

NAMING THE FIRST MINISTER: SCOTTISH ADOLESCENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL DECISION- MAKING PROCESSES

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INTRODUCTION

Official turnout records of 59.4% in the 2001 general election were the lowest since 1918, and the lowest ever under the full democratic franchise.

Young people are some of the people least likely to turn out and vote. In 2001 MORI estimates that only 39% of 18 – 24 year olds voted compared to 70% of those aged 65.
(Russell et al 2002, p. 6)

And still the children came, in their hundreds, then thousands. It was unprecedented. [...] 'No War, Blair Out' stickers were plastered across taut, bare tummies and on tracksuited bottoms. Boys checked out girls, checking out boys, chanting, 'Who let the bombs off? Bush! Bush and Blair!'
(Brooks 2003, p. 1)

The above statements from the Electoral Commission report on the 2001 General Election capture the scale of the perceived problem of dramatically worsening voter disengagement and, crucially, the very marked

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disengagement of young voters. They confirm trends observed in the 1997 UK general election (Pattie and Johnston 2001, p. 286). The report by Brooks (2003) of pupils abandoning classes for protests against the war in Iraq suggests, however, a different kind of engagement rather than any generalised disengagement from politics, and perhaps a trend away from interest in established party-based politics toward single issues such as war or human rights.

The recent push for democratic citizenship education, now apparent in curriculum guidelines in the schools of post-devolution Scotland (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2000), England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 1998), after decades of establishment and professional antipathy to political education in schools (Frazer 2003) has its origins in political anxiety about these trends. Though a causal link between citizenship education and electoral turnout has not been demonstrated, an indirect connection from education to political awareness and from awareness to turnout has been suggested by two American studies (Merrill 1998; Jackson 1995).

Similar problems with political engagement have been reported in the USA (Cross T and Slater RB 1996, pp. 120-127) and across Europe (Siaroff and Merer 2002, pp. 916-927; Taylor 2000, pp. 95-134). In Siaroff and Merer's study, exceptions to the apparent trend toward voter disengagement were found only in a small number of European states where there is strictly enforced compulsory voting, a polarized two-party system or a high level of party membership (Siaroff and Merer 2002, p. 916). In Taylor's study, lower electoral returns were typical where 'electorates channel frustrations in systems characterized by "fuzzy" lines of responsibility' (Taylor 2000, p. 916). The argument being made by Taylor is that when electors cannot easily identify where responsibility lies (for economic performance especially), this results in disengagement from the electoral process.

The UK Electoral Commission report focused on a number of key issues, including young people's attitudes towards elections, parties and politics. Among the reasons commonly given by young people (18 year-olds) for not voting were: the view that it makes no difference who wins; a lack of interest in politics; the view that individual votes made no difference; a lack of knowledge about politics and the view that politics is not for young people (Russell et al 2002, p. 6).

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Cynicism and negativity, popularly associated in a general sense with young people, were not identified by Russell et al (2002) as a common reason for not voting. Indeed, research in the USA would suggest that 'some negative feelings about politics serve to heighten, rather than dampen, young voters' intent to participate in the elective process' (Austin and Pinkleton 1995, p. 215). Austin and Pinkleton's study suggests, rather, that voters who feel able to see through political spin believe their votes can make a difference. Apathy, by contrast, they assert, is strongly correlated with reduced voting activity. Research in the UK reinforces the view of young people as interested in politics but disaffected from, as they see them, corrupt politicians (White et al 2000; Buckingham 1999, p. 176). Further, there is some evidence of transfer, rather than loss of political involvement, to single-issue or 'alternative' movements such as the anti-globalisation movement, CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) or ALF (Animal Liberation Front) (Weinstein 2003).

Such recent empirical studies took place against a background of well-established, if contentious, theoretical approaches to contemporary society which assume that a number of post-industrial nations are socially atomized, consumerist, introverted and uncaring (Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1991; Maffesoli 1996; Bauman 1999). Such attributes are generalizable across many post-industrial societies. The UK can be portrayed as especially problematic, for example lacking certain attributed cultural anchors and civilities of mainland Europe (Habermas 1992; Hutton 1996). In this view, perceived losses – of security, local identity, family life, permanent paid work, religion – lead to a resigned acceptance of a culture and society primarily characterized by absences of value, meaning and commitment (Hebdige 1988). This is despite often strong contrary evidence such as the recent sustained widespread Iraq war protests of 2003, noted above.

Such a cluster of views can configure the UK as inimical to the retention or renaissance of political engagement. However, this is not at its most pressing simply as a theoretical question. Political concern and participation are urgent practical matters. Many British children are born into poor economic circumstances by EU standards (UNICEF 2000) while the gap between rich and poor increases. Across comparative indicators of quality of life the UK fares poorly within Europe, for example on health (World Health Organization 2003). To characterize contemporary UK society as 'post-political' implies an unacceptable level of resignation (more emphatically so

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in Scotland, where economic and health indicators are persistently discouraging).

