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# **A Generational Approach to Modelling Youth's Engagement in Politics**

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## Abstract

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Youth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies are less engaged in politics than their adult counterparts. To explain why, this study adopts a generational approach to modelling youth's engagement in politics. Contemporary youth are characterised by progressive individualist values of democratisation and individualism that respond to the instability and uncertainty of late modernity. Linear regressions are used on datasets extracted from the World Values Survey for four study countries – Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. The results show that the conventional civic engagement model no longer explains why contemporary youth are statistically less engaged in politics than adults. The index of progressive individualism developed in this study, however, does diminish the impact of age in determining variation in political engagement. Although further research is needed to confirm progressive individualism is a generational characteristic of contemporary youth, this study advocates for increased flexibility in the practice of politics to reflect the lived experience of young citizens in late modernity.

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# 1. Introduction

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Youth's historic lack of engagement in politics has earned them a reputation for apathy. Whether founded in reality or not, youth's perceived apathy impacts the extent to which political decision-makers consider youth's concerns whilst creating policy. This affects the health and robustness of contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies. To shake off the image of apathy and increase their influence on political decision-making, youth must engage in politics through visible modes of political expression.

Hope for the revitalisation of youth's engagement in politics has sprouted from the increased levels of voter turnout in the recent 2008 American presidential elections. The 53 percent of American citizens under 30 years of age who voted (CIRCLE 2008) were an evident increase from the 37 percent that voted in 1996 (Lipka and Wiedeman 2008). In his presidential acceptance speech, Barack Obama recognized youth's achievement in "reject[ing] the myth of their generation's apathy" (Lipka and Wiedeman 2008). Youth's increased rate of engagement in politics in 2008, however, is reflective of an overall increase in voter turnout across all age groups: the general voter turnout rate of 51.7 percent in 1996 rose to 61.7 percent in 2008 (McDonald 2009). A comparison of youth and general voter turnout in these years indicates that youth's engagement in politics is still consistently below that of adults.

Targeting youth's image of apathy, a long tradition of research attempts to explain *why* youth engage in mainstream politics at a lower rate than their adult counterpart. This study does the same, by developing a generational model that is operationalised by conceiving contemporary youth to be characterised by progressive individualism.

Over the last forty years, social and political scientists have developed a greater understanding of the reasons for youth's disengagement from politics. Robert Putnam (2000) argues that because youth are less engaged in civic life, they lack the civic resources and motivation that generate engagement in politics. The development of Putnam's civic engagement model by contemporary researchers questions whether youth really are disengaging from civic life or whether they are engaging in a different way. This argument gives rise to the new politics model, which suggests that because of changing social ties and networks, youth engage in politics through the Internet or new social movements. In using Putnam's civic engagement model to study societies outside of America, studies question whether the strong relationship between civic engagement and political engagement is only present in democracies where politics are strongly rooted in civic life.

In considering the impact of the world in which youth make their transitions from childhood into adulthood on their political development, this study develops a generational approach to youth's engagement in politics. The generational approach focuses on the effect of historically specific social, economic and political structures on contemporary youth's engagement in politics. In late modernity, youth's interaction with education or employment structures is highly fragmented and democratised. Youth perceive their development as independent and autonomous because they undertake individualised projects of risk assessment (Beck 1999) and self-actualisation (Giddens 1991). This leads to a proliferation of progressive individualist values among youth. It is hypothesised that because youth experience life through individualised and fragmented structures, their evaluation of collective political action as a vehicle of social change is significantly compromised.

Four study countries are chosen to assess the civic engagement and generational models: Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. Between them, the similarities in social and political environments and differences in power, resources and modern histories provide sufficient scope for comparative analyses. Data is sourced from the World Values Survey and International Social Science Programme. Descriptive analyses are conducted to show that in comparison to adults, youth have been less engaged in politics in all study countries over up to the last 30 years. Linear regressions are used to conduct explanatory analyses through the civic engagement and generational models. Even in the USA, where Putnam (2000) conducted his study, the civic engagement model is shown to no longer be adequate for explaining why youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults. However the alternative generational model, which is operationalised using an index of progressive individualism, *does* explain the observed difference in political engagement due to age.

The results of this study show that progressive individualism is more effective than civic engagement in accounting for the impact of age on contemporary engagement in politics. Because contemporary youth are more likely to be individualistic, innovative and less affected by authority or social standards, they are more likely than adults to disengage from politics. Perhaps counter-intuitively, young citizens who are most socialised and most respectful of authority are likely to engage in politics at similar rates to that of adults. This evokes the concern that in no longer being a construction of critical citizens, contemporary democracies are surrendering their capacity to keep themselves in check. Instead, progressive citizens disengage from politics because of the individualistic lived experience encouraged by late modernity while less progressive citizens influence politics. This tension indicates that citizens who have the resources to disrupt and democratise the political space lack the motivation. By being absorbed by an “ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement” (Beck 1999: 9), progressive individualist youth compromise their potential for collective determination and empowerment.

## 2. Theoretical overview

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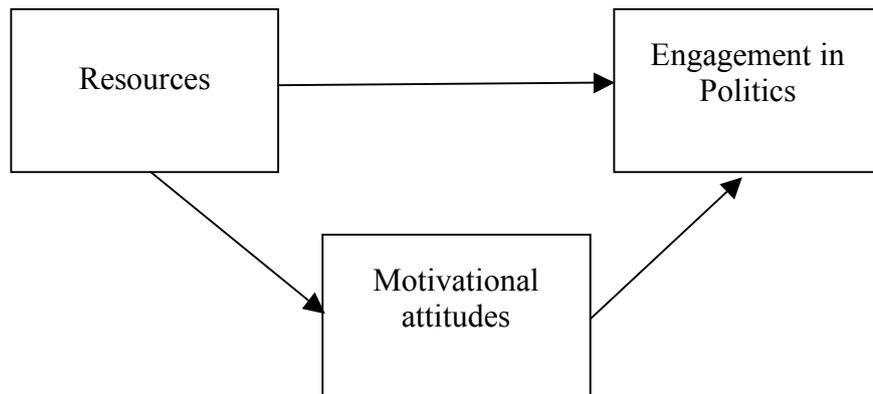
Among researchers who study youth's engagement in politics, it is commonly observed that youth engage in politics at a lower rate than their adult counterpart. This observation is supported by a plethora of both quantitative and qualitative studies. In Britain, Russell *et al* (2002) report a decline in not only youth membership in political parties and civic organizations, but also their already low election turnout rate. In Australia, Edwards (2006) finds that youth believe voting is an ineffective vehicle for change, as the contemporary political landscape offers such little choice amongst candidates. In America, where democracy is highly rooted in civil society, Putnam finds youth are engaging increasingly less in voluntary associations (2000). Researchers are driven by the question of *why* youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults. The ultimate motivation of existing research in this literature is to re-democratise the political space by strengthening youth's political voice to be equal to that of adults. Ultimately, it is projected that this would enable the creation of a more robust democracy.

