Individualising social and political participation – reconstituting youth in policy making

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Abstract: Overseas evidence indicates that lack of trust and belief in politicians is increasing amongst all ages and socio-economic groups, and that people are disengaging from institutional forms of political participation in growing numbers. This so-called 'crisis' in democratic countries is especially evident in the behaviours and attitudes of young people who are more likely to suffer social exclusion due to high rates of unemployment, lack of education, social status and social skills. Ironically, this is occurring at a time when western governments are intensifying their efforts to re-engage young people in traditional forms of political activities and practices. A major tenant of neoliberal doctrines is an emphasis on the role of the individual as a self-governing person responsible for their own social, political and economical well-being. It should not be surprising then, that young people’s political practices reflect these ideologies in post-industrial western societies. This research explores what young people (16 and 25 years) think about the notion of 'political participation'. This includes the formal (voting and belonging to political parties) and informal methods (fashion, popular culture, music, sub-cultures) of political participation and their ability to influence policymaking on local and global issues. The paper reports on the preliminary findings of an empirical study of (n=179) young people using a survey. Some writers argue that young people are not apathetic about public policy concerns; they participate in different ways and methods compared to previous generations. Theoretically, and practically this paper raises a number of important issues for policy makers. What is their understanding of political participation? Do their notions of political participation provide alternate visions to discourses of the neo-liberal individual? How does this reflect on the status of young people in contemporary society?

Keywords: young people, political participation, policymaking, individualising, disengagement, new forms of participation

1. Introduction

Overseas evidence indicates that lack of trust and efficacy in politicians is increasing amongst all ages and socio-economic groups (Bouckact, 2003), and that young people are disengaging from institutional forms of political participation in growing numbers (Adsett & McKellar, 2002). It would appear that those most likely to withdraw from political participation are young people experiencing suffer social exclusion due to high rates on unemployment, lack of education, social status and social skills (Bay & Blekesaume, 2002; Henn, M, Weinstein, M. & Wring, D; 2000). Various political and policy responses have been set up to stem the growing tied of disaffected young people around the world. In Australia, recent policy emphasis has been on top-down highly structured consultative and participation processes that do not adequately address young people’s citizenship rights and agency (Bessant, 2004; 2003).

The proposition that young people are disinterested and disengaging in political participation is contested in the literature, some writers argue that they are not apolitical or apathetic about public policy concerns; they are participating in different ways and methods compared to previous generations (Vromen, 2003; 2004). Considerable attention has focused on the way in which political disengagement is occurring in formal institutional contexts, employing a narrow definition of 'political participation'. A lot less emphasis has been placed on exploring young people’s notions of ‘political participation’ and what form this might take in contemporary post-industrial welfare state societies. For example, there is little exploration of alternate forms of political expression – and more importantly, the ways in which participation is expressed through various forms of popular culture – the media, music, fashion, sub cultures.

This paper provides an overview of the major debates about the level and extent of young people’s political participation. In the following section, some of the competing theoretical and policy issues are explored. This is followed by a discussion of the preliminary results of an exploratory study of (n=179)

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Australian young people aged 16-25 years. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of future research directions.2

2. Political participation – overview of debates

There is an extensive body of literature on young people and political participation found in a wide range of disciplines. The majority of the work is found in political science. It is possible to delineate a number of major themes and concerns in this literature. These are reviewed briefly below, but it should be noted that they are not mutually exclusive and some themes overlap with each other.

One major theme running through the literature around the world is that young people are increasingly disengaged from participating in formal political institutions, such as voting,3 belonging to political parties and other forms of civic activity, such as voluntary organisations and volunteering. A wide range of explanations is provided for this phenomenon. Some writers suggest that young people are not adequately socialised into voting (Roker, Player & Coleman, 1999) and other forms of civic behaviour (Smart, Sanson, Da Silva & Roumbourou, 2000). Some suggest this problem can be addressed through civic education (White, 1999; McAlister, 1998), and action learning in schools (Wilson, 2000) or from role models, such as parents (Youniss et al, 2002). Adset (2003) argues that that changing demographics (young people are numerically to small to make an electoral impact) and social conditions (less political attention is paid to young people’s concerns), explains the drop in voting amongst Canadian youth. Others, point to the role of the media, and its lack of serious attention to political issues (Evans & Sternberg, 1999). British researchers highlight structural barriers (such as poverty and unemployment), that militate against mainstream political participations (Henn, Weinstein & Wring, 2000). Yet, others suggest the deficits lie in young people themselves, and claim they are more materialist and individualist than previous generations (Inglehart, 1990). Different solutions (and policy options) are proposed depending on the particular disciplinary background and ideological assumptions underlying the research.

