

# Exploring the lack of Youth Representation in UK Politics

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## Abstract

The representation of young people in UK politics is lacking and has been for some time. Despite young people making up such a large proportion of the UK demographic, they are continually excluded from key issues ranging from climate change to electoral reform. This article investigates the underlying causes and significance of this underrepresentation, focusing on legal and societal barriers. Although there is progress to be seen in terms of achieving equal representation in the UK, this article evaluates the relative importance of various barriers and how they interact with one another in the context of the UK. To address these barriers is essential for creating a more inclusive and representative political system that values the contributions and voices of young people in shaping the UK's future.

## 1. Introduction

Fair and unbiased representation in politics is crucial in order to ensure equal representation amongst all demographics, especially young people. In the UK, young people are categorised as those aged 16-24 (NHS,2024), accounting for 7,814,00 people (Office for National Statistics,2024). Forming such a large demographic, young people encompass a wide range of political views and concerns which seem to be under-represented in Parliament. Ranging from climate change to educational reforms and mental health, the UK's political system should depend on the voices of these young people for shaping policies that will ultimately define their futures.

Despite this, there seems to be a severe lack of representation for young people in UK politics, but why is this and what are the potential issues which could arise? The idea of a 'social revolution' is not a new concept, with the likes of Karl Marx stating that society 'cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future' (Marx, 1852). This vision of transformative change is particularly relevant today, as the lack of youth representation in UK politics highlights the need to rethink and reshape our democratic institutions for future generations.

## 2. Legal Barriers

Although making up such a significant proportion of the UK population, why does the younger generation have very little say in politics? Young people in the UK are faced with several legal challenges; including restrictions on voting age as well as the current electoral system disadvantaging smaller parties which may be more reflective of young people's views. These legal parameters not only constrain young people from becoming involved in politics but also act as a catalyst for the cycle of youth political disengagement.

### 2.1. Voting Age

One reason for a lack of representation of young people in the UK is the legal voting age. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, new legislation permits the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds. Currently in England and Wales, the legal voting age remains 18. The UK Labour Government has recently announced they will uphold their manifesto promise on the extension of enfranchisement to 16–17-year-olds in the next general election. However, questions remain about whether this promise will truly address the fragmented approach to enfranchisement across the UK or if it will be another unfulfilled pledge. Labour MP Jim McMahon, who made an unsuccessful attempt to pass legislation lowering the voting age during the 2019–2020 Parliament, challenged the notion of a static electoral system. He maintains that: 'The franchise has got to continue to modernise and reform to reflect the widest possible number of people to involve them in how the country is run and, in whose benefit.' (Tonge, 2021). McMahon's statement highlights the belief that a democratic system must evolve to remain inclusive, suggesting that expanding the franchise through 'Votes-at-16', is essential to ensure broader representation in shaping the nation's future. In terms of assessing representation across the UK youth, this current inconsistency undermines an equal and fair representation throughout the UK. However, the idea for extending the franchise to 16–17-year-olds is not a new concept, thus the recent announcement of the extension has sparked both enthusiasm and scepticism. Time will tell whether this extension of the franchise will significantly alter young people's political engagement or whether it is merely a symbolic gesture.

A recent example of extending the franchise to under-18s was used in Scotland for the 2014 Scottish Referendum. In many ways this was deemed as a success which saw, according to ICM, 75% of 16- and 17-year-olds voted, compared with 54% of 18–24-year-olds (Curtice, 2014). This highlights the potential for a stronger political engagement amongst under-18s. This can be further emphasised by the [2019 General Election](#), which [saw a turnout](#) of around 47% amongst voters aged 18-24, a

decrease of 7% when compared to 2017 (Mashford and 89 Initiative, 2020). Thus, raising the question, what is the UK doing wrong when encouraging youth turnout?

Young people in the UK deserve to be taken seriously by the political establishment. The UK's voting laws act as the biggest barrier to equal representation amongst all young people across the UK. Critics argue that only a small percentage of youth are affected by this, the symbolic exclusion of the youngest cohort reinforces broader issues of marginalisation. While the Government has announced it will extend the right to vote to 16–17-year-olds, this is not yet UK legislation. Until this promise is implemented in law and applied consistently across the UK, meaningful representation for young people remains incomplete.

## *2.2. Electoral System*

Beyond the voting age, the electoral system of the UK poses many challenges for achieving fair and equal representation. Young people have a variety of political opinions, hence minor parties can be more appealing to young people instead of the two main political parties of the UK, the Conservatives and the Labour Party.

The First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system disproportionately marginalises smaller parties that may better reflect the views of young people in the UK. According to Stuart, a lecturer in British Politics, 'Young people are far more likely to support Labour, and older people to support the Conservatives' (Fox, 2024). However, this does not capture the growing number of voters who do not align with the two main parties. For instance, in the 2024 General Elections the combined Labour/Tory vote share was just 57% (Fox, 2024).