In this article, which presents a part of the findings from a considerably larger survey, we suggest that evidence exists to dispute such theoretical assumptions and to support at least in part the more positive elements of empirical studies.

The Electoral Commission report and other studies point to a lack of empirical studies about the determinants of missing political commitment. (Russell et al 2002, p. 6; Schweer and Erlemeyer 2001, p. 6). The fieldwork project reported in this paper set out to provide empirical evidence on the knowledge and perceptions of political processes amongst a slightly younger group (13/14 year-olds) which will, of course, be eligible to vote from 2007. In selecting this age group our intention was to focus on a population perhaps less jaundiced in its views of the adult world including that of politics, and one perhaps more useful as an indicator of political literacy development in schools. The knowledge and perceptions held at 13/14 years of age, the point at which many pupils elect not to continue with the subjects which are thought to contribute to political literacy (in Scotland, History, Geography and Modern Studies), may prove a reasonable indicator of the social and cultural capital they take with them into the post-school and potentially voting age.

METHODS

Eighteen of Scotland's 32 education authorities were contacted for permission to approach head teachers. The selection was designed to offer a reasonable spread: of city, large town, small town or rural; of highland and island, or lowland, and east or west areas. In socio-economic and cultural terms, these three sets of dimensions are useful in representing Scotland. All 18 education authorities gave permission to approach head teachers. Forty schools were then selected on the same basis to offer a representative sample. Of these, 15 agreed to take part. Fortunately, the sample remained reasonably representative with the following (overlapping) distribution:

City or Large Town	6
Small Town	7
Rural	3

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West	9
East	6
Highland	2
Island	3
Lowland	10

It was noticeable that head teachers of city and large town schools were more likely to refuse involvement or not to respond at all, in the first instance, than the head teachers of smaller schools in the more rural areas. The distribution of the sample in terms of the East/West dimension mirrors the Scottish population, but on the highland, island and lowland dimension there is, in crude numerical terms, an over-representation of the first two areas. Given that Scotland is a highly urban society, embracing diverse ethnic and cultural groups, this under-representation of pupils from the densely populated central belt is worth keeping in mind but we do not believe it to undermine the value of the findings.

The questionnaire and interview methods were piloted in three Ayrshire schools with a sample of around 60 pupils. The teachers carrying out the pilot offered advice which was used extensively in the accompanying guidance notes. These notes suggested that teachers could and should help pupils, at some length if necessary, to understand the questions or the political context, but indicated that they should, of course, refrain from suggesting answers. In most cases, each school issued the questionnaire to a single class of between 20 and 30 (average: 28.5 per school) pupils giving a total sample of 423 pupils in the 13-14 age range.

Interviews were semi-structured with pupils invited to elaborate on and to explain the choices they had made in completing the questionnaires. Because of the constraints of the study, interviews were carried out in only two schools (one city and one rural/island) with, in each, a group of five pupils, so although these were helpful for piloting future interview work, it is the questionnaire data which is of greater interest here.

The data from the questionnaire returns were processed using standard spreadsheet software to generate a set of bar graphs showing the distribution of responses across the whole sample. A selection of these has been used in the Results section below to give a broad representation of the sample's perceptions. At this stage, no comparison of, for example, the urban with the

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rural or the highland with the lowland responses has been made. Our purpose in this report is simply to report on the Scottish picture, based on a representative sample.

We obtained findings based on many more questions than we report on here (informants responded to some 40 questions overall, in spring 2003). Our principal interest, in what has been an exercise to garner representative data in the short term – and to help determine further areas for more intensive long-term research – was not just to assess knowledge of political or constitutional matters in our samples, but to explore with them a fairly wide range of ethical matters associated with decision-making and power. Who takes which kinds of decisions, about what, in our society? This included questions about peer activity and about families.

In what follows we offer a representative selection of data with some tentative conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bar graphs illustrating the distribution of responses to each of a selected set of questions are presented here. Commentary from the interviews is added where this offers insight into how respondents may have understood the questions (but we should observe again that these were pilot interviews involving small numbers).

Two of the most obvious questions to ask with a view to beginning to assess political literacy are, of course, 'Who is the Prime Minister?' and in post-devolution Scotland, 'Who is the First Minister of Scotland?'. Figures 1 and 2 seem to offer encouraging news for Tony Blair but, perhaps, disappointment for Jack McConnell.

Figure 1
Who is the Prime Minister?

