



Conclusion

Recent trends across a wide range of contemporary advanced post-industrial societies suggest that there is an ongoing – and deepening – disconnect between citizens and democratic politics and institutions (Norris 2011). This plays itself out in different ways in different contexts, but what is common to many is that this disaffection is epitomised by declining electoral participation rates, with people voting in far fewer numbers than was the case in previous decades. This was particularly evident at the 2014 European Assembly elections. There, nearly 400 million Europeans in 28 countries were eligible to vote, yet only 43% opted to do so. This represented the lowest turnout rate since direct elections to the Assembly were first held in 1979 when 62 per cent of the electorate voted (European Parliament 2014).

Furthermore, where they do vote, significant numbers of people in many such countries are rejecting traditional and mainstream parties and elites, and choosing instead to vote for populist and anti-system parties, often of the emerging left or of the authoritarian-nationalist right (Della Porta 2006; Grimm and Pilkington 2015; Mudde 2010). For instance, in Britain, the anti-EU UKIP achieved first place at the 2014 European Assembly elections, scoring a notable victory over traditional Westminster parties; the Green Party (8%) pushed the Liberal Democrats – the traditional “third” party – into fifth place. Elsewhere, populist anti-immigration, nationalist and far-right parties made significant advances in countries like

Denmark (Danish People's Party, first-place and 27%), France (Front National, first-place and 25%), Hungary (Jobbik, third-place and 20%), Greece (Golden Dawn, third-place and 9%). Meanwhile, relatively new leftist anti-system parties rejecting austerity and neoliberalism, scored impressive results in countries such as Greece (Syriza, first with 27%) and in Spain where PoDemos, which was founded just 6 months earlier, came fourth (8%). Many of these and other insurgent parties (such as "Pirate" parties in Iceland and elsewhere, the Five Star Movement in Italy) have repeated or even bettered these performances in national Parliamentary elections since, suggesting that the traditional political parties are vulnerable to challenges from newer anti-establishment left, right and populist parties.

The strong performance of the Labour Party amongst younger voters in the 2017 UK General Election in one sense appeared to buck these trends. Young people had been drawn in droves to a mainstream political party of the centre-left. On the other hand, the success of Labour with this demographic also illustrated the continuing disillusionment of many young citizens with politicians and political parties. After all, this success was driven by the perception of Jeremy Corbyn as *principled* and *authentic* in contrast to the existing political establishment. And, Labour had been re-invented by Corbyn, with a youth-friendly and anti-austerity election manifesto and a mass-campaigning style that welcomed participation by grass-roots party members and the general public – especially young people.

YOUTH AND POLITICAL ACTION

These trends of non-voting and of alternative voting are more a feature of the advanced post-industrial world now than was the case in earlier decades, and young people are not immune from the processes undermining citizens' engagement with democratic institutions. This is the case across Europe but also in countries like Russia, Japan, Canada and the US (Dalton 2013; Sloam 2014; Stetsenko 2002). Indeed, as we have seen in this book, the disenchantment with the practice of contemporary politics and the distrust of political elites who are invested with the powers to conduct politics on behalf of the public, is particularly evident amongst young people – nowhere more so than in Britain. Throughout the years of the new Millennium, young Britons have, until very recently, been

noticeable by their absence from the polls. Their electoral turnout rates at UK Parliamentary elections in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015 were considerably lower than was the case for older age groups within the electorate. Just as importantly, their abstention rate at these contests was significantly higher than it was for previous youth generations throughout the post-War decades.

However, it is not only their rate of electoral participation that distinguishes young people from other citizens. There is a significant body of evidence suggesting that when compared with older adults, young people in the UK and in similar countries have a distinct lack of interest in parliamentary and electoral politics and considerably lower levels of political knowledge. They also appear to be less satisfied with democracy, more critical of politicians, less likely to be politically active, have comparatively weaker commitments to political parties, and are less likely to be members of political organisations (Henn and Oldfield 2016).

A number of recent studies have suggested that young people's relationship with politics is a complex one. Whilst many may have little interest in 'formal' parliamentary politics, this does not signal a disengagement from all forms of politics. Instead, research indicates that contemporary youth often take part in many differing forms of political action such as demonstrations, boycotts, and direct action (Hooghe and Oser 2015; Melo and Stockemer 2014). These unconventional forms of youth political action tend to be focused on single issue campaigns such as environmental concerns, women's rights, anti-war, as well as broader anti-capitalist movements such as the global Occupy phenomenon. They also pertain to issues that affect young people's everyday lives, such as the youth movement for tighter gun controls in the United States that was inspired by the survivors of the Parkland school shooting.

In many respects, such alternative styles of political action represent a rejection of traditional and 'formal' methods of parliamentary politics, which tend to be overly reliant on political parties which are considered to be too regimented and restrictive, and led by politicians who can't always be trusted to do the right thing. Instead, these newer forms of politics tend to attract youth because they are grass-roots organisations which are more open to influence by individuals, and which have agendas which seem to young people to be much more relevant and achievable (Tormey 2015).