A second theme is that young people are not disengaging from traditional forms of political participation but they are re-engaging in different ways. Australian research conducted by Vromen (2003) counters the myth that young people are politically apathetic or disengaged. Vromen developed a conceptual typology – consisting of four distinct forms of political participation (activist, communitarian, party and individualistic) amongst young people 18-34 years of age. There is evidence to show that young people are concerned about a range of issues such as Aboriginal reconciliations, global poverty, third world debt and the environment (Beresford & Phillips, 1997). A number of studies have attempted to tease out these new forms of participation, whether in traditional institutional political arenas, as well as in newer forms of social movement participation. Some of this activism is taking place in cyberspace, but not to the level that many e-democracy advocates have predicted. There is a class, education and gender bias found in ITC forms of political participation. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds lack either access, or the inclination to take up ITC mediums of communication (Hudson, 2002). They are also most likely to be the most disengaged from traditional politics or political participation (Bay & Blekesaune, 2002). Some researchers, such as Micheletti & Stolle (2005) have been exploring the ways in which the market has become as important site for young people to challenge transnationals, employing a whole toolkit of individual and collective forms of ‘political consumerism’. These actions are deliberate and conscious forms of political participation that appeal to a wide range of young people. These actions combine both individual and collective forms of political action, and do not involve membership of groups, rigidity and formalities associated with traditional politics.

A third theme revolves around critiques about the flawed assumptions, definitions and methodologies underpinning research on young people’s participation in formal political activities. Some writer’s argue that the current definitions of ‘politics’ and participation (O’Toole, Lister, Marsh, Jones & McDonagh, 2003) is too narrow, and does not adequately capture the range of political activities that young people engage in both inside and outside of traditional political institutions. They argue that different research methods  

2 A longer-term project will explore the influence of popular culture on young people’s political participation.

3 The Australian Research Council and the Australian Electoral Commission has funded a 4-year national study on young people’s participation in the electoral process (Print, Saha, & Edwards, 2004).
(for example, in-depth interviews and focus groups) need to be used to capture the voice of young people, a claim supported by Vromen (2003). There is a need to develop new and expanded notions of what ‘political participation’ means in contemporary western societies that can be operationalised in empirical research. Indeed, the very notion of ‘democratic participation’ is deeply flawed (Lister, 1997). We also need to debunk the myths that young people are a homogenous group. Young people are as diverse (socially, politically, ethnically, culturally and economically), as other groups in the wider populations.

A fourth theme takes up theoretical concerns underpinning these debates. This body of literature challenges many of the assumptions underpinning liberal democratic theory, notions of citizenship (active and passive), community and civic engagement, and questions the way in which they are applied to young people (Bessant, 2004; Vromen, 2003).

A fifth theme analyzes the policy responses made by governments around the world to the ‘perceived’ problem of young people’s declining voter turnout and ‘disinterest’ in politics and formal political institutions. Governments around the world have instituted a wide range of formal and informal policy institutions and mechanisms, to give ‘voice’ to young people. These consist of youth parliaments, young roundtables, and youth councils and networks. Governments have set up Websites and enlisted the help of a wide range of nongovernment organisations in their quest to consult with young people. Bessant (2004) argues that the Australian initiatives are flawed for three reasons. They fail to take into account the significant problems young people experience in trying to participate socially, politically and economically; they are based on flawed notions and rhetoric about ‘participation’ and what it entails; and they are based on particular notions of citizenship and community that do not empower young people.

3. Empirical study

An empirical study was designed to explore some of the assumptions and myths surrounding young people’s political participation. An underlying assumption of this study was that young people are interested in politics, but they may wish to express their feeling, beliefs and attitudes about mainstream political issues in different ways to those of previous generations; for example, through various forms of popular culture.