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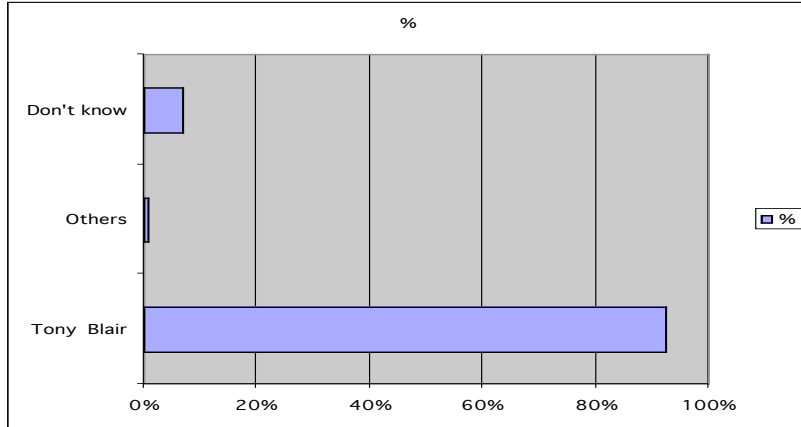
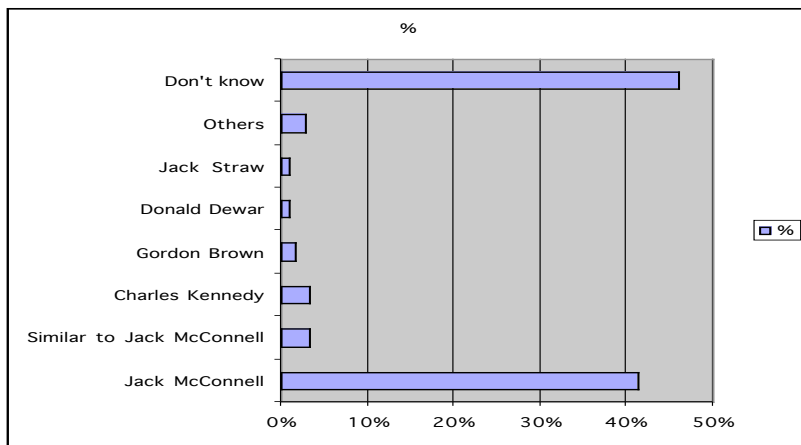


Figure 2
Who is the First Minister of Scotland?



What these results indicate is, of course, a matter for debate. Clearly nearly all (92%) of these 13/14 year-olds could name the Prime Minister and this

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suggests at least 'entry-level' political knowledge. Equally clearly, only a minority (41%) could name the First Minister of Scotland and most could not even suggest a name. This suggests a serious lack of breadth to that knowledge and, where Westminster politicians were named, confusion of the UK and Scottish contexts. It should be noted that the 'similar sounding name' category included probable attempts at the correct name including the delightfully modern 'McGoogle'! When asked to name the place of work for these two figures, nearly all (96%) were able to identify Edinburgh for the First Minister of Scotland but, fascinatingly, a sizeable minority (9%) placed Tony Blair in New York. In considering these results, we need to remember Tony Blair's particularly high international profile and his perceived 'presidential' style. Equally, with regard to the First Minister of Scotland, we need to note that there have been three incumbents in quite a short period of time, and we also need to consider the differences in the level of media interest in the two leaders. For example, although people living in Scotland will generally read Scottish-produced newspapers, they also consume much of their television news from London editors and broadcasters. We surmise that it is television which provides the primary explanation for this difference in perception in our sample.

With four layers of government (European, UK, Scottish and regional/local) making decisions that affect the lives of the population, the Scottish context is fairly complex. The perceived influence of each level, summarised and presented in Figures 3 and 4, may offer an initial insight into thinking about these institutions.

Figure 3 suggests a fairly widespread view that all four layers of government are influential but that the UK and, notably, the Scottish national contexts are more significant than the other two. The issues which are, in fact, the actual responsibility of the Scottish Parliament do seem (Figures 4 and 5) to have been strongly associated with it by the respondents. In interview, both groups seemed relatively unsure of the role of the EU but fairly sure of the role of the UK parliament in foreign affairs especially regarding the decision to go to war with Iraq. With regard to the Scottish context, the city school interview group rated the influence of the Scottish parliament quite highly whereas the rural/island group seemed to perceive it as markedly less influential than the UK parliament. Explicit school-based education (Modern Studies) in the role of these four governmental institutions does seem, in the light of comments

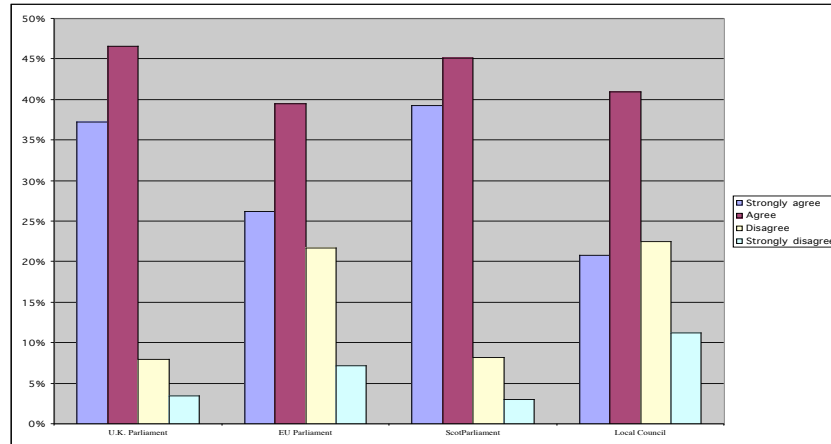
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from the interviews, to have played a part in informing and influencing the perceptions of the respondents.