EXPLAINING INTRAGENERATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN YOUTH POLITICS

Importantly, in this book we have used original data from our own research that indicates quite clearly that these patterns of political engagement and political participation are not uniform. Just as we have observed *intergenerational* differences, we have also identified *intragenerational* variations. British youth are not a homogenous mass; their political behaviours, values, sentiments and aspirations differ and are often structured by such factors as their gender, ethnicity, social class and educational trajectory. Our analyses reveal that there exists a large group that includes especially young women, students and the highly educated who are particularly predisposed to postmaterialist values and are often drawn towards anti-austerity cosmopolitan-left politics. These particular young people can be contrasted with a smaller group of youth who are more likely to be male and of low socio-economic status and education level, and who are susceptible to an anti-establishment, right-wing and xenophobic discourse and who incline towards authoritarian-nationalist populism.

Explanations offered for these differing and unequal patterns of political (dis-)engagement and political participation are varied. A useful way to conceptualise these is offered by Hay (2007) who distinguishes Supply and Demand explanations. Supply-side accounts emphasise the failure of mainstream political parties and political elites to inspire and mobilise young people. Instead, today's youth feel at best ignored by the political class and at worst victimised by Government austerity policies which have progressively favoured older citizens and impacted disproportionately harshly on the nation's youth (Birch et al. 2013). These experiences have left young Britons feeling alienated by the actions of politicians in office (Henn and Foard 2014).

Demand-side explanations focus on the changing nature of contemporary society such as there has been a shift in values and culture which means that young people are increasingly critical of the practice of democracy and the behaviour and performance of those elected to office. This disenchantment is reinforced by a convergence of party programmes around neoliberal imperatives that fail to offer alternatives to austerity conditions and worsening prospects for today's youth (Côté 2014). Frustrated by the practice and outcomes of mainstream democratic politics and the record of successive governments in office, many young people have become increasingly attracted to new – often

postmaterialist – political agendas and new styles of politics in a search for alternative ways to actualise their political aspirations.

The withdrawal of many young people from formal institutionalized politics and abstention from elections in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015 is not therefore indicative of a generalised youth apathy. On the contrary, it is our contention – empirically verified by the results of our recent studies – that for many young people, such elections held little appeal as they were considered to lack value in terms of providing meaningful solutions to the social and economic challenges faced by themselves and their peers.

THE YOUTHQUAKE

Young people are neither anti-democratic nor are they innately anti-election, and recent developments give grounds for optimism, suggesting that young people will engage with electoral politics and will vote if they feel that there is value in doing so. This is evidenced by the recent surge in young voters' turnout at a number of recent electoral contests. For instance, the Electoral Commission estimates that 75% of newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds turned out to vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, and as we have seen in Chap. 4, youth were particularly prominent at the 2016 UK Referendum on EU membership (Ipsos MORI 2016). While the level of turnout of young people at the 2017 UK General Election is contested, we have presented a case in Chap. 5 that there was indeed a “youthquake”. This was evident in several respects, and particularly in terms of the overwhelming support of young people for Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party, with its youth-oriented agenda and its new style of open and bottom-up politics that has given greater opportunities for the grass-roots to shape the party's destiny. In some respects, this was made possible by the decision of former party leader Ed Miliband to open-up Labour to new members. Although this was viewed by many in the Parliamentary Labour Party as a mistake which ultimately propelled Corbyn to the leadership of the party and enabled his followers to gain ascendancy and a significant degree of power and control, it has also provided a democratic channel for youth politics.

What we have encountered in the data that informs the various chapters of this book is that the youthquake is not limited to this most recent 2017 electoral contest. Instead, it is the culmination of processes that we have been gaining momentum since the landmark General Election of 2001 when observers of electoral studies turned their gaze and attention to the

issue of electoral turnout rather than to the performance of the parties and the formal outcome in terms of composition of the new Government and balance of power in the House of Commons.

These processes include a change in outlook and culture of young people. We have argued throughout this book that young Millennials are not a passive and apathetic generation of disinterested bystanders. On the contrary, even though they often abstained in large numbers at local, national and European Assembly elections between 2001 and 2015, our own data and the findings from studies published elsewhere indicate an ongoing interest in politics in general and in elections in particular (Henn and Foard 2014; O'Toole 2015). They are also strong supporters of democracy (Cammaerts et al. 2014), but remain anxious that there exist only relatively few available opportunities for them to meaningfully participate in formal politics. Moreover, they consider that those who have been elected to public office on their behalf have failed to champion their issue-interests. As a consequence of this, today's generation of young people are engaged sceptics.

However, we have seen throughout the years of the new Millennium that there is a sizeable group of young people who have been attracted to a new style of politics and who prioritise an alternative politics agenda that is broadly postmaterialist in nature. They represent a new cosmopolitan-left group. We have identified these young people as having a solidaristic outlook and a deep concern for social justice. They emphasise the tackling of domestic and global inequalities as well as support for wealth redistribution. They are internationalist with a pro-European outlook and a tolerance of others from difference backgrounds. These young people are also critical of mainstream politics – and supporters of reforms that might rejuvenate democratic processes and institutions so that these become more open and accommodating to young citizens.