This theoretical overview is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the classical model of political engagement. The second section provides a layout of the theoretical models that are most prominent in the contemporary literature on political engagement. The third section develops the generational model, which presents a new way of modelling contemporary youth's political engagement.

### 2.1. Classical model of political engagement

The classical framework for modelling the mobilisation of political engagement was developed by Nie *et al* in 1969. Nie *et al* develop it to question whether and how a country's economic development, which drives urbanisation, leads to increased political engagement. They propose that economic development transforms the pyramidal class structure of peasant worker societies into a diamond-shaped structure. This transformation is due to an expansion of the middle class through the growth of the service and white-collar industries. The subsequent urbanisation and economic restructuring leads to changes in political socialisation patterns, which endow a greater number of citizens with politically relevant resources and motivations. These changes are brought about by new income, education and social transactions. For example, Nie *et al* (1969a) suggest that more citizens are exposed to political information which increases their political awareness, causing them to develop attitudes of political efficacy and to acquire a sense of civic duty. Nie *et al* write that "these attitudes motivate the citizen to participate in politics, sensitize him to available opportunities, and provide him with political resources" (1969a: 374). In Figure 1 below, Kindseth and Listhaug (1979) schematically illustrate Nie *et al*'s (1969a) classical model of political engagement.

**Figure 1:** Classical model of political engagement (Nie *et al* 1969a; Figure adapted from Kindseth and Listhaug 1979)



The results of Nie *et al*'s (1969a) empirical study however show that although this framework can contribute to understanding changes in political engagement, it fails to accommodate different levels of detail. For example Nie *et al* (1969a) find *no* significant relationship between the individual's urban residence and degree of political engagement. Referring to the existing literature of the time (Deutsch 1961), Nie *et al* argue that this is because urbanisation merely transforms political orientation from parochial to national. They cite Dahl (1961) who argues that urbanisation weakens the ties between the individual and local community, which lessens the extent of local political activity (in Nie *et al* 1969a: 367). By amending their political engagement index, Nie *et al* confirm that urbanisation does lead to the decline of citizen's engagement in local politics (1969a: 368). Nie *et al* also conduct further research to clarify the conditions that give rise to motivational attitudes. Initially, Nie *et al* argue that citizens become motivated to engage in politics because of the resources they accumulate through their interaction with organised civic life. However after conducting their empirical research, Nie *et al* (1969b) find that group-members can often lack attitudes and resources for engagement in politics and are instead motivated by other factors such as strong leadership.

Since it was initially proposed, the classical model of political engagement has undergone a series of transformations through repeated redefinition of each of the input variable categories (resources, motivation and political engagement). For example, Verba *et al* (1995) use this framework to identify three reasons for political *disengagement*. First, if citizens 'can't' engage, it is because they lack the resources of time, money and civic skills. Second, if citizens 'don't want' to engage, it is because they lack the psychological interest that motivates engagement. Third, if citizens do not engage because 'nobody asked', they experience isolation from the recruitment networks which typically mobilise citizens to engage in politics (1995: 271). Alternatively, studies problematise the framework by trying to understand how demographic factors, such as sex, age and ethnicity affect the accumulation of resources and motivation (Gordon 2008; Henn *et al* 2005; Pacheco and Plutzer 2008).

The theoretical models described in the following sections re-conceive how the resources, networks, social and psychological statuses of the individual influence their political engagement.

## **2.2. Contemporary models of political engagement**

The three contemporary models most commonly used in current research on youth's engagement in politics are presented below. First, in the civic engagement model political engagement is understood to be dependent on individuals' accumulation of resources through their civic engagement (Putnam 2000). Second, in the new politics model youth's apparent disengagement from politics is explained to be due to their transferral of political activity onto the Internet, into new social movements or into local community activism. Third, in the structure and agency model the form of contemporary political structures and the extent of youth's political agency are argued to be interrelated.

### **2.2.1. Model 1: Political disengagement as a result of the retreat from civic life**

A wealth of studies performed on the relationship between civic and political engagement exists within the literature (Putnam 2000; Quintelier 2008; Odegard and Berglund 2008; Kim *et al* 1999; Barber 1998; Bogard *et al* 2008 and Milner 2002). These studies overwhelmingly argue that changes in trends of engagement in politics can be reduced to broader shifts in engagement with civic and social life. The best-known advocate of this model is Robert Putnam (2000), although many others support and further develop the model. Putnam's research is firmly planted in analyses of the development of American communities across the twentieth century. The civic engagement model is particularly applicable to American society because as theorised by De Tocqueville, American democracy is strongly rooted in civil society (in Putnam 2000: 48).

Putnam argues that civic engagement produces social capital, which endows citizens with social confidence as well as an appreciation for social norms, values, trust and obligations. He writes that when "people are trusting and trustworthy... social transactions are less costly" (Putnam 2000: 288). Developing a norm of reciprocity means that citizens do not waste their resources ensuring that other citizens will uphold their end of the transaction. For Putnam (2000), civic engagement proves to the individual that a community exists that is willing to fight for uniform values and goals. He argues that being part of a stronger collective force is instrumental in the citizen's empowerment and consequential political engagement. Putnam's argument can be understood through Nie *et al*'s classical model of political engagement (see Figure 1), by arguing that civic engagement not only motivates citizens to engage in politics by magnifying social confidence, but also provides them with the resources of shared values and beliefs.

Although the positive relationship between civic and political engagement is rarely disputed, researchers vigorously question the reasons for this relationship. Rather than emphasise the accumulation of social trust, Kim *et al* (1999) suggest that civic engagement develops the citizen's political voice. Civic groups provide a forum for non-purposive and casual political conversation, which produce impartial and rational opinions that can be used in formal political performances. Since civic groups are unregulated, citizens are more likely to experiment with political opinion and in the process groom their deliberative skills to develop a political 'habitus' (Bourdieu in Kim *et al* 1999). Together, these processes convince civically engaged citizens that they own a legitimate political voice, capable of resonating in the formal political sphere (Kim *et al* 1999: 379).

Alternatively, Milner's 'civic literacy' (2002) and Barber's 'civic competence' (1998) argue that civic engagement increases political engagement because it educates group members about democratic

processes whilst demonstrating the power individuals have to create practical change. In this case, the importance of understanding the political system is emphasised more than the importance of understanding political issues. By understanding the political system, citizens are more likely to be successful in influencing political decision-making and consequently develop a record of political engagement (see Bogard *et al* 2008: 541). Regardless of the qualitative correlation between civic engagement and political engagement, ‘civic competence’ authors also believe the decline in political engagement is due to a retreat from civic life.