Some specific issues, with a high ethical/moral content, have attracted considerable public and media interest as well as lobbying by pressure groups in the period leading up to political decision-making. Notable examples have been human cloning, war and controversial public works such as new motorway building. Figures 6 to 8 indicate how the respondents rated the different sources of power and influence in the debate on these three key areas.

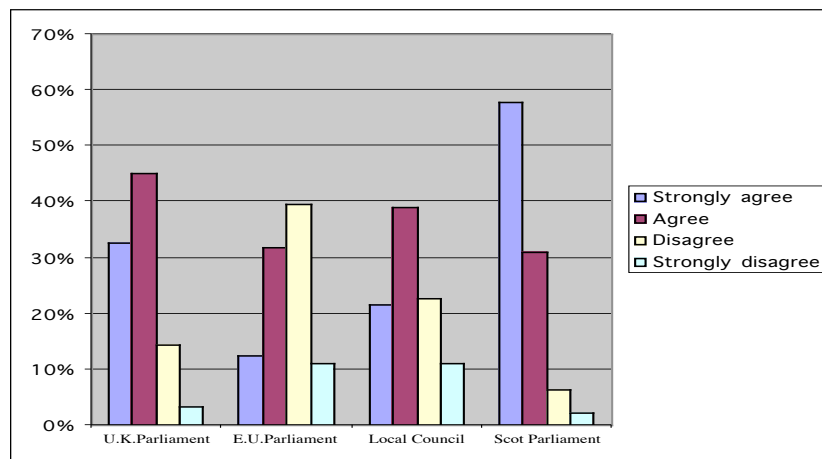
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Figure 3
The politicians who take the most important decisions about our lives work where?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

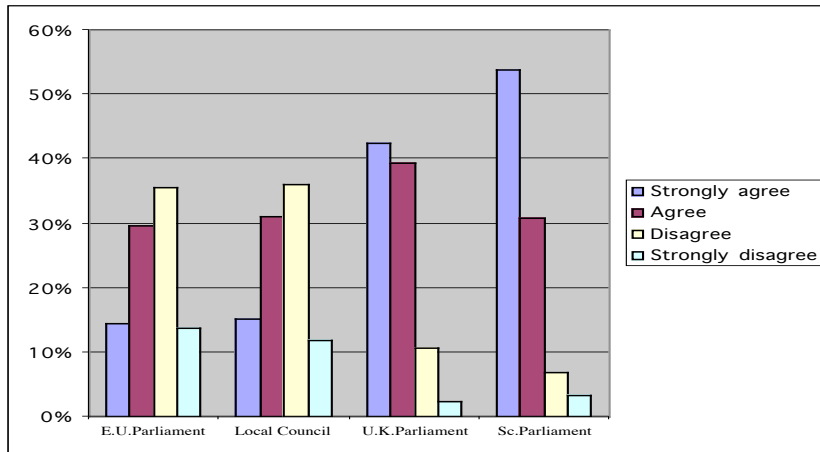
Figure 4
The people who take the main decisions about health, education and transport in Scotland work where?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

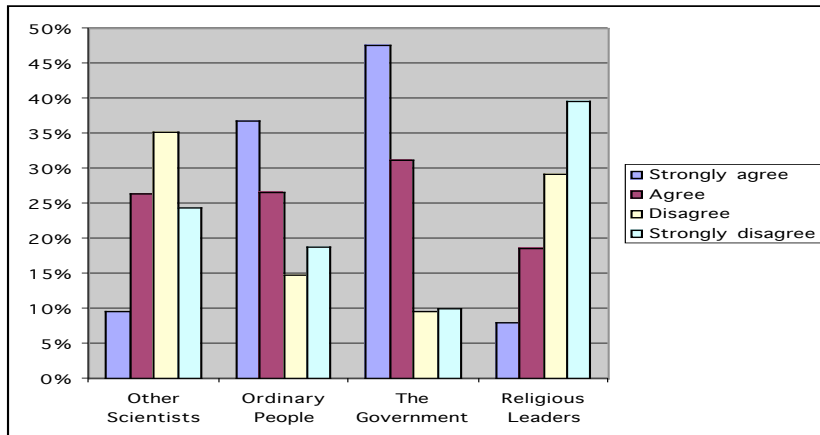
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Figure 5
The people who decide how much money there is to spend on the police and fire services in Scotland work where?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

