JOHN
SMITH
CENTRE
Youth
Poll UK
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FOCALDATA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OUR THREE TAKEAWAYS:

1. **Don't believe all the doom and gloom** about young people in the UK today. Most say they are still optimistic and that their lives will be better than their parents'. Contrary to recent claims, when it comes to running the country, they prefer democracy over dictatorship, and many are keen to get involved.
2. However, young people think UK **democracy is in trouble** and their optimism is tempered by financial anxiety. They are focused on the fundamentals: higher wages, decent housing, a reliable health service.
3. While many commentators have often chosen to emphasise the differences between the younger and older generations, it's possible that this gap may be smaller than the differences within the generations. The poll reveals that young peoples' **attitudes**, their **sense of agency** and their **willingness to contribute to society diverge significantly due to their life circumstances**, by where they live, and by who they are.

OUR THREE ACTION POINTS:

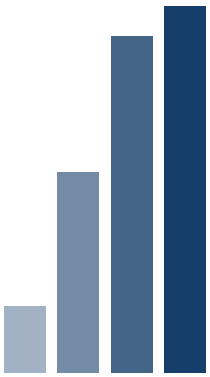
We believe the message given by young people in this survey demands three action points:

1. **Don't catastrophize Gen Z**: despite fierce headwinds, young people have used our poll to tell us they are still positive and willing to get engaged in the UK's future. We need a society that feeds their optimism with opportunities to do so.
2. Young people have told us in this poll that they want a **more honest and constructive politics** that focuses relentlessly on the delivery of the basics: job security, decent housing and a functioning NHS. They want politicians to be open and honest about the challenges they face. Government and opposition should respond to this challenge by doing politics better.
3. We believe the poll shows the need to reach out much more to those young people who feel they don't have a voice in the UK. A failure to do so will only create a new generation of left-behinds who end up feeling cut off from society, and thereby vulnerable to extremes.

What we did

The John Smith Centre UK Youth Poll 2025, run by Focaldata, began with a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups with young people across the UK. After reviewing this data, we then drafted a 40-question survey to a representative sample of 2,039 16-29-year-olds on everything from the state of British democracy to their own feelings of happiness, many based on the issues they had raised with us in the qualitative phase.

Our aim was to deliver an 'inside-out' perspective: to find how young people are feeling about themselves and the country at large, and to uncover what it is they want from society and government.



The key poll findings were as follows:

DEMOCRACY

Young people in the UK still **believe in democracy** but they are worried about its future.

Democracy is backed over a dictatorship by 57% to 27%. But young people agree 'democracy in the UK is in trouble' by 63% to 24%.

POLITICS

Young people believe **politics is an honourable job** and agree it is relevant to their lives, but overwhelmingly they see politics as too divided. They want politicians to be more open and honest and they want to see more young people in leadership roles. **Established political parties cannot take their position for granted**: not when just under two out of every three young people say they would consider voting for an independent.

59% agree politics is an honourable job, only 28% disagree. 56% disagree politics is not relevant to their life vs 38% who agree. 72% agree politics is too divided, with only 18% disagreeing. 61% agreed they would consider voting for an independent candidate outside of the mainstream parties vs 23% who disagree.

POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

A third of young people say they **would consider getting involved in organised politics** and three quarters say they have taken part in some kind of political activity in the last 12 months.

35% say they would consider getting involved in organised politics, with 62% saying they would not. Only 26% say they had done no activities in the last 12 months such as signing a petition, attending a meeting or using social media to advocate for an issue.

PERSONAL LIFE

Young people in the UK are **optimistic about the future**, think their lives will be better than their parents', and say they are broadly happy. However, many also say they **live with anxiety**.

63% say they are optimistic about their personal future; only 20% say they are pessimistic. 63% say their lives will eventually be better than their parents; only 14% say it will be worse. 72% describe themselves as either rather or very happy; only 28% say they are not very or not at all happy. But 56% say they feel anxious either daily or weekly.

POLICY

Financial worries are the biggest source of anxiety for young people and easing them is the key to making young people happier. Young people are focused on **quality-of-life issues** that affect their day-to-day lives, less so global or cultural matters.

Asked to rank the most important issues in the UK today, young people listed inflation and the cost of living (41%), healthcare (37%), housing affordability (32%), and crime (26%). Lower ranked issues included AI (6%), China's global influence (4%), LGBT+ issues (10%) and the war in Ukraine (9%). The top three contributors to anxiety were financial worries (37%), work pressure (23%), and job insecurity or unemployment (20%). Asked what would make them happier, the most popular answer was higher wages/ financial stability (41%). Asked to rank their top policy areas, young people raised affordable housing (38%), more investment in the NHS (36%), and lower taxes for low earners (29%).

CURRENT AFFAIRS

A majority of young people agree **social media should be banned for under 16s**, believe **racism is a major problem** in the UK, agree that **toxic masculinity is becoming more common**, are **divided on the impact of feminism**, and **support immigration**.

67% say social media for under 16 should be banned vs 28% who disagree. 73% believe racism is a significant issue in British society vs 20%. 67% say toxic masculinity is becoming more common vs 21%. On whether feminism has done more harm than good, young people are divided: 42% agree, 45% disagree. 51% agree immigration has changed their communities for the better, as opposed to 32% who disagree.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

The views of the UK's young people are **highly dependent on their demographic circumstances**.

Young people in work or with a degree are far more optimistic and engaged than those who are long-term unemployed, or less well educated.

- 70% of those working full-time are optimistic about their personal future vs 44% of those not in work.
- 34% of young people with degree-level or above qualifications strongly believe their vote can help shape their local area vs 19% of those without.
- Only 21% of people in full-time work had done no political activity in the last 12 months, compared to 54% of those out of work long-term.

Young men are more right wing and young women are more left wing. However, overall the majority of both genders identify as neither left or right.

- 26% of young men feel warm towards Reform UK vs 15% of young women. The same proportion of men and women consider themselves right wing.
- 20% of young women said they were left wing, vs 13% of young men.

Young peoples' sense of political agency varies depending on where they live.

- 44% of Londoners say yes to getting involved in politics vs only 28% in the east of England and Yorkshire and Humber.

CONCLUSION

In recent weeks, headlines have claimed that young people in the UK prefer dictatorship to democracy and that many even support the military taking over.

Our poll offers a more nuanced perspective on the experience of being young in the United Kingdom.

Young people are undoubtedly worried about the future of the UK and they are concerned about the state of democracy.

However, our poll makes it clear that young people support our democratic inheritance, and many want to play a part in it – if only they were given an opportunity to do so.

As to what young people want from politics, the answer is clear: a more open, honest political culture which provides answers to their basic needs. This is a generation that thinks our politics is too divided and wants politicians to come up with deliverable solutions. It's a generation that puts crime as its fourth most important issue, ahead of climate change and well ahead of wider current cultural issues. Many young people are simply seeking the safety and

security of a good job, an affordable home, and the comfort of family and friends around them.

It appears that in the face of a cost of living crisis, global insecurity, unaffordable housing and a more uncertain world, today's young people simply want democracy to deliver on the essentials.

For the John Smith Centre, a vital takeaway from the poll is the wide disparities in experience between young people depending on their region, their ethnicity, their income bracket, their gender and their education.

It is clear that growing up in the UK today is not an equal experience – and that those experiences have a deep impact on the optimism and the sense of agency that young people feel.

It demonstrates that our own mission to inspire and encourage young people from under-represented groups into politics and public life is all the more important.