Putnam argues that intercohort change generates society’s retreat from civic and political engagement (2000: 35). This means that rather than individuals changing their habits, likes or dislikes, society experiences a slower and subtler turnover of generations. It is more difficult to reverse intercohort change since no individual actively adopts new tastes and habits (Putnam 2000: 34). Intercohort change emerges when new generations, which increasingly represent a greater portion of society, introduce new values and norms. In Putnam’s words, “the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested” (Putnam 2000: 36). To reverse intercohort change in a literal sense would mean to reverse the natural physiological cycle of birth and death. The distinction between types of social change is central to Putnam’s work because it shows that the decline in civic engagement and consequently political engagement is something which emerges as a consequence of social growth which appears to be beyond the power of the individual. If Putnam is correct in his diagnosis of intercohort change, youth’s disengagement from civic and political life should be considered of paramount importance in understanding societal trends in political engagement.

In opposition to Putnam, Odegard and Berglund (2008) find that youth are not retreating from civic life, but rather being more selective in the civic groups they choose to join. Odegard and Berglund (2008) argue that youth are more likely to engage in civic groups that *bond* across citizens of a common generation. This is opposed to *bridging* civic groups which unite citizens across different generations, backgrounds and cultures (2008: 276). Consequently, instead of fostering an attachment to existing social networks, norms and values, youth locate themselves in an environment in which they can collectively experience dissatisfaction with the political world of their predecessors (Odegard and Berglund 2008: 285). Nonetheless bonding social networks still facilitate one’s accumulation of social capital and improvement of civic literacy. Indeed, with the new emphasis on civic learning in the school curriculum, civic literacy among youth is expected to be on the increase (Print 2007). Ultimately if political engagement continues to decline among youth in the presence of strong bonding networks, it is not because youth lack social capital or even civic literacy, but rather because they are not part of social networks that advocate the values and beliefs of wider society.

### **2.2.2. Model 2: Refuting youth’s political disengagement through new politics**

Advocates of the new politics model claim that if youth’s civic engagement functions through bonding networks, youth are consequently developing new modes of political engagement. To refer to Nie *et al*’s classical model of political engagement (see Figure 1), the new politics model redefines and broadens the scope of political engagement to encompass youth’s socio-political activity. The new politics model does not accept that in disengaging from traditional forms of political expression, youth

now exist as an apolitical population. Researchers such as Vromen (2003), Crawford (2006), Norris (2003) and Henn *et al* (2005) conceive new politics to encompass engagement in politics through dialogue on the Internet, consumer activism or supporting local communities. This shift has occurred due to a rise of non-material political values through the improvement of education, proliferation of media globalisation, peace and economic security (Kimberlee 2002: 91). Consequently new politics are mobilised on global issues such as the environment, living standards, women's rights, distribution of wealth and international peace. Since these issues do not dominate conventional political party politics, Norris states that youth adopt new 'repertoires' of political expression (2003: 3; also Beck 1999: 14). In being disillusioned by the state's political mechanisms, youth act on issues beyond the realm of domestic politics through single-issue campaigns and new social movements.

Among researchers who investigate youth's engagement in new politics there is a specific interest in political activity on the Internet. Banaji (2008) creates a link between traditional and cyber civic engagement by identifying a common thread of training and motivating youth to engage in politics. For example, activist sites such as 'GetUp: Action for Australia' provide information on relevant political issues and encourage citizens to take action in their local communities (GetUp 2009). According to the civic engagement model, political engagement should not alter if (a) youth is disengaging from traditional civic life because they are engaging in cyber civics and (b) civic life and cyber civics foster the same process of motivating and training. Nonetheless, Banaji finds that the number of young people who actually allow their cyber civic experiences to influence their political activity is small (2008: 548). According to Kim *et al* (1999), until citizens are forced to deliberate and question their own political knowledge, they remain in danger of experiencing the political debate from a passive perspective. This argument is upheld by Putnam (2000), who states that the media not only competes with civic networks for the citizen's time, but also allows citizens to 'free ride' on majority opinions. Banaji's finding shows that the resources youth accumulate through cyber civics are not enough to counter the dissatisfaction with, alienation from or impenetrability of domestic politics. Yet as Edwards (2006) argues, omitting to see a change in the structure of social networks and activity could result in understanding youth to be blatantly apathetic, rather than dislocated and disillusioned from domestic politics.

The primary shortcoming of the new politics model is its lack of empirical support. When discussing the empirical works that address youth and new politics (eg Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995; Armstrong 1996; Jacques 1996 and Inglehart 1990), Kimberlee (2002) provides evidence for the presence of youth's alternative *values* rather than their rates of political *activity*. For example, Kimberlee writes that "Inglehart identified a 'silent revolution' taking place among young when he documented a generational shift in attitudes away from the materialist focus of older people to the post-materialist concerns of youth" (cited in Kimberlee 2002: 92). This is confirmed by Bennie and Rudig (1993), who find that although it is more likely for youth to be more sympathetic to alternative values, they are less likely to express their concerns physically (in Henn *et al* 2005: 559). Furthermore, Henn *et al* (2005) find that although there is evidence for Britain's youth to be more engaged in participatory and direct forms of politics, it should not be overstated. They write "it would not be appropriate to explain young people's apparent disengagement ... as a consequence of a uniform shift towards a 'new politics' value system and orientation" (Henn *et al* 2005: 573). In addition to the lack of empirical support (or perhaps because of it), the new politics model functions on a redefinition of politics without definitive parameters. Thus it is very

difficult to test the new politics model, because as Milbrath writes, “when politics becomes ubiquitous or universal, it begins to lose its meaning” (1965: 1).

### **2.2.3. Model 3: Political disengagement as a result of contemporary political structure and agency**

Structure and agency are separate but interrelated concepts, which are used to explain youth’s disengagement from politics by examining the extent and nature of interaction between youth and political structures. While authors who use the new politics model attempt to redefine ‘politics’ to recognise youth’s political activity, the structure and agency model returns to a traditional definition of politics by which youth are found to be disengaging from politics.

The structural perspective questions the nature of opportunities for engagement within the operational procedures of the state. For Norris, political structures change depending on “the level of competition and fragmentation in the party system and the degree of pluralism or corporatism in the interest group system” (Norris 2002: 5). Greenberg (2003) and Edwards (2006) argue that in contemporary representational politics the scope of policies and opinions has narrowed. Consequently, the representation of many interest groups and populations has decreased. Greenberg (2003) states that in not framing political issues in a youth inclusive way, a structural shift has occurred that diminishes youth’s place in politics. For example, rather than framing economic policy in terms of job security and wages, both the USA Democratic and Republican parties focus on easing the price of health insurance and fighting dives in superannuation funds (Greenberg 2003: A5). Debates on youth-relevant issues such as job security or education are quashed by representatives’ failure to introduce them into political discussion. Essentially the structural approach suggests that changing political structures have the capacity to alienate youth by not representing their concerns.