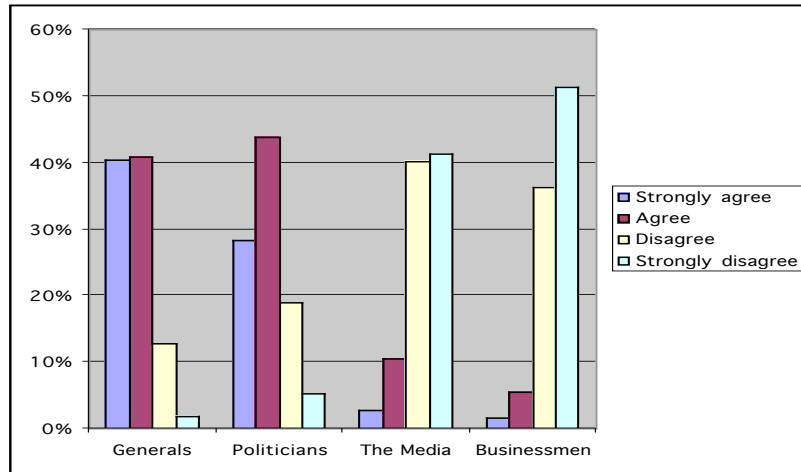
Figure 6
Scientists should not be allowed to clone humans unless they have permission from whom?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

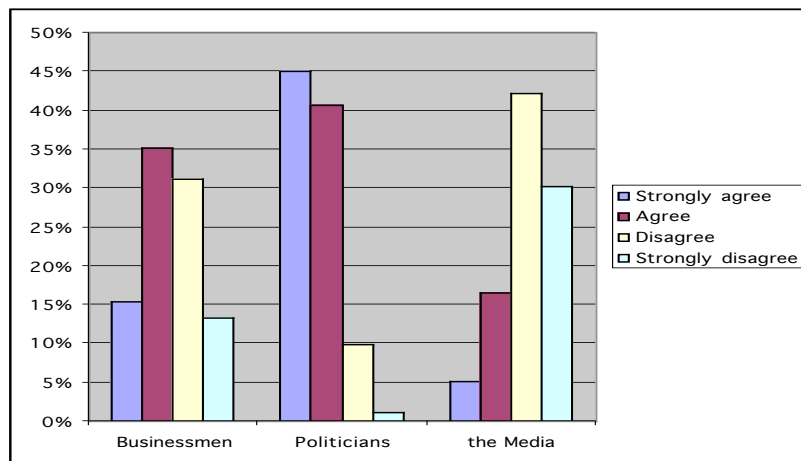
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Figure 7
When our soldiers go to war, the people who send them are who?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

Figure 8
When we get new motorways or rail links, the people who take the main decisions are who?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

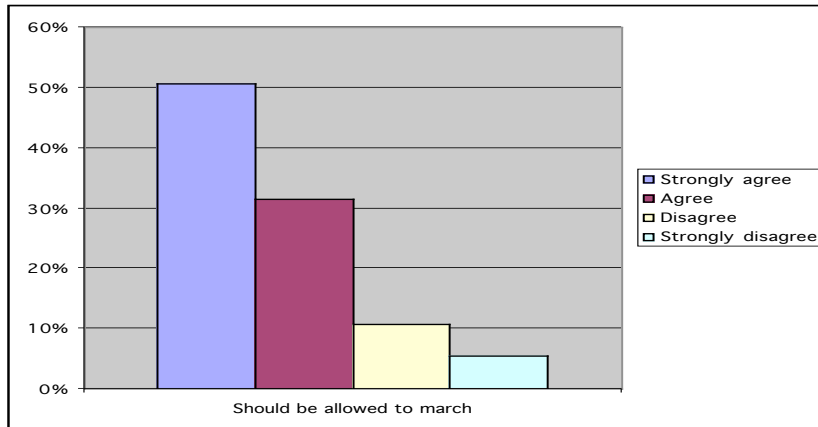
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These three graphs suggest quite a strong sense of the role of government and public opinion in forming and making decisions on controversial moral issues. The influence of 'technical experts' (scientists or businessmen), 'moral experts' (religious leaders) or the media was not rated highly by many respondents. Exceptionally, 'generals' seemed to be recognised as powerful and legitimate decision-makers in the extreme context of war. (Unfortunately, interview transcripts do not shed any light on informants' thinking about the relative roles of government and military leadership.)

The data collection phase preceded the dramatic anti-war protests, including those by schoolchildren of the same age as our sample, in the spring and summer of 2003. It would have been fascinating to measure the respondents' reaction to the legitimacy or otherwise of these protests within the UK's democratic political processes. However, Figure 9 does reveal a high level of support for the legitimacy of 'street' protests on environmental issues.

