

## **Social Capital and Civic Action: A study of youth in the United Kingdom**

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### **Summary**

In recent years the apparent decline in civic and political engagement across western societies has attracted growing attention amongst academics, policy makers and social commentators. The condition of young people's political consciousness and attitudes to political engagement has attracted especial attention. The (apparent) emergence of a politically 'disaffected' or otherwise 'disconnected' generation of young citizens characterised by declining political interest, trust, and levels of formal participation has especially attracted the attention of the policy makers and commentators in the wake of the historic low tides of electoral participation recorded in the 1997 and 2001 General Elections.

At the same time, trends in the reproduction of social capital have been widely cited as key drivers with regard both to long-term decline in political engagement and civic mindedness in western democracies, as well as with respect to a wide variety of other dimensions of social cohesion in the UK policy context (declining levels of social participation and community voluntarism, rising anti-social behaviour, etc.). In this context it is sometimes argued that the erosion of social trust and reciprocity amongst young people in the UK reflect the emergence of a more individualised social outlook associated with the decline of collective social ties and identities. To this extent, trends in social capital formation may be said to reflect important generational as well as period effects with young people 'leading the way' in the development of more individualised social perspectives.

However, whilst trends in social capital are frequently cited as a key factor in the decline in civic mindedness and participation in Western democracies, rather less clarity exists with respect to how this process operates and crucially which dimensions of social capital are important with respect to civic participation. Drawing upon data from the UK 2000-01 General Household Survey Social Capital module, this paper explores the relationship between social capital and civic action amongst young British citizens at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In particular the following questions are addressed: How important is social capital in explaining the level and type of young people's civic action? Are certain forms of social capital more important than others in explaining patterns of civic action? Is the relationship between social capital and civic action dependent upon individuals' position in the life cycle?

Understood in terms of social networks and support, these data do not suggest any specific crisis of social capital formation amongst the UK's young people, nor that such behavioural ties are especially important in shaping patterns of civic action. However, with respect to the subjective dimensions of social capital, and especially with regard to notions of social trust and reciprocity, these data certainly show both significant differences across the life-cycle and that such attitudes are central in explaining patterns of civic action both in terms of 'conventional' political contacting, and 'non-conventional' political protest. At the same time, these data also suggest that

the influence of these attitudinal factors may vary to some extent across the life-course with the role of social trust in shaping patterns of civic action of rather less significance for young people than for older citizens. These findings suggest that whilst social trust and reciprocity are important drivers of civic action for the population as a whole, such effects are somewhat less important for young people. From a policy perspective, developing new avenues for meaningful participation in the political process by young people may be a more fruitful strategy for encouraging youth political engagement.