The agency perspective focuses on the factors that come into consideration when youth make the decision to disengage from politics. Banaji (2008) argues that youth surrender their political agency, because in adopting an active political identity, they are forced to bear more duties than privileges. Borrowing from Ruth Lister (1998), Banaji formulates citizenship through a balance between individualistic and communitarian, or rights-based and duty-led social roles (Banaji 2008: 544). The notion of citizenship is an imagined contract, which changes form and meaning with the changing values of societies. Lister understands the contemporary western meaning of citizenship to be experiencing a paradigm shift, placing greater emphasis on obligations rather than rights (1998: 313). A reason for this could be the economic and social implications associated with an aging population. Banaji (2008) argues that entering into a discourse of citizenship, which emphasises morally conscious citizens (who accept their duties but are limited in their political activity due to a narrowing of the political sphere), can disillusion and repel youth. Consequently, youth frame their own innovative political acts as apolitical. By failing to prove they are a cohort worth campaigning for, youth allow political parties to institutionalise youth-neglectful political performances.

### **2.3. Adopting a generational approach**

To inform my empirical analyses I draw on both the civic engagement and structure and agency models of engagement in politics. I do not draw on the new politics model because its broad definition of

politics is not well suited to the motivations of this study. I test the civic engagement model because of the numerous works that find a strong relationship between civic engagement and political engagement. Current studies that find that youth *are* civically engaged (Odegard and Berglund 2008; Vromen 2003) however, indicate that youth's disengagement from politics is influenced by more than just their civic engagement levels. Because I suspect contemporary youth are different to Putnam's youth (the baby boomer generation) (2000: 257) I adopt a generational approach. I advocate potential for the development of the structure and agency model by examining the effect of historically specific economic, social and political structures on contemporary youth's development of political behaviour.

I posit that contemporary youth are disengaging from politics because they are influenced by 'late modernist' values. Labelled 'progressive individualism' in this study, these values revolve around notions of individualism, creativity and democratisation of political and social structures. Progressive individualism is considered generational because youth, as developing citizens, are most influenced by the fragmented, unestablished and individualised structures of late modernity. These structures greatly affect youth's transitions from childhood to adulthood by placing boundaries on their development of identity and agency. For example, during the economic restructuring associated with post-industrialism in the 1980s, youth unemployment rose to the highest level known in the post-war years (France 2007: 18; Inglehart and Baker 2000). Youth deferred (and still defer) full-time employment by continuing with higher education. However (in response to economic restructuring) the organisation of education changed by also fragmenting and diversifying. Late modernity affects youth not only by problematising their entry into the workforce, but also by orientating their education around competition and investment. The new structures through which youth develop to become citizens of the adult world fragment their identification both with their cohort and with wider society. The highly individualised manner of contemporary youth's social development is hypothesised to have a notable impact on their development of political identities.

The generational approach is distinct from the youth-focused model, which stems out of 'life-cycle' explanations. The youth-focused model emphasises that the development, attitude and lifestyle of youth leads to political apathy and disengagement (Kimberlee 2002: 87). Youth's development is characterised by a constant fluctuation between "self-confidence and humility, selfishness and altruism, society and solitude, ... knowing and doing, conservatism and iconoclasm, sense and intellect" (Hall 1904: 40). The youth-focused model understands this turbulence to influence youth's political engagement until they make their transition into adulthood when their political engagement conforms to the norm. Unlike the generational approach, the youth-focused model does not recognise that each generation is subject to fundamentally different environments, which subsequently cause differences not only in their political engagement but in their interaction with the adult world more broadly (Kimberlee 2002). In this study, the generational approach is developed to support the argument that unique structures of late modernity have a strong impact on the development of contemporary youth's political identities. In the sub-section that follows the social and political environments in which contemporary youth exist are discussed within a historical context.

### **2.3.1. The effect of changing economic, education and social structures on youth's political development**

In Western societies, modernity gave rise to 'youth' as a distinct social identity in the public sphere. Industrialisation and urbanisation restructured the organisation of employment, family life and governance and consequently made youth a 'responsibility' of state agencies (France 2007). In the mid-twentieth century, post-war Anglo-Saxon democracies adopted welfare capitalist strategies that shifted the framing of youth from 'depraved individuals' to a group suffering from 'social inadequacies' (Davies 1986 cited in France 2007). During this time, 'youth' represented the symbolic locus of social change of post-war restructuring efforts (France 2007: 15). Inclusive welfare policies placed youth's development within supportive structures of education, youth services and formal youth movements. The focus on community, family and universal work allowed youth's transition from childhood into adulthood to be certain and stable. Since the post-war years, however, the flexibilisation and mobilisation of work has transformed the economic, social and political structures which influence youth's transition from childhood into adulthood.

In his work on new capitalism, Richard Sennett writes that the contemporary structure of the economy requires "short-term jobs [to] replace stable careers" and "skills [to] rapidly evolve" (Sennett 1997: 161). The flexibility and instability of the workforce problematises youth's transition from 'school to work'. In its fluidity and instability, new capitalism surrenders positions which are assigned to developing and preparing new employees for life-long careers. Accordingly, unlike in the 1950s and 60s when work was easily obtainable for youth (Baron *et al* 1999: 485), new capitalism not only suppressed the youth labour market in the 1980s, but subsequently constrained its recovery in the economic boom of the 1990s. For example Kimberlee (2002) writes that in 1997, Britain's long-term youth unemployment was twice the level of unemployment in any other age group. Youth's unemployment in the 1990s was the highest level of youth unemployment since the immediate post-war years (Mizen 2004 cited in France 2007). Additionally, for the fraction of youth participating in the workforce, the value of their wage (at the end of the twentieth century) was less than for young people in 1988 (Kimberlee 2002: 94). As adult employment recovered, the continuation of youth unemployment signalled a fundamental shift in youth's place in adult society. Lack of work meant youth paid proportionally less tax and symbolically unbalanced their equal status (with adults) in society. The simultaneous institutionalisation of youth's unemployment and the rise of 'policies of control' created an overt imbalance between adult and youth social statuses.

Youth's unemployment in late modernity catalysed their longer continuation of education. This is clearly illustrated in Furlong and Cartmel's finding that (in Britain) in 1974 "one in three young people stayed on at school after the official leaving age had been reached. This number increased to one in two in the early 1980s, and seven out of ten a decade later" (Furlong and Cartmel 1997 cited in France 2007: 18). Governments encouraged the continuation of education because it not only delayed the transition from 'school to work', but also diminished unemployment rates in tough economic times. However the social consequences of increased education in the 1980s did not mirror those of liberalised education in the 1950s and 60s.