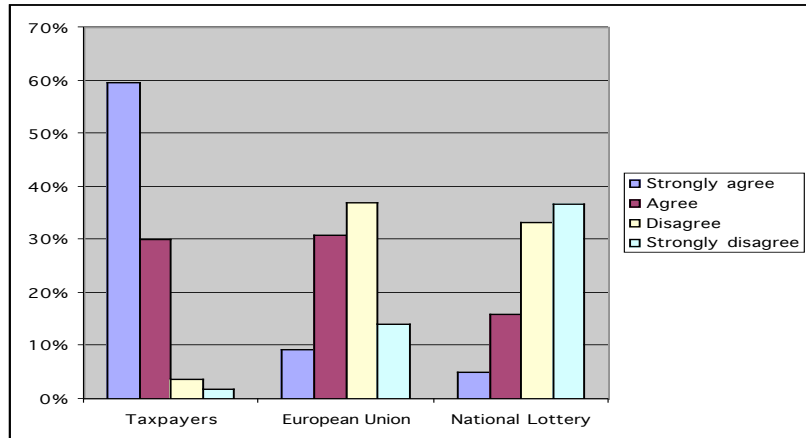
As well as environment issues, we also tested on perceptions of the funding of public projects approved by government, respondents being asked how such funding is raised and how it ought to be raised.

Figure 9
People should be allowed to take part in marches and street protests against developments that may harm the environment



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Figure 10
Free health care is paid for by whom?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

Figure 11
Everyone should pay for the cost of hospital treatment, not just those who need it

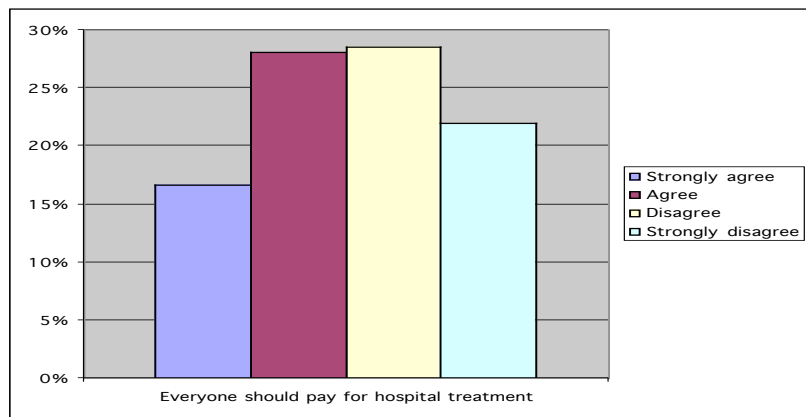


Figure 12
Only those with children should pay the cost of schools

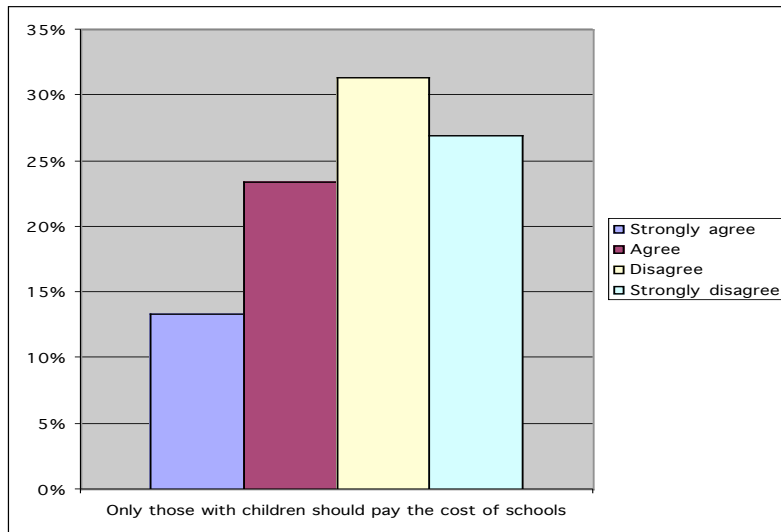
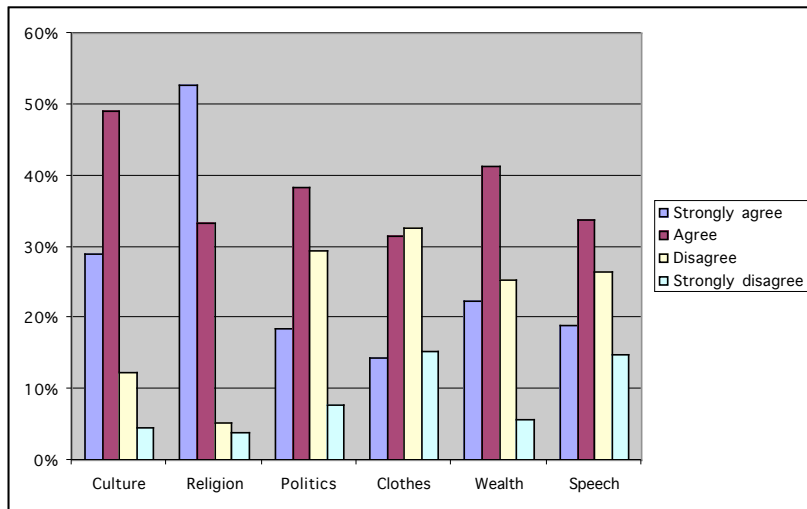