Overall, the UK's FPTP system hinders the representation of young people by making it more difficult for smaller parties to come into power to change legislation to reflect young people's priorities. In order to have a fair and equal representation for young people, electoral reform could bring a positive change to allow for a wider range of views. However, it seems unlikely after the 2011 AV (Alternative Vote) referendum where 67.9% were against electoral reform (BBC, 2011). The UK's electoral system will continue to reinforce the UK's lack of representation of young people.

## **3. Societal Barriers**

Beyond legal challenges to representation, there are also societal barriers. Arguably, society generates a much more significant barricade towards representation of young people in UK politics than any other form of challenge. These barriers can hinder their ability to influence policies and access opportunities. The two main

reasons for a lack of youth representation in the UK stems from stereotypes in the media and society's structural barriers.

### *3.1. Structural Barriers*

In the UK there is a clear and direct reason for why the average age of an MP is 51 (Keay and Cruz, 2023). There are financial difficulties to becoming an MP in the UK, with many young people being unable to afford the cost of standing to be an MP. There is a £500 deposit required to run as an MP, and it is only refunded if a candidate receives 5% of votes cast. The potential loss of this deposit acts as a deterrent, especially for young people who may want to run as an independent. There are not only the financial costs involved with standing but also campaigning costs. Furthermore, it puts independent candidates and smaller parties at an even greater disadvantage as the costs involved are disproportionate and restrict participation in elections.

These financial barriers, combined with legal restrictions like the voting age and societal challenges such as stereotypes and disengagement, create a cycle that disproportionately excludes young and less affluent candidates, reinforcing the dominance of older, wealthier MPs and limiting truly representative political participation in the UK. As a result, this leads to a system where the voices and viewpoints of young people are consistently left out of legislative discussions.

### *3.2. Youth Political Engagement*

Today's society stereotypically presents politics as 'old' and 'boring'. This influences the perception of young people with 42.4% of young people aged 16-24 saying that they had little to no interest in UK politics (BBC, 2024). This shocking figure clearly highlights the idea that politics is uninteresting to young people and therefore they are becoming politically disengaged, causing a decline of representation for the younger generation in UK politics. A lack of interest leads to a lack of participation essentially preventing young people from having their voices heard.

Some argue that young people are actually politically engaged, but in alternative or non-traditional forms (Rainsford, 2017). The popularity of social media amongst young people is now being embraced by the UK's political parties. Smaller parties such as Reform UK are now becoming increasingly popular amongst young people, generating the support of 12% in this demographic and the Green Party being the most popular with a backing of 40% (Dazed, 2024). But why is this the case?

Many experts dubbed the 2024 general election as the 'Tik-Tok Election' with many parties using the social media platform as a campaigning strategy. On average, 16-

24 year olds spend 57 minutes on Tik-Tok daily (DJS Research, 2022). The UK political parties capitalised on this throughout the election to appeal to the younger electorate. Arguably, this was most successful for Reform UK who accumulated a Tik-Tok following of over 200,000 (Dazed, 2024). The success of this campaign can be demonstrated through vote share, as Reform UK with 14% of votes was ranked third overall.

Youth political engagement plays a pivotal role in ensuring the effective representation of young people in UK politics. Social media is now being recognised as a useful tool to try and reignite the passion for young people in UK politics and is now being used to amplify youth voices by promoting issue-based advocacy and fostering direct interaction with political representatives. Importantly, it has been found that low-cost political behaviours online can stimulate those who are usually uninterested to participate, leading to the idea that these small acts may serve as a 'gateway' to more significant political engagement (McLoughlin and Southern, 2020). Social media can help bridge some gaps in representation that young people face in the UK's formal political systems. Although not the perfect solution for representation of young people it has certainly improved engagement and participation in politics and it is now up to MPs to foster this and make UK politics more representative and accessible to all.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The lack of representation for young people in UK politics stems from the complex intertwinement of barriers imposed by the law and society. Legal restrictions, financial limitations, and societal barriers, such as diminished youth political engagement, are intricately interconnected, collectively perpetuating systemic inequalities that hinder the establishment of a fully representative parliament for young people in the UK.

Furthermore, the First Past the Post electoral system tends to marginalise smaller parties that often align more closely with youth perspectives, reinforcing traditional voting patterns. Additionally, stereotypes about youth political disengagement and the perception of politics as unappealing have further alienated young people from engaging with the political system.

While social media acts as a platform for youth political engagement and representation they cannot fully compensate for the current lack of representation that young people currently face today. To combat the underrepresentation of young people, systemic reforms such as reducing the voting and candidacy age, providing access to political opportunities, and advocating youth-friendly politics and electoral systems should be held which would better reflect diverse political

views of young people. These steps would allow the UK to have a political system that is inclusive, equitable, and representative of its whole population through giving youth the voice they need and deserve.

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