Late modernity framed education as an instrument through which to acquire human capital. Education became a risky 'investment', which would need to earn returns on the job market (Becker

1975). The shift in the framing of education led to competitive and individualistic development, consequently giving rise to values of individualism and democratisation. The marketisation of education in late modernity also advocated individualism by diversifying or fragmenting courses and disciplines (Coffey 2001: 1-6). In contrast to the 1960s, this led students to perceive their social and intellectual development through education to be distinct to that of other students. In gaining an education that is qualitatively different to older generations, youth cannot be expected to show the same relationship between education and political engagement as adults. As Putnam argues, the different (generational) experiences that arise from developing in specific historical environments influence how youth engage in adult political life (Putnam 2000: 255). Individualism, generated by education and employment in late modernity, not only fragments the social space but disempowers citizens in diminishing their perception of the effect they can have on politics.

The fragmentation of work and education in late modernity complicates social life by proliferating social transactions. The mobility of the workforce in late modernity means that workers are prevented from developing existing social relationships because every time they change jobs or locations, they abandon existing social ties and begin anew. As Sennett writes, new capitalism transforms how we make sense of our “ethical values, how we make sense of one another as social creatures, and our understanding of ourselves” (Sennett 1997: 162). Sennett argues that the contemporary annihilation of durable (linear) time is a direct consequence of economic restructuring (1997: 169). Constant movement within the workforce prevents social bonds such as trust, loyalty and obligation from developing. Effectively, this unravels the social and civic dimensions that support one’s development of their own identity (Sennett 1997: 169-170). Youth, who are most exposed to the effects of late modernity, respond to the uncertainty of unstable social structures by engaging in individualistic ‘reflexive’ biographies (Beck *et al* 1994). This means that individual young persons are responsible for assessing their own exposures to risk in the social, political and economic structures they interact with. By exacerbating individualistic values, late modernity disrupts youth’s transition from childhood to adulthood by displacing the institutionalised social support and guidance that eased previous generations’ integration.

### **2.3.2. Progressive individualism in late modernity**

One might question whether late modernity’s unstable and competitive economic, social and political structures impact youth’s development of political identities and behaviours. Through their interaction with either education or employment, youth are encouraged to acquire progressive individualist values which best respond to the needs of late modernity’s economy. Progressive individualist values circulate notions of individualism, creativity and democratisation of political and social structures. Widespread individualism among youth is generated by late modernity’s emphasis on self-actualisation (Giddens 1991) and individualistic ‘reflexive’ biographies (Beck *et al* 1994). Individualism stunts political engagement because individuals perceive change and risk management as individualised projects. Late modernity teaches citizens to be responsible for shaping their own lives rather than collectively creating social change.

Individualisation leads to values of democratisation in which citizens seek to break down the social and political barriers that restrain complete self-determination and individual empowerment. Although Beck writes that “there is no guarantee that the democratisation of decision-making...will

necessarily improve the quality of decisions” (1999: 131), a destabilisation of vertical power structures and authority allows individuals to become more flexible in their responses to uncertainties. Creativity and innovation are values of progressive individualism because they diversify the responses individuals can consider in managing their exposure to risk. In this study, progressive individualist values are conceived to be a reaction to the uncertainties of late modernity. They are argued to be generational both because youth are most vulnerable to the instability of late modernity and because youth are easily influenced in their transitions into adulthood.

This study investigates whether late modernity limits youth’s political engagement because in emphasising the need for individual self-determination and actualisation, values of progressive individualism compromise the individual’s perception of the merits of collective empowerment. After finding that civic engagement is no longer effective in explaining why youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults, this study develops progressive individualism as the new generational differential. It is hypothesised that because levels of progressive individualism are higher among youth than adults, youth are more likely to disengage from politics.

### **3. Data and Method**

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This study is a comparative analysis of youth's political engagement in developed Anglo-Saxon democracies; namely Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. Canada is not included due to unavailability of data. By placing this study within an environment of shared language, cultural and political heritage, the scope of possible explanations for differences in trends is constrained. Differences in political behaviour between countries are still expected however, because political system and culture are important influences on citizens' political behaviour (Almond and Verba 1963). This logic is supported by institutional arguments within both the varieties of capitalism (Hall and Sockice 2001) and welfare state (Hwang 2010) debates. Hall and Sockice write that institutions structure a "matrix of sanctions and incentives" for political performances and can in this way be seen as socialising agents (2001: 5). With similar political and economic heritages, the four study countries establish similarly structured social and political environments within which citizens engage in politics. Nonetheless, the differences in power, resources and modern histories provide sufficient scope for a comparative analysis.

#### **3.1. Selection of data**

The World Values Survey (WVS) provides a wide range of data relevant to engagement in politics, civic engagement and progressive individualism. Data collected through the WVS produces "valuable information about [the] crucial component[s] of social change" (Inglehart 2009: 2). In general, the aims of the WVS study are to examine the changing values, beliefs and practices in the social and political lives of up to ninety percent of the global population. These aims are achieved by applying a standardized questionnaire to representative populations across a possible ninety-seven societies. Among themes such as religion, gender, work, social tolerance, the environment and subjective well being, the WVS also conducts a thorough evaluation of political engagement.

For this study, data from third (1994-1999) and fifth (2005-2008) WVS waves are extracted for Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand. Where available, data from the remaining waves is used to examine changes in political engagement over time. In the fifth wave, data for the USA and Australia were collected using a complete questionnaire, whilst Britain and New Zealand used a reduced version of the complete questionnaire. Although the WVS is 'standardised' there are many gaps and constraints when working between countries and years.

The International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) survey on Citizenship (conducted in 2004) is used as a secondary source of data. The ISSP combines data from existing social science projects in separate national studies to support cross-national and cross-cultural perspectives. As for the WVS, the ISSP collects data through representative national sampling of approximately one thousand respondents per country. The ISSP does not administer the same standardised questionnaire in time waves as does the WVS, but rather regularly develops new surveys which respond to issues that are "meaningful and relevant" at the time of data collection (ISSP 2009). The ISSP is conducted on a voluntary basis where each country not only funds but also conducts surveys independently. Some questionnaires, including the 'Role of Government', 'Work Orientation' and 'Family and Changing Gender Roles' have to date been administered two to four times. However the Citizenship Survey of 2004, the component of ISSP data which replicates some of this study's analyses of WVS data, has only been administered once.

Nonetheless the overlap in questions between the ISSP survey on Citizenship and the WVS in areas of political practices and attitudes considerably strengthens analyses of the dataset used in this study. The ISSP provides required data (for engagement in politics only) for all four countries under consideration – Australia, the USA, Britain (although respondents are selected from Great Britain) and New Zealand.

In this study, WVS and ISSP data are recoded specifically for analyses of trends in political engagement across age groups and countries. ‘Age’ is a pivotal variable prepared for all analyses of data. Three new indices (engagement in politics, civic engagement and progressive individualism) are created by sorting through available data and extracting relevant information. Engagement in politics measures the extent to which respondents engage in domestic representational politics. Civic engagement measures the extent to which respondents engage in civic life. Finally progressive individualism measures the extent to which respondents embrace ‘late modernist’ values. Not all respondents report data for all variables. Table 1 is a summary of the number of respondents for whom engagement in politics can be computed and compared with other variables.