Figure 10 suggests that most respondents could correctly identify taxation as the actual source of funding for most public projects but, interestingly, Figures 11 and 12 indicate quite a spread in attitudes to the question of who should pay. Quite a sizeable proportion of the responses seem to suggest a more individualistic view whereby only those currently using a service should pay for it. Interviews reinforced the impression of some diversity of thinking and, critically, that such thinking was not superficial but, rather, informed by background (often family) ideology. The rural/island group took a less individualistic stance and stressed the concept of sharing responsibility within communities while, in the city group, an American pupil made much of personal responsibility for health problems. (These pilot findings are being pursued in further planned research.)

Finally, where democratic processes fail and conflict flares, what causes did respondents identify?

Figure 13
The main reasons for conflict between different groups of people in Britain are what?



Options shown were offered to respondents.

There may be no surprise to see, in Scotland, religion identified most strongly as the source of inter-group conflict. We saw little point in testing for the rather (for our age group) abstract quality of 'class', instead asking about clothes, wealth and speech. In interviews, both sets of respondents suggested, however, that they 'knew' religion in itself was not really the issue. Both groups saw 'cultural' conflict, which they equated with 'ethnic' conflict, as more of a problem in England than in Scotland; and religious conflict as more of a problem in Northern Ireland than in Scotland. 'Speech' as a problem causing divisiveness was mostly explained as having to do with a kind of assertive, 'posh' way of speaking. Interestingly it was not the view of our small interview sample that there exist varieties of Scottish speech which are assertive or 'posh' in this sense, nor was Englishness in general the issue for the interviewees (the forms of speech found in TV soaps such as East Enders, Coronation Street or Brookside were not perceived as divisive). We surmise that our sample identified a form of speech associated with what

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Tom Nairn memorably called the 'southern lowland hegemonic bloc' (Nairn 1988).

This intriguing field of perceptions connecting concepts like 'culture', 'religion', 'ethnicity' and 'politics', as well as the difficult area of 'class', is one of those in which we plan to pursue detailed qualitative research.

CONCLUSIONS

Our first conclusion is essentially methodological, albeit expected in a range-finding study of this kind. Like many researchers at this stage, we find the quantitative elements in the study so far both informative and rewarding, but we are instantly faced with questions which need to be explored by different methods and in greater depth. However, we have discovered some useful things about the broadly 'political' perceptions of 13/14 year-olds.

The apparent and growing reluctance of young people to engage with elections in the UK is widely presented as a crisis for democracy. This study sought to establish whether the problem had visible roots in the knowledge and perceptions of democratic processes held by the group (13/14 year-olds) currently in the final stages of a compulsory social education in schools and who, critically, will join the electoral pool themselves in four or five years. The results, recognising the limitations of a sampled survey based heavily on a questionnaire method, suggest the presence of emerging political literacy. There is nothing here which yet tells us whether or not our informants are well-enough equipped and motivated to enable them to engage with democratic political processes in a developed participative sense. But there is evidence of potential here which through further development in the 14 to 18 year-old phase, might well increase the level of engagement with politics.

Evidence of an emerging political literacy can be found in the ability to identify the particular responsibilities of the four levels of government in what is quite a complex system (Figures 4 and 5 and interview comments). Similarly, the tendency to select democratic and popular influences over technical, moral or media experts (Figures 6, 7 and 8) and the high level of support for street protest on environmental themes (Figure 9) might be read as evidence of an emerging global citizenship of the type promoted in recently developed curriculum guidelines.

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Understanding the economic basis for the funding of democratic society's key institutions such as health and education – in personal taxation, in government redistribution and in charities – is important for the development of citizenship. There is evidence here of at least 'entry-level' knowledge of the fundamental role of taxation and of engagement with a debate over the justice of its forms (Figures 10, 11 and 12 and interview comments).

Failure to engage with UK parliamentary and local democracy amongst young voters will have its explanation elsewhere. What this study demonstrates is that it is unlikely to be found in the knowledge and perceptions of democratic processes commonly held by adolescents only four or five years before they gain the right to vote. Perhaps the practical question which emerges is primarily for the education system. There may be evidence here of a developed political and ethical consciousness – but what happens to it between the ages of 14 and 18?

FURTHER RESEARCH

The team is planning further quantitative and qualitative research with a view to gaining a broader and deeper understanding of the changing nature of democratic citizenship for young people in Scotland and, since we are trying to construct a comparative dimension, in a major English region. (We should make it clear that the following intentions are dependent on funding which is currently being sought.)