Consequently, this exploratory study was designed to explore two main issues; first, to examine the nature and extent of political participation amongst young people, and second, to find out what young people defined as ‘political participation’. The research instruments consisted of an anonymous survey and in-depth focus groups. Given the limitations of surveys in eliciting information about political participation (Dunleavy, 1966), the research design incorporated the use of focus groups to explore young people’s views ideas about political participation in more detail.

First year University students aged 16-25 years were chosen as a convenience sample. This was to ensure that respondents had limited exposure to political/socialisation processes involved in higher education. Traditionally University students have been politically active, and so this group could provide information about young people that is not available in another population. In addition, it was anticipated that this group of young people would provide some insight into alternate forms of political participation. However, given the socio-economic bias in this sample, it is planned to extend the research to a wider range of young people from diverse backgrounds.

The sample consisted of students enrolled in political science, sociology and social work subjects at University of Queensland in 1st semester 2005. An anonymous survey was administered to approximately 600 students at the end of their weekly lecture. Over 200 students completed the survey, of which 179 were aged between 16-25 years. Students were asked to indicate whether they would be involved in a focus group discussion. Twelve students agreed to participate in focus groups; however, only two students came to the meetings. They agreed to be interviewed and this data has provided valuable background information for the research project.

The survey elicited a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. The survey data was entered into SPSS for coding and analysis. The qualitative data was entered into NVivo and is being analysed thematically.
Main findings

The survey included demographic variables and a series of questions about traditional forms of political participation, for example voluntary work, voting behaviour as well as eliciting opinions about the influence of voting on political decisions. In addition, students were asked to list their five most important personal and political issues. The first section provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the participants. This includes age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, employment status, and social class.

Demographic data:

The mean age of students was 19 years with 54.4% aged 16-17 years of age. There are more female students (77.5%) compared to males (22.5%), which is not surprising given the inherent gender bias prevalent in social science disciplines. The majority of students were in their first year (71%) with 24% in their 2nd or 3rd year at University. Over a third of students identified as Australian (36.5%) with 11% from the United Kingdom, 8.4% from Europe and 6.7% from South East Asia. The majority of students identified with a Christian religious affiliation (56.4%), however 31.4% said they were not religious, with at least one person identifying with Hindu, Judaism and Islamic faith traditions, and 8.1% as other. The ethnic and religious composition of the students matches those of the ABS census data (check reference).

Some studies suggest a strong correlation between engagement in political participation and employment status. In this sample, 68.9% of students were currently employed and 31.1% were not working at the time of the study, although 90.6% had worked at some stage in their lives. The majority of students were employed casually (72.6%) which probably reflects in part, the demands of work/study at this time in their lives and the decline of the youth labour market. Only 1 (0.6%) students had a permanent position. Students were employed predominantly in the hospitality, service and retail sectors. Membership of a trade union was low (14.4%).

Social class is often seen as a predictor of levels of political involvement and political affiliation. In this study, the majority of students identified as middle class (36.2%) middle working (22.4%), working (11.5%) and then professional middle (10.9%) and upper middle class (10.3%) respectively. Given the sandstone nature of this particular University, it is interesting that so many students identified as working class.

Finally, students were asked to nominate their political orientation. Over half described themselves as progressive (26.3%) or moderate (31.2%). In contrast, 13.5% described themselves as ‘traditional’ and 22.4% as ‘none’ with 6.5% as other.

Nature of civic and political participation

Students were asked if they were currently (or had been) involved in voluntary work (or civil organisations), as the work of social capital theorists, such as Putnam (2000) is used to argue that this is a predictor of declining levels of political participation. Two-thirds of students had undertaken some form of voluntary work (60.1%) and just around a third (39.9%) had not. On closer examination of the data, the majority of student (42.5%) had undertaken short periods of voluntary work (1-6 months), with 33.1% involved for 7 months to two years, and tapering off to 2% who were involved for over 10 years. This suggests similar trends in voluntary work found in ABS data (Lyons & Fabiansson, 1998). The majority of students were involved in a wide range of social and community/church service organisations – door knock appeals etc, a much smaller number had done voluntary work for political parties (Labour, Green, liberal), political organisations (socialist alternative), or local/global social action groups, such as Amnesty International.