**Table 1:** Number of respondents for whom engagement in politics is computed and compared with other variables (according to dataset and country)

| Country     | WVS<br>(Wave 5) |          |                  |                           | ISSP<br>(2004) | WVS<br>(Wave 3) |
|-------------|-----------------|----------|------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
|             | Age             | Controls | Civic engagement | Progressive individualism | Age            | Age             |
| Australia   | 818             | 698      | 698              | 698                       | 1049           | 1410            |
| USA         | 805             | 693      | 693              | 693                       | 1030           | 920             |
| Britain     | 611             | 415      | 415              | 415                       | 469            | 655             |
| New Zealand | 468             | 407      | 407              | 407                       | 790            | 612             |

### 3.2. Defining the age variable

The WVS and ISSP data on age is recoded into three categories: ‘youth’, ‘adult’ and ‘over 55’. Conceptually, youth is a socially constructed collective identity that is defined more by behaviour than by absolute age. This is particularly the case in late modernity, when youth is defined in cultural terms (Rossi 2009). However in research on political engagement, ‘youth’ encompasses the age bracket during which the majority of citizens develop their political opinions, skills and habits. Despite (or perhaps because of) youth’s hazy boundaries, it is surprising how many studies on youth’s political engagement omit to mention the exact boundaries that contain youth (eg Odegard and Berglund 2008; Quintelier 2008; Gordon 2008; McFarland and Thomas 2006). To conceive youth as the period during which citizens are politically socialised, some researchers use the 14- to 22-year-old age bracket (eg Pasek *et al* 2006), allowing a study of political socialisation through secondary school and beyond. A possible reason why this is not the most popular age bracket by which youth is defined is the researcher’s decision to include an analysis of voter turnout rates. With the legal age for voting generally being 18, it is less problematic for the researcher to define “youth” as being between the ages of 18 and 24 or 25 (eg Henn *et al* 2005; Bogard *et al* 2008 and Print 2007). This study adopts the 18 to 25 age bracket, not because it intensively measures political acts that require the legal age, but rather because the generational approach is

concerned with how the transformation of tertiary education and employment in late modernity influences youth's transition from childhood into adulthood. Generally, this journey does not truly begin until the citizen turns 18.

The 'adult' age group in this study is defined as respondents between 26 and 55 years of age. The 'adult' population is capped at fifty-five to minimise the effects of difference in lifestyles (between youth and adults) which could drastically affect patterns in political engagement. As opposed to the 'youth' and 'adult' age groups, the 'over 55' age group is hypothesised to have more free time, radically different political experiences and different interests in political issues (eg in health, economy and welfare), which would affect their political engagement. Consequently the 'over 55' age bracket is not included in analyses of trends in political engagement.

### **3.3. Defining control variables**

The variables sex, income and education are used as controls in the final stage of running the explanatory regression analyses. These specific variables are chosen because they describe the general background of the sample population and also because they are recognised to have an effect on political engagement. For example sex, which is dichotomised between male and female, has been argued to be indicative of access to resources (Listhaug and Kindseth 1979). Motivated by Nie *et al*'s framework (1969a), where resources and motivation support engagement in politics (see Figure 1), Lafferty (1978) argues that not only do resources typically favour men, but also the sex role of women restrains female engagement in politics (in Listhaug and Kindseth 1979). Gordon finds that among youth, females are more likely to experience a fragmented political life because of conflicts with parental power (Gordon 2008).

Income and education are also controlled in the final stages of data analysis. Within Nie *et al*'s framework (1969a), income and education are considered as resources that fuel political engagement. Put simply, "there is a widely conceived notion that political engagement is more prominent amongst citizens of a higher social strata" (Listhaug and Kindseth 1979). Accordingly, income and education are both pivotal in establishing barriers or conversely bringing them down for social mobility. Maintaining WVS and ISSP coding, income is measured along a ten-point scale marking the deciles between the highest and lowest incomes of each country. Education is similarly assessed, however on a nine-point scale ranging from 'no formal education' to the 'completion of [a] university degree'.

### **3.4. Defining the engagement in politics index (EP\_index)**

The engagement in politics index (EP\_index) measures how politically engaged a respondent is by computing the sum of the respondent's engagement in five possible political actions. In the broader literature, engagement in politics encompasses a virtually endless array of behaviours, values, attitudes and skills. As Henn *et al* (2005) write, the boundaries of politics are unique to each researcher, respondent and reader. Political engagement can be defined either "broadly... [as] everyday political experiences and commitments" (Vromen 2003: 80) or more narrowly as actions that directly target the formal decision-making of parliament (eg Milbrath 1965; Conway 1985). Tossutti (2007) and Teorrell (2003) place their definition of political engagement between the two extremes by creating a distinction between engagement designed to influence government and engagement that manifests in the public eye. This

study advocates that political actions that manifest in the public eye, such as public demonstrations, have just as much potential to influence government decision-making as more direct forms of engagement, such as petitioning or political party membership.

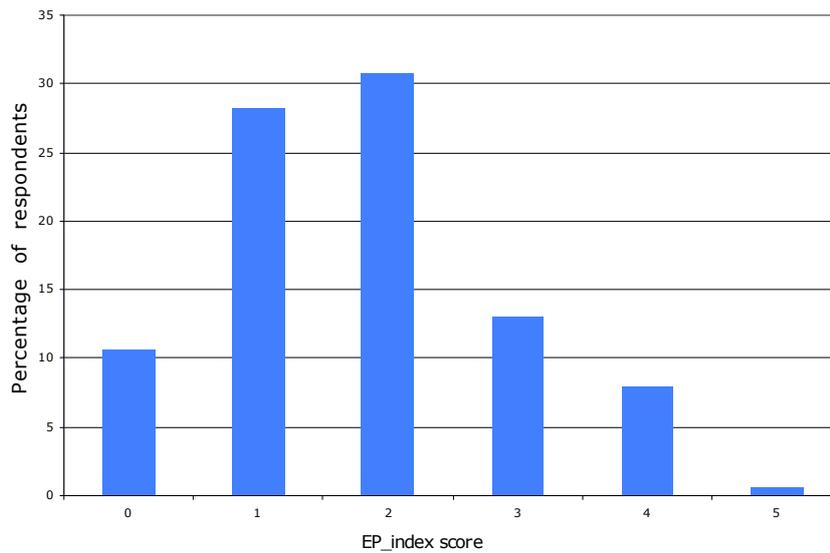
An EP\_index score is computed for all respondents by awarding one point for every separate type of political activity they have performed (to a maximum of five). Ranging from zero to five points, the EP\_index score gauges the respondent's level of engagement in politics. Rather than qualitatively asking 'how', the EP\_index simply asks 'whether' respondents engage in domestic politics. The first indicator included in the EP\_index, interest in politics (EP1), indicates a mental connection with politics and responds to the knowledge framework (UK Audit of Political Participation). Petitioning (EP2), boycotting (EP3) and demonstrating (EP4) represent political acts which range across the scales of public and government orientated action, volume or strength of action as well as 'traditional' and 'protest' political action (Norris 2003). Where EP2-4 can encompass either single-issue campaigns or entrenched loyalty to a political ideology, political party membership (EP5) represents only the latter. In summary, each respondent's EP\_index score is calculated by accumulating points depending on whether the respondent:

- EP1: Is interested in politics
- EP2: Has ever petitioned
- EP3: Has ever boycotted
- EP4: Has ever demonstrated; or
- EP5: Is currently an active member of a political party

For a more detailed account of how each indicator is prepared, see Appendix A.