As always, research into complex phenomena (here, for example, phenomena of 'identity' and 'participation') leads directly into questions about methods. Our intentions are to pursue the findings so far by seeking more complex, qualitative data, but it will readily be understood that testing for political and ethical awareness involves addressing a potentially over-large range of interests and knowledges, even in limited samples (and we don't want the quantitative dimension to suffer too much either). Our next steps will involve theming the questions around topics which we think most likely to contextualize political and ethical affirmations (or denials), broadly enough to enable productive analysis and evaluation. As researchers we have in various ways explored the question of which domains of knowledge and feeling can most usefully contextualize political identification and participation statements. The areas which we feel compelled to test are (for obvious reasons) political and historical knowledge, followed by the equally

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self-selecting field of certain related collective identity propositions. For example, belonging and locality claims (both handled as likely to emerge plurally, in other words across at least a short spectrum of self-identification) are of very considerable importance here.

Next – given salient aspects of recent social and cultural developments, and the nature of the theoretical propositions to which we have been attending – we identify consumer identity in particular as an area which needs more exploration, in juxtaposition with political and other 'modern' (that is, as distinct from 'postmodern') characteristics. In the generalizing, and often pessimistic, theoretical accounts which we referred to above, there is an assumption that if the young have gone from politics into some other domain, it is toward the world of consumption that the path leads. Company logos – insignia denoting consumer enslavement, in this perspective, rather than ideological commitment – are the badges of contemporary youth pinned on them by pessimistic observers (whether they really wear them or not: we will return in a moment to the need for researchers to avoid such assumptions).

Relationships with media culture and (from a different angle) popular culture generally comprise the fourth domain which we want to explore. Of course these are areas of life which overlap with each other, and perhaps all of the others, but it will be helpful to separate them for analytical purposes. So, by juxtaposing political and historical knowledge, belonging and identity claims, consumer identity accounts, and, in particular, accounts of relationships with media culture and popular culture, we hope to widen and deepen our analysis of participation myths and realities among our informants.

To do this we need to move up to a further age range. What we have found at a descriptive level from 10-14 year olds is not really pursuable at greater qualitative depth below the young adult range (for more than one reason). 16-21 year olds will be the primary though not exclusive age range for further work. The matter of age prompts a further observation. The researchers intend to seek early evaluation from their informants of the researchers' own assumptions about these topics, this in order to try to drain prejudice from the investigation. There is a possibility that some determinedly pessimistic theorizing of contemporary society, and perhaps particularly of culture in its broadest sense, is in part a product of an older generation looking at a younger. Our intentions involve trying to capture the full value of contemporary, often 'alternative' identifications, rather than assume a pattern of 'loss of values'.

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The remaining, parallel strand of the next phase involves investigating response mechanisms by society to the perceived drift in young adults' political commitment. It is clear that institutional attempts to respond to a lack of interest and participation among young adults in traditional politics are having mixed results. For example, 'youth government' and similar websites are often at best limited in impact. There is a real need for research into remedial 'politicization' or 'repoliticization' processes, in turn mapped on to more detailed qualitative research on the present pattern of values of engagement among young adults. Alongside a consideration of institutional practices (youth wings of political organizations, for example) this investigation will require us to analyze less tangible phenomena, such as the impact of demographic factors on take-up of the opportunity to 'participate' in websites. In 2001, only 10% of low income families had access to the internet in the UK, compared with 82% of high income families (National Statistics 2002, p. 4). Uncovering stable and significant identity data is always a challenging task, but the new world of 'electronic democracy' is especially susceptible to misinterpretation.

Fieldwork methods will be varied and the work phased to enable adjustments to our plans as we go. Online and hard copy questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, media-use and consumer activity diaries, ethnographic logs, and creative/expressive video work are desirable constituents of the process in order to provide the breadth and depth of empirical evidence from both young adults and professional informants needed to comment on theories and ideologies of depoliticization. Our current intention is to produce a comparative dimension to the work through collaboration with colleagues in the English Midlands, in a context in which both similarities and differences in local cultures (the other being chiefly the west of Scotland) can help build a fuller picture. It is hoped, given the twin-nation collaboration, to elicit some useful comparative data on attitudes to mainstream political developments, associated, for example, with proposed English regionalization, such data emerging as a function of discussing with informants their perceptions of 'localities', 'ethnicities', and the 'collective' dimensions of their lives (Saeed et al 1999).

For example, does the prospect of English regionalization increase the relevance of mainstream politics to young adults? And how does this compare with perceptions of the devolved status of Scotland? We will include some consideration of 'positive' and 'negative' engagement issues, for

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example, commitment to environmental issues, or against asylum seekers. Though the core samples will in the main be age-limited, it is difficult to see why a proportion of the research results should not be generalizable.

We hope that not only educators, but cultural resource providers, political institutions and media professionals may find both those offered here, and subsequent results, of interest.

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