YOUTHQUAKE AND A CULTURAL BACKLASH?

The future and momentum of the youthquake remains uncertain. The emergence of the new left-cosmopolitan group of young people has a mirror-image in the appearance of an economically-insecure left-behind group of young people who don't share the same progressive values. Inglehart and Norris (2016: 29) have characterised these two groups as having potentially diametrically opposed outlooks – reflecting a new cultural cleavage – so that the forward thrust of the youthquake that we have witnessed in recent years is by no means guaranteed:

[T]he spread of progressive values has also stimulated a cultural backlash among people who feel threatened by this development. Less educated... citizens, especially white men, who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, resent being told that traditional values are 'politically incorrect' if they have come to feel that they are being marginalized within their own countries. As cultures have shifted, a tipping point appears to have occurred.

Indeed, the current economic, social, cultural and political environment is none too conducive for the advance of left-cosmopolitanism, and in some respects may be considered somewhat hostile. Inglehart's thesis suggests that the spread of postmaterialist values is in large part contingent on the underlying economic circumstances in which young people are socialised; the ongoing global recession, austerity politics and rising economic inequality and insecurity potentially, therefore, present a major challenge to the proliferation of cosmopolitan, multicultural and progressive values. Furthermore, the continued absence of many young people from the polls, a first-past-the-post electoral system that works to the disadvantage of small progressive left-libertarian parties such as the Greens, and the prospect of Brexit, each contribute to these uncertainties and to the heightening of opportunities for a cultural backlash.

Nonetheless, the recent upturn in youth engagement witnessed in Britain at the 2016 EU referendum and the support for Corbyn's Labour party at the 2017 General Election share common features with trends elsewhere internationally, and lend cause for optimism regarding the prospect of further advances for left-cosmopolitanism in the future. These include young people's participation in protest movements such as Occupy, the emergence of high profile and credible anti-establishment candidates and parties such as Sanders in the US and PoDemos in Spain, and the election to power of socially liberal leaders including Justin Trudeau in Canada and Jacinda Arden in New Zealand. Together, these developments offer young people alternative means and opportunities to address their fears and hopes in times of economic, political and social upheaval.

DEMOCRACY AT A CROSSROADS

Contemporary advanced post-industrial democracies are at a crossroads. In Britain, we have seen a youthquake in which young people have emerged on the electoral stage as key players exercising a collective power

that has demonstrated the capacity to shape the outcomes of electoral contests and the balance of power within the UK parliament. The Labour party did not win the 2017 General Election, but the mobilization of young people and their mass support for Corbyn's Labour helped to deny the Conservatives the majority at Westminster that was expected, and which Prime Minister Theresa May considered necessary to achieve a strong and stable Government and a successful transition to Brexit.

However, the continued engagement of young people in British electoral politics is not guaranteed, and neither is the spread of progressive democratic values. The natural process of generational replacement begs the question of which sentiments are carried on into later life by today's youth? Will older cohorts be succeeded by a youth population instilled with authoritarian-nationalist values that promote division and conflict? Or will more positive values and sentiments associated with left-cosmopolitanism prevail, values that are typified by open-ness, tolerance, solidarity, social justice, and cooperation – where the goal is to extend and deepen democratic institutions, practices and processes?

These trajectories are critical. Brexit opens a new and uncertain chapter in the direction of UK democracy. The extent to which young people feel that their voice will be heard and that there will be meaningful opportunities for them to assert that voice and play an active role will shape whether, and how, they choose to engage with democracy and participate in democratic life. One of the rallying calls of those advocating a permanent Brexit was the notion that it would offer the opportunity for enhanced political sovereignty by the taking back of control from Europe to return political power to the public and provide the opportunity to rejuvenate UK democracy. The Government and political parties have a role to play in harnessing the energies of youth in this process, of developing methods to reach out to young people and to work with them to help shape the renewal of UK democratic institutions and processes. If the political class is committed to this endeavour and successful in doing so, then the youthquake may be sustained and may progress in a positive direction that enhances and strengthens democracy and the spread of democratic values. If the political class fails to act in this decisive way, that will place a question mark over the course, stability and future of democracy, post-Brexit.

In this respect, education and political literacy are also pivotal in determining whether young people have the knowledge, skills and resources necessary to engage in democracy. We know that younger citizens claim to know less about how politics works than older generations. And, this is

particularly the case for young people from poorer backgrounds. And, the inequalities of participation within the generation of Young Millennials are disturbingly large. Clearly, political and social institutions need to do more to provide young people from these social groups with a reason to vote and the skills to do so. Here, we believe that schools and universities can play a central role – through the provision of citizenship education and opportunities for the practice of democratic skills – in scaffolding the transition of young people into adulthood.

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