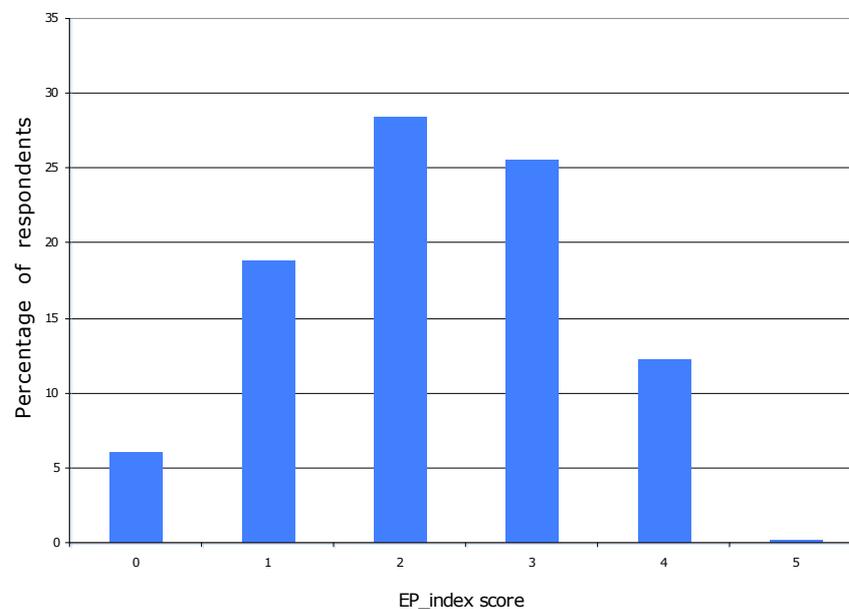
In both the third and fifth waves of the WVS dataset, the EP\_index is constructed in the same way across all age groups and all four study countries (Australia, the USA, Britain and New Zealand). The histogram in Figure 2 (below) illustrates the frequency of each EP\_index score for all Australian respondents calculated with fifth wave WVS data - ranging from not having executed any of the five political indicators (an index score of 0) to having executed all of them (an index score of 5). The graph skews slightly to the right. This means that for this population, it is more likely for respondents to engage in one or two similar strategies of political engagement than it is for them to perform across the board. A similar trend can be found in the remaining countries. The distribution of EP\_index scores for the other three study countries (for WVS 2005) can be found in Appendix B.

**Figure 2:** Histogram showing the frequency of each engagement in politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from Australia across all age categories (WVS 2005)



For the ISSP dataset, the EP\_index mirrors the WVS EP\_index. Details of how each indicator is prepared can be found in Appendix A. The histogram in Figure 3 (below) illustrates the frequency of each EP\_index score for all Australian respondents calculated using the 2004 ISSP dataset. Figures 2 and 3 are consistent in both showing that it is rare for citizens to score an EP\_index score of either four or five. The distribution of EP\_index scores derived from ISSP dataset for the other three study countries can also be found in Appendix B.

**Figure 3:** Histogram showing the frequency of each engagement in politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from Australia across all age categories (ISSP 2004)



### 3.5. Defining the civic engagement index (CE\_index)

The civic engagement index (CE\_index) is a measure of the magnitude of respondents' involvement in civic life. A number of studies on youth's disengagement from politics conduct their research by creating a link between civic and political disengagement. Putnam (2000) writes that in disengaging from civic life, citizens are dislocating from their main source of social capital. Social capital is instrumental in creating feelings of obligation and social responsibility that encourage and support political engagement. The CE\_index is used to identify whether the datasets used show a positive correlation between engagement in politics and engagement in civic life. Specifically, the CE\_index allows this study to determine whether youth are more disengaged from politics (than adults) because they are more disengaged from civic life.

A CE\_index score is calculated for all respondents by computing the sum of the number of civic groups in which they are active members. For effective accumulation of social capital, Putnam (2000: 51) requires civic membership to be expressed through active and physical involvement. The same requirement for active engagement is expressed through the civic literacy and competency frameworks (see Bogard *et al* 2008). Citizens cannot develop their civic skills unless they play a practical role in civic life. Passive civic engagement may spark political interest through community newspapers or by allowing citizens to develop a social life that stems from civic groups (van der Meer and van Ingen 2009: 295). However these effects have a lesser impact on political engagement than active involvement (Putnam 2000). Accordingly, respondents in this study are considered civically engaged only if they are 'active members' of civic organisations.

The CE\_index recognizes that various types of civic groups have an impact on respondents' engagement in politics. This is despite some studies advocating that the type of civic organization has a qualitatively unique effect on respondents' engagement with politics (eg Mannarini and Fedi 2009: 213). Rather than asking 'how' civic engagement influences political engagement, this study simply asks 'whether' there is an influence on political engagement. Van der Meer and van Ingen (2009) report that the correlation between civic engagement and engagement in politics is strongest if the civic organisation is outward looking and adopts strategies of activism. Putnam (2000) recognises the role of 'expressive' organizations, which are more homogenous and 'inward' looking, in the building of social confidence and networks. Incorporating both, the CE\_index creates a balance between inward and outward looking organizations.

