The enthusiasm for third spaces among the young people who took part in the workshops was not confined to youth-designated provision. Many identified intergenerational connection as central to their civic lives. As one young organiser put it:

***“You don’t just want youth hubs, because exchange between young people and older people is essential. Communities are intergenerational, and if young people don’t spend any time with older people, they would never know it.”***

The Pride in Place Programme (PiPP) (MHCLG 2026) targets funding at deprived communities, with the objective that neighbourhoods can shape their areas. With its flexible, community-led mandate and £5.8 billion of investment in exactly the kinds of spaces young people described, it offers the right vehicle for embedding the vision for intergenerational connection, but it needs an explicit mandate for this.

We propose two additions to the programme's design:

- First, all PiPP neighbourhood boards are directed to nominate a community-led organisation to take over local delivery of PiPP within three years. We propose that these successor organisations be required to include at least one member aged under 25, recruited through local schools, colleges or youth organisations. Neighbourhood boards should be encouraged to act in anticipation of this – whether by appointing young members voluntarily or establishing youth panels – rather than waiting for the transition.
- Second, PiPP sets demanding conditions for community engagement, and young people should be explicitly named as a group that must be actively engaged in shaping neighbourhood visions. To facilitate this, the Network for Neighbourhoods community of practice should establish a dedicated youth engagement stream, connecting neighbourhood boards with the expertise they need to engage young people effectively.

## **OBJECTIVE 2: DEVELOP THE KNOWLEDGE, HABITS AND ACCESS THAT DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION REQUIRES**

As the previous chapter documented, the barriers holding young people back from meaningful democratic engagement are both educational and structural: a deficit of civic knowledge and confidence on the one hand, and a political system whose practices and rhythms actively exclude those without time, money and stability, on the other. Addressing both requires concrete action.

### ***Give citizenship education the status it deserves***

A 2018 House of Lords report flagged concerns that citizenship education was “withering on the vine” (House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement 2018: 30) – and little has improved since (Hecht et al 2025). The government’s Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) moves in the right direction – particularly the proposal to make citizenship a compulsory subject in Years 1–6 – but it does not go far enough. The commitment to maintain the “existing structural architecture” of subjects (ibid: 49) risks leaving citizenship on the margins of the curriculum at secondary level, where it has languished for two decades and where the stakes, for young people approaching voting age, are highest.

Addressing this requires action on three fronts:

1. The curriculum needs to be reconceived rather than merely expanded. Previous iterations have too often reduced ‘active citizenship’ to box-tick community activities such as litter picks and sponsored events, with little connection to the democratic process itself. While experiential civic participation is essential (see the next proposal), it should complement rather than be a substitute for a firm grounding in the foundational knowledge of how national, regional and local politics works and how young people can meaningfully engage with it.
2. Delivering this effectively requires dedicated funding for specialist teacher training. At primary level, where generalist teachers will inevitably lead citizenship education, the government should fund training programmes to upskill teachers in the new content. At secondary level, policymakers should clarify that citizenship is a priority subject by ensuring it is properly assessed as a curriculum subject rather than as personal development, as is currently the case – incentivising schools to give it the attention and resources it deserves. Once this is done, the government should channel funding towards training specialist citizenship teachers at the secondary level – equipping them with subject-specific pedagogy and the confidence to navigate complex and controversial political topics while observing political impartiality rules.

3. The Curriculum and Assessment Review's (2025) proposal to broaden the citizenship course to include financial literacy and climate change should be approached with caution. While these are undoubtedly important life skills, including them risks exacerbating the longstanding problem of citizenship getting folded into broader life skills provision such as personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and becoming a grab-bag course that serves no single purpose well. Its core purpose must be protected, equipping students with the knowledge and confidence that meaningful democratic participation requires.

### ***Enable democratic education beyond the classroom***

Classroom instruction is essential for teaching the basics of how British politics works – but it is not enough. Truly democratic citizenship is not simply a body of knowledge: it is a set of habits, dispositions and relationships that can only be developed through practice. The aim is not to trade knowledge for participation, but to let each reinforce the other. We therefore recommend that, as a complement to the foundational grounding mentioned above, citizenship education include a mandatory community engagement component: structured opportunities for young people to take part in the democratic life of their area, such as attending local democratic forums, participating in community organisations or volunteering on local issues.

The goal is not box-ticking but the cultivation of what civic republicans have long understood as an essential democratic virtue: a felt sense of membership in, and responsibility towards, a community beyond oneself. Democracy is not something that happens to citizens – it is something citizens do, together, in the places where they live. Young people who develop that habit while still in school are considerably more likely to carry it into adult civic life.

Reforming education addresses the knowledge deficit – but it cannot on its own overcome the structural obstacles that make sustained participation so difficult for so many young people. Two sets of targeted reforms would make an immediate difference, as set out below.

### ***Incentivise voting as a civic duty***

Voting should be treated as a public good in the same way jury service is. The government should make election days public holidays (Patel and Swift 2025). It should also allow citizens to take time off work for political duties if they are participating in formal democratic activities such as citizens' assemblies and council consultations.

The government should also work with local transport authorities to ensure free or heavily subsidised travel on polling days, giving particular attention to rural and peri-urban areas where young people are most likely to be without access to a car.

These measures are deliverable at relatively low cost and would make an immediate difference to the young people in insecure or inflexible employment who are currently most likely to face practical barriers to participation.

### ***Integrate digital technology to make local politics more accessible***

Current legislation prevents local councils in England from holding meetings remotely, despite the widespread adoption of hybrid working across public and professional life. This anomaly disproportionately disadvantages younger people, who are more likely to face barriers of cost, geography and scheduling. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should prioritise legislating to enable remote and hybrid council meetings. It should also revise guidance to encourage flexible meeting times – including in the evenings and on weekends – as a standard feature of democratic participation rather than an exception (Swift and Billingham 2026).

### **OBJECTIVE 3: BRING YOUNG PEOPLE BACK INTO REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS**

As the previous chapter documented, young people have not given up on democracy – they have given up on institutions that feel closed, unrepresentative and immune to accountability. The government has recognised this challenge: the national youth strategy identifies a “vicious cycle” in which young people’s sense that their voices go unheard drives civic disengagement, which in turn reduces political attention to young people’s concerns (DCMS 2025). It has also proposed a range of welcome measures in response – from community consultations to new guidance on embedding young people’s voices in policymaking (DCMS 2026).

But more can and should be done to match the scale of the problem. What is needed are structural changes that give young people genuine rather than symbolic power within existing institutions – changes that make the system feel, and are, designed to take the perspective of young people and future generations as a central point of consideration. Ambition will be essential for making this work. Anything less than a redistribution of institutional power will run the risk of falling into the same cycles of tokenism that have plagued previous reform efforts.

#### ***Form a youth interest committee to bring young people’s voice into the legislative process***

To this end, there is a need to think creatively about how to incorporate young people into existing legislative institutions directly. To achieve this, we propose embedding young people’s voices directly into Westminster’s legislative machinery through the establishment of a youth interest committee in the House of Lords. This committee would scrutinise all primary legislation and issue a formal statement on whether each bill adequately accounts for the interests of young people – a statement to which the government would be required to respond, giving the committee’s findings genuine standing in the legislative process. Locating the committee in the House of Lords rather than the Commons would also insulate it from short-term political pressures, helping to ensure a longer-term outlook.

The committee would draw its membership from two sources: sitting peers, who bring legislative experience and institutional knowledge, and young people nominated through schools as part of the revamped citizenship education programme. A handful of schools per region would be selected by lot for each parliamentary session, with a small number of students from each school serving as youth members for a defined term. This dual membership structure would do more than amplify young people’s voices in the legislative process. It would also create a direct and visible link between democratic education in schools and real political power, giving citizenship education an immediate and tangible purpose that classroom learning alone cannot provide.

## 5.

# CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A YOUTH-FOCUSSED DEMOCRACY

Young people in Britain have not turned away from democracy. And as the evidence shows, the familiar story of a generation radicalising rightwards is largely wrong. If anything, young people remain the most progressive age cohort in the country, with young women in particular shifting decisively to the left. What unites young men and young women, however, is not ideology, but alienation: a shared and deepening conviction that the political system, as currently constituted, is simply not designed for them and is incapable of acting on the concerns that shape their lives.

The youth engagement paradox this report has documented – high political engagement and low institutional participation – is neither inevitable nor irreversible. It is the product of identifiable failures:

- a political system that feels closed and unresponsive
- community infrastructure hollowed out over more than a decade
- material conditions that make long-term thinking feel like a luxury.

These failures can be addressed.

What is required is a new political compact with young people. Its terms are not complicated:

- Rebuild the spaces where civic life takes root.
- Remove the barriers that make participation feel impossible.
- Give young people genuine rather than symbolic power within the institutions that shape their lives.

In return, British democracy gets something it urgently needs: the re-engagement of its most politically passionate and progressive generation. None of this requires reinventing British democracy from scratch. It requires taking seriously the idea that a democracy that persistently excludes a generation is diminishing itself.

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