# We have a voice

## young people and political engagement

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**democratic**
**dialogue**

# Contents

# Preface

DD

# Executive summary



**D**emocratic Dialogue has always had a strong interest in young people and politics since it was established in 1995 and the Belfast-based think tank has again returned to the issue.

This time we sounded out the attitudes of young people—by which we mean teenagers—through informal discussions groups drawn from across Northern Ireland, balanced by gender,

religion, urban/rural location and class. The messages emerging were clear.

Young people have a relatively high knowledge of basic political *facts*, but can struggle when it comes to *understanding*. They have a lukewarm interest in politics, but this general disposition conceals a much greater interest in particular issues—from war and poverty abroad to health and crime at home.

What passes for politics in Northern Ireland is not of great interest to young people. This is however mainly because of their negative assessment of progress in the talks between the parties in the region.

And they do think politics matters. While they may not be keen to join a party, they are quite willing to vote, sign a petition or even join a campaigning organisation. And they are just as interested in international as domestic affairs.

Young people identify clear barriers to their engagement in politics. They perceive politicians in a negative light and want them to engage with the issues in which young people are interested and to communicate with them in an effective way.

More positively, they know what would encourage them to be more politically engaged. Independent political education in school would aid their understanding. Mock parliaments would give them an opportunity to develop their skills. Parties and politi-cians better informed about, and focused on, youth concerns would gain their interest.

What young people don't want is gimmicky or populist answers to the 'apathy' problem. They don't particularly want to able to vote as soon as they're 16—or, unless their security concerns are assuaged, to be able to do so by mobile phone. **DD**

# Introduction

Democratic Dialogue is an independent think tank based in Belfast. It was set up in 1995 to encourage fresh political thinking, broaden participation and to work in problem-solving partnership with a wide spectrum of organisations.

The organisation has, more recently, initiated a series of specific and innovative projects to engage young people. During 2000-01, DD facilitated Northern Ireland's first 'young citizens' jury' on the issue of the '11-plus' transfer test.[1] DD also recently managed a project on sex education, which involved using specialist computer software—called Group Systems—to gather the views of young people.[2]

In an earlier project carried out by DD, *Politics: the Next Generation* (1997)[3], a survey of young people found a genuine interest in politics and indeed a desire to learn more about political issues.

A total of 73 young people (all of them teenagers) participated in the latest project, in eight groups. Participants were carefully selected to ensure that their profile was similar to the general young population—particularly in relation to urban/rural location, gender, religion and (as far as possible) social



You might be apathetic--but we're not

class. This involved identifying schools and youth clubs that were most likely to match the variables.

Drawing on clubs as well as schools also allowed for more variety of perspective. All those taking part were given information about the project, to inform their decision to do so, and were given the opportunity—if they wished—to withdraw at any time. DD

# The project

The project was called 'Young People and Decision-making'. It sought the views of young people on the current political system in Northern Ireland. It focused on three key issues:

(1) exploring young people's understanding of and engagement with political processes and decision-making;
(2) identifying what issues were important to young people; and
(3) looking at ways of engaging, and stimulating the involvement of, young people in the political process.

The project was conducted between March and September 2003. Central to it were informal discussions with the groups of young participants. These were concerned to:

* assess young people's knowledge and understanding of, and interest in, politics and

* collect views on how to stimulate such involvement and interest.

The discussions were moderated by facilitators from DD. To encourage debate, they used quizzes and polling exercises, as well as smaller working groups.

Towards the end of the project, a seminar brought together participants and political representatives. The purpose was to enable the former to interact with the latter and to seek views on how the project's findings should be reflected in the political domain. DD

# Knowledge and understanding

Although many of the young people commented that politics was not something about which they deliberately sought to learn more or to which they paid much attention, it was clear that their knowledge of politics was relatively good. Over half of those asked ten multiple-choice questions on a range of political issues were able to answer seven correctly (see table 1).

It is worth speculating that the questions which young people scored less well on might have caused difficulties for typical adults: the electoral system for regional elections (answer = proportional representation by single transferable vote), the name of the current Northern Ireland secretary (Paul Murphy), and the responsibilities of local councils (eg leisure centres).

Differences in performance, in terms of the proportion of correct answers, correlated with age (young teenagers were, unsurprisingly, less knowledgable) and possibly social class: groups in more disadvantaged areas were less likely to score highly than others.

While at least a basic level of knowledge was evident, *understanding* of politics appeared less widespread. Members in at least four of the groups were able to articulate fairly clearly the policy and ideological differences



**Who says politics has to be boring?**

between the main political parties. This may have been because these participants were more enthusiastic about politics than the 'typical young person' and to an extent self-selected. By contrast, in two areas young people were unsure about the reasons for voting for a certain political party and the more complex question of why certain activities might be regarded as 'political'. Several had been involved in intercommunal rioting but did not identify, or in any way conceive of, this as a 'political' act. **DD**

### Table 1: testing participants' knowledge of political issues

| Question | Correct answers (%) |
|---|---|
| Name of parliament at Stormont | 86 |
| Name of British political party that doesn't fight elections in Northern Ireland | 57 |
| Minimum voting age | 84 |
| Type of voting for regional elections | 19 |
| Beliefs of nationalist political parties | 60 |
| Name of secretary of state for Northern Ireland | 12 |
| Name of leader of Sinn Féin | 88 |
| Which organisation makes laws about policing | 48 |
| Responsibility of district councils | 29 |
| Official name of politicians at Stormont | 40 |

# Interest in politics

It was obvious from the discussions that family influenced participants' interest in politics:

> Your upbringing, your background, what your parents believe in [affect your interest in politics]. Because if they believe it they are going to sort of feed it to you.
>
> I think it [interest in politics] depends on the family.

Almost half of the participants agreed with the statement that 'young people aren't interested in politics' (see table 2). Again, younger participants and those from disadvantaged areas were more likely to appear uninterested.

**Table 2: 'young people are not interested in politics'**

|  | % |
|---|---|
| Agree | 46 |
| Disagree | 54 |

But when participants were presented with particular political issues, rather than asked about politics *per se*, a more complex picture emerged. This showed higher interest than the general question elicited and prioritisation of the issues in participants' minds—betraying very high interest in some cases. Table 3 shows the interest of participants in a range of local/regional, 'national' and global issues.

The fact that the Iraq war was relatively current at the time of the fieldwork may have elevated responses in this case. Nevertheless, it was striking how many participants commented on the issue, with some having attended protest marches—corroborating media claims that young people had been radicalised by the subject. Moreover, almost as strong interest was shown in the (unfortunately) enduring issue of world poverty.

Moreover, the domestic concerns of crime and healthcare exceeded Iraq as

areas of interest. On crime, for instance, participants made clear their awareness of, and concern about, the incidence of burglary.

Indeed, these 'bread-and-butter' concerns ranked above interest in talks on the future of Northern Ireland (which came in fifth overall). Negative assessments by the participants of political progress emerged as the overriding factor influencing their relative apathy towards this subject.

Moreover, if participants were roughly evenly divided as to whether young people were interested in politics, there was a much clearer division on the question as to whether they ought to be. As Table 4 shows, a big majority felt that politics mattered.

**Table 4: It doesn't matter that young people aren't interested in politics**

|  | % |
|---|---|
| Agree | 37 |
| Disagree | 62 |

For some participants there was a realisation that political engagement was linked to maturity, with one person pointing to the onset of the right to vote:

> [Politics matters] because we are going to have to vote in a couple of years.

**Table 3: extent of interest in political issues**

| Subject | Interested or very interested (%) |
|---|---|
| Iraq war | 86 |
| Budget | 57 |
| World poverty | 82 |
| Environment | 73 |
| Closure of local leisure centres | 64 |
| Crime | 90 |
| Northern Ireland peace talks | 77 |
| Healthcare improvement | 87 |
| Age of consent | 71 |

# Barriers to engagement

The biggest barrier to political engagement by the participants stemmed from their negative view of politicians. One person pointed to the perceived characteristics of the typical politician:

Characteristics of politicians? They're old, grumpy, male, wealthy.

Another participant seemed to summarise the views of several young people in terms of politicians being out of touch with the younger generation:

Aye they're old, forget about what it's like to be young. And especially as we were brought up in a different generation. They didn't have the things that we have nowadays, so how the hell do they know what we want?

Table 5 lists the key barriers to engagement for young people ranked in terms of the balance of views emanating from the discussion groups. The focus on the perceptions of politicians is evident, as is the generational difference implicit in the statements ranked first and second in the list.



Staring at a brick wall?

**Table 5: Key barriers to engagement in politics (by incidence of comment)**

1. Politicians don't address the issues that matter to young people.
2. Politics is boring.
3. The information provided by political parties is badly presented.
4. The politicians aren't representative of me.
5. Politicians can't be trusted.
6. Politics is too divisive in Northern Ireland.
7. I can't understand the information that political parties present.
8. The means of voting puts me off.
9. There are too many political parties.
10. I don't know what the political parties stand for.
11. There is a poor choice of political parties.

# Involving young people

Participants were asked to consider a range of broadly political activities that they would consider, graduated by commitment. Not surprisingly, as table 6 shows, the vast majority were averse to high commitment (joining, working for or standing for election for a political party). One person seemed to sum up the views of most, in relation to joining political parties, when he said:

**Table 6: preference for participating in a political activity (%)**

|  | Would do | Would think about | Never |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sign a petition | 76 | 13 | 11 |
| Wear a badge | 18 | 43 | 39 |
| Send a letter to a local newspaper | 36 | 37 | 27 |
| Join a campaigning organisation (other than a political party) | 25 | 42 | 33 |
| Protest | 34 | 42 | 24 |
| Arrange a meeting with a local politician | 22 | 42 | 34 |
| Vote | 73 | 24 | 3 |
| Join a political party | 3 | 40 | 57 |
| Work for a political party | 4 | 27 | 69 |
| Stand for election | 6 | 30 | 64 |

> [Getting involved in politics means] you're labelled.

Yet again the picture is not so simple. The discussions bore out the earlier survey evidence in *Politics: the next generation* that young people are significantly more likely to join a non-governmental organisation than a political party. In line with the discriminating approach to the issues we highlighted above, they are also perfectly willing to associate themselves with a cause with which they identify, such as by signing a petition. And the very high support for voting does provide evidence that young people are inclined to express a party preference when the opportunity arises.

In terms of promoting the engagement of young people in politics, the participants discussed a range of options, which are ranked in table 7. Three features stand out:

* the highest preference, for introducing political education in schools;
* the relatively low support for using electronic media for delivering political information and voting—largely due to concerns about security; and
* the lack of support for lowering the voting age to 16.

The first of these points bears out the evidence from *Politics: the next generation*, which encouraged the Council on the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in Northern Ireland to develop a strong citizenship strand in its proposals for revision of the curriculum.[4] This idea, which has been rolled out through more and more schools

**Table 7: Options for promoting political engagement by young people (ranked by incidence of comment)**

1. Introducing political education in schools/colleges
2. More information for politicians on the needs of young people
3. A Young Northern Ireland parliament
4. A minister for young people
5. More young elected politicians
6. Each political party to develop a policy for young people
7. Each political party to have a spokesperson on young people
8. Delivering more political information electronically
9. Allowing the use of e-mail / text-messaging for voting
10. Altering the voting age to 16
11. Political parties to introduce quotas to make sure enough young people are standing for election

taking part in pilot programmes, has met resistance from some teachers. While one can sympathise with concerns about additional burdens on the timetable, a narrow focus on conventional academic subjects cannot justify the exclusion of such a socially useful as well as student-relevant topic from a 21st-century curriculum. This is particularly so in the context of the proposed broadening of post-14 options envisaged by the working group established by the education minister on post-primary arrangements.[5]

The second point, taken with the preferences as a whole, should ward against superficial, gee-whiz approaches to the challenge of youth 'disengagement'. Thankfully, young people tend to be much more literate in terms of computers and electronic media than their elders, but participants were more concerned about the substance of political activity *vis-à-vis* young people and were not likely to be swayed by technical gimmickry.

On the third point, lowering of the voting age (to 17) was suggested by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in its 2001 draft document on a bill of rights for the region.[6] The views of the participants suggest this, again, may not be high on the list of concerns for young people, as indeed the commission found in its own consultation.[7]



It needn't be so big a gulf—meeting Dermot Nesbitt and Nelson McCausland

# Recommendations

Participants identified the recommendations in table 8 as emerging from the project. These recommendations commend themselves to region-ally elected politicians—who may, once, again hold the levers of power—and to ministers currently running Northern Ireland under direct rule.

Table 8: recommendations from the discussion-group participants

1. More effort is needed by politicians generally to work with young people and understand their needs.
2. Greater emphasis is required on providing more young-person-friendly information about politics.
3. Political education should be a compulsory part of the school curriculum, to be delivered independently.
4. A Young Persons' Parliament should be introduced for Northern Ireland.
5. Political parties should introduce policies for young people and appoint someone to speak on youth issues, if they do not do so already.

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