Young people were asked whether they currently belonged to a range of organisations e.g. social, religious, political and sporting clubs. Those attracting the highest levels of membership included socio-cultural (28.3%), sport (26.7%), religious/church (18.9%) internet chat rooms (16.7%) with trade unions.

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4 One student identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.
5 Respondents were asked to indicate the high school they attended and its post code, as well as their current postcode to further analyse the variable of social class. This data is not included in this paper.
and political parties (13.3%). Few students belonged to environmental groups, professional organisations or book clubs.

**Personal/Political issues of concern to young people**

Some writers have suggested that young people are apathetic and less interested in social and political issues than previous generations. To try to ascertain the kinds of issues that are important to young people, students were asked to list the five most important personal and then, the five most important political issues to them. These two questions yielded a large amount of qualitative data.  

The data indicates that young people are concerned about a wide range of issues as demonstrated by other researchers (Beresford & Phillips, 1997). For example, at the personal level responses included family, friends, university, personal time and fitness, to the whole gamut of domestic and global social, economic and political issues – environmental sustainability, international poverty and homelessness, war in Iraq, taxes, defence, water and environment to name a few. It was interesting that the majority of students listed global political, social and economic issues amongst the five most important personal concerns. Once again, the data from the question on political concerns reveals a wide range of local/national/global concerns spanning social, political and economic issues – refugees, Iraq war, environment, and deaths in custody, a bill of rights in society, environmental matters, education system, health system, and lack of police. Many responses to this question focused on critiques of democratic institutions and processes. It is clear from the responses to these questions, that young people are very aware of the range of social problems in contemporary Australian society and around the world.

**Formal engagement with political processes**

Students were asked if they had ever voted in any elections at local, state and federal government elections. The majority (80.4%) were registered to vote and around 50% had voted in elections at the three levels of government. Given that voting is compulsory in Australia, it was seen as important to explore whether students through that voting influenced political decisions. Over half the students (55.3%) felt that voting was influenced politics, and a surprisingly high number of students felt it was very influential (15.1%). In contrast, 26.3% felt that voting was only slightly influential, and 3.4% felt it had no influence on political decisions, etc.

This issue was explored in more detail, as participants were asked to state why they thought voting did or did not influence politics. The qualitative data obtained from these two questions, reveals highly polarised responses between the two groups. Responses from those who felt it influenced politics emphasised the formal institutional nature of political organisation and democracy. For example:

*Makes politicians accountable and thereby shapes public policy through political pressure (forces them to address major needs of people)*

*By providing a democratic element to politics, it allows common people to have a say or even a chance to have a say in the political protection of our country*

*The answer if obvious! Voting = politics*

However, even amongst those who did believe that voting influenced politics – there was a level of cynicism and they frequently qualified their responses.

*Because politicians want to be re-elected, so they try to do what voters want.*

*They are going to tell people the good things they’re going to do (what people want to hear) to get more votes.*

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*6 The responses to these two questions are still being analysed but they reveal a wide range of concerns*
Your vote gets your opinion out there, and if people feel the same like you do, things might change, or not, whatever.

For those who did not think voting influenced politics or political decisions, several themes emerged including a general disillusionment with the formal political processes.

*Because [shit] is going to happen whether we like it or not, what the government wants will happen whether we like it or not.*

*Because common people do not have enough say in politics.*

*My vote [one vote] never wins*

A number of students made specific reference to feelings of disenfranchisement amongst young people.

*Many politicians are more concerned with themselves and are superficial about the issues that affect the real world. Political parties will not care what youth believe and do not change their tactics/views after voting.*

Students were asked whether any they believed any other forms of action, (apart form voting) influenced politics and political decisions. The majority (86%) indicated that it did. They were asked what kind of alternate political actions influenced political participation. The majority of responses included traditional forms of political protest and action eg lobbying, petitions, rallies and protests, demonstrations, media. Some mentioned ‘riots’, propaganda, international pressure, international NGOs, terrorist attacks, mass murder, and a few mentioned non-traditional forms, such as music, street theatre, fashion and popular culture.

The students were asked to define in their own words what ‘political participation’ meant to them. The majority of students emphasised being active (voting), being aware of issues, keeping informed, and knowledgeable about events/issues. The responses indicated an action-orientation, far removed from the claims of ‘apathy’ that politicians, the popular press, and some researchers make about young people.

4. Discussion

The debate about whether young people are engaged or not in traditional politics is an important issue for many reasons. Obviously, for a liberal democracy to survive, it needs to ensure that all citizens feel they have a future investment in any society, and that they have the opportunity to access the resources and goods to meet their needs and expectations. In the wider policy context, the renewed government interest in the level and nature of young people’s political participation is taking place in a political, economic and economic landscape dominated by doctrines of new public management and associated restructuring of the welfare state. This has significantly changed the nature of post-liberal democracy and democratic participation in post-welfare societies. Notions of collective human and social rights no longer grant citizens a legitimate political identity, or space to make claims on the state for assistance or care. The shape and extent of this revising of post-welfare state institutional arrangements is not fully evident.

There is concern that a generational shift is emerging about the nature of welfare state support given to politically salient groups in the future. In an era of baby boomers’ and rapidly ageing populations’ in post-welfare states – states that have rolled back support for many groups including young people. It is argued that they may increasingly less investment in a society that ignores and pathologizes their identities, life styles and political views or interests. Let alone a society that has abandoned them to market forces and limited support in favour of global economic and political agendas (Giroux, 2003). Giroux’s (2003) argument is a compelling one. He suggests that young people have been sidelined as global imperatives of war and terrorism have taken over domestic and international political agendas. Massive funds are going into this effort. New political rhetoric and policy agendas have developed that reposition young people in highly negative ways. They no longer are a policy priority for state funds; in fact, he argues they are no longer seen as the ‘future’ generation, as in the past when young people were seen as an important group to invest in. Young people hear that political message and it is not doubt they are
responding. It is obvious that young people have been disengaging from traditional forms of political participation over a long period. Therefore, it is not possible to point to any one factor as causal in this complex phenomenon.

5. Future research

A major tenant of neoliberal doctrines embedded in New Public Management is an emphasis on the role of the individual as a self-governing person responsible for their own social, political and economical well-being. It would not be surprising then, that young people’s political practices reflect these ideologies in post-industrial western societies. A major proposition in the broader research project is that the process of individualising and individualisation is having a direct impact on young people’s views and forms of political participation. There is clearly a need to explore any empirical evidence and theoretical insights available to support such an argument.7

This research is exploratory and cannot be used to generalise findings to wider groups of young people. Further research needs be undertaken on different groups of young people. This research needs to ask broader questions about the way in which young people define and experience ‘political participation’ in contemporary society, as ell as how they understand and use the limited ‘public space’ available to them. It is also important given the amount of mass consumption in our society, to examine the roles young people play in ‘political consumerism’ (Micheletti & Stolle, 2005), as well as other forms political expression derived from popular culture to gain a better understanding of the complexity and range of young people’s political participation.

6. Conclusion

Countries around the world, including Australia report that young people are disengaging from traditional forms of political participation. This paper has provided a review of some of the major debates found in the literature. They tend to be polarised. Some argue that there is clear empirical evidence to support the above contentions. Others suggest that young people are still politically engaged, but express their participation in different ways.

This paper reports on an exploratory study that investigated the extent and meaning of political participation in young people aged 16-25 years. This exploratory study demonstrates that young people are not disengaged from traditional forms of political institutions, as some would suggest, or that they are apathetic. In fact, quite the opposite picture emerges. The majority of young people take voting seriously and believe that it influences political decisions. The findings also reveal that young people are concerned and aware of a wide range of social, political, economic, environmental and international issues. They define political participation in very broad ‘active terms’ – being aware, being informed and taking part in a range of activities, but not joining or belonging to traditional forms of political organisations, such as political parties or trade unions. They may not be conceptualised as ‘active’ citizens in the traditional liberal democratic viewpoint, but they do demonstrate an ‘engagement’ with politics in a wider sense.

Finally, it is argued in this paper that future research should take into account the neoliberal character of contemporary social, political and economic arrangements, to ascertain the extent to which it is shaping individualised forms of political participation and identity amongst young people. Current research tends to suggest an eclectic mixture of individual and collective forms of political participation amongst young people, but one wonders how long that can be sustained in the contemporary policy environment.

References


7 This is explored in detail elsewhere.