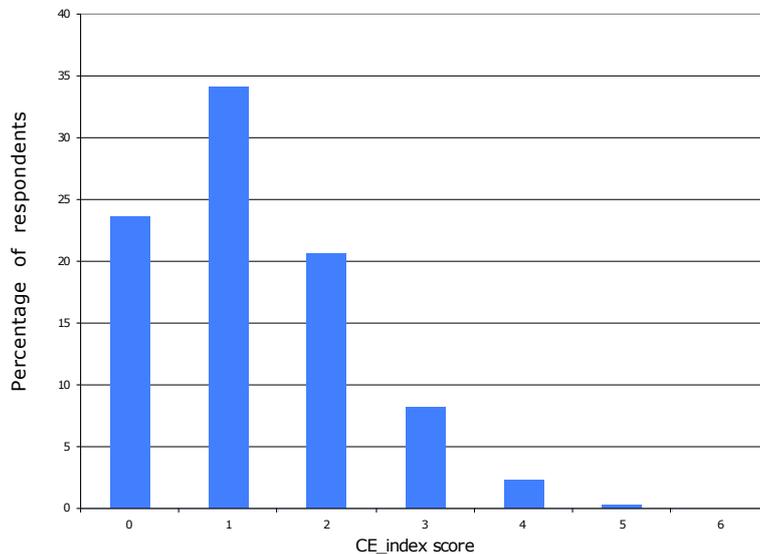
The CE\_index is calculated by accumulating points depending on whether the respondent:

- CE1: Believes people can be trusted
- CE2: Is an active member of a religious organisation
- CE3: Is an active member of a sports or leisure organisation
- CE4: Is an active member of a trade union
- CE5: Is an active member of an artistic, musical or educational organisation; or
- CE6: Is an active member of a consumer organisation

Summing these indicators gives respondents a maximum CE\_index score of six and a minimum CE\_index score of zero. For a more detailed account of how each indicator is prepared, see Appendix A.

The histogram in Figure 4 (below) illustrates the frequency of each CE\_index score for both youth and adult Australian respondents calculated using fifth wave WVS data. In skewing to the right, the histogram shows that most respondents are active members of zero to two civic groups. A similar pattern can be found in the USA, Britain and New Zealand. The distribution of index scores expressed as a percentage of each country’s sample population can be found in Appendix B.

**Figure 4:** Histogram showing the frequency of each civic engagement (CE\_index) score for respondents from Australia across all age categories (WVS 2005)



### 3.6. Defining the progressive individualism index (PI\_index)

The progressive individualism index measures the extent to which respondents’ values and views of social and political structures reflect those associated with late modernity. Using data from the fifth wave of the WVS, ten indicators are formed to measure progressive individualism. Emphasis is placed on ‘values’ rather than ‘actions’ because the effects of late modernity are most detectable in how respondents allow their *perceptions* to influence decision-making. For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) write that citizens respond to the instability of contemporary structures by managing their own risk according to individual perceptions and calculations. Respondents’ values are therefore indicative of how they can be expected to manage their political behaviour.

Ten indicators are assembled in the PI\_index to address themes of individualism, democratisation and creativity. Individualism is identified as a core value of late modernity because as Beck writes, “the ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current” of late modernity (Beck 1999: 9). Structures of ‘insititutionalised individualism’ in late modernity force citizens to “plan, understand [and] design themselves” (Beck 1999: 9). Although this may lead to a collective lifestyle, individuals perceive their life experiences as unique from that of other citizens. Rather than focus on the influence the political system has on the respondent, the PI\_index indicates the extent of influence the respondent would like to have on the political system. The theme of democratisation is addressed in the

PI\_index because democracy is intrinsically linked to principles of autonomy and individualism which characterise late modernity (Giddens 1994: 192).

This study's measure of progressive individualism addresses exposure to social and political socialisation because this indicates the respondent's disruptive capacity in managing a truly unique lifestyle. Giddens writes that in late modernity, the strength of socialisation subsides as people develop through their interaction with experts and therapists (1991: 33). Youth who develop in late modernity are active and disruptive agents in projects of self-actualisation. Socialisation is measured by considering respondents' views on family, authority and social standards. It is through the nature of youth's relationship with their immediate environment and adult society that determines the extent to which their decisions are influenced by processes of socialisation (France 2007: 72).

As for both the EP\_index and the CE\_index, the PI\_index is calculated by accumulating points depending on whether the respondent

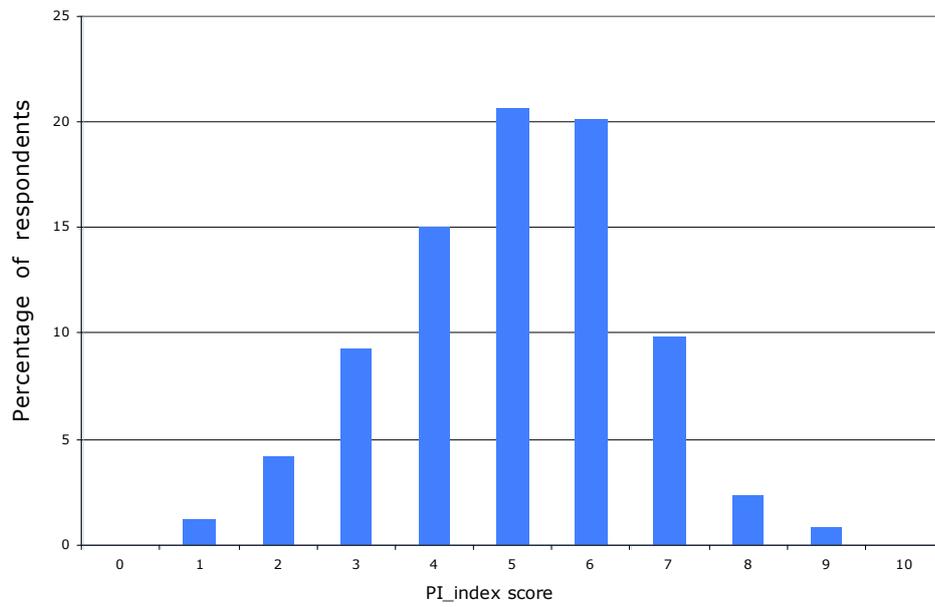
- PI1: Believes free elections are an essential feature of democracy
- PI2: Believes the protection of civil rights against oppression are an essential feature of democracy
- PI3: Thinks 'democracy' is important
- PI4: Finds thinking up new ideas and being creative is important
- PI5: Used the internet in the last week
- PI6: Does not attempts to 'behave properly' in social settings
- PI7: Does not support a greater respect for authority
- PI8: Does not support a greater emphasis on family life
- PI9: Does not continually try to make their parents proud; or
- PI10: Does not live with their parents

For a more detailed account of how each indicator is prepared, see Appendix A.

The series of ten indicators listed above are applied in their complete form to both Australia and the USA using fifth wave WVS data. Due to the question not being asked, PI10 is omitted in Britain. The majority of indicators listed above were not asked in New Zealand at all. Consequently, the PI\_index for New Zealand consists of only PI6, PI8 and PI10. This dramatically reduces the reliability and statistical power of New Zealand's regression models (in section 4.4.3.). The PI\_index allows for a maximum accumulation of ten points in Australia and the USA, nine in Britain and three in New Zealand.

The histogram in Figure 5 (below) illustrates the frequency of each PI\_index score for Australian respondents calculated with fifth wave WVS data. Unlike Figures 3 and 4, Figure 5 is not skewed. The graph shows that most respondents are only moderately 'individualist' (high scores) or 'conformist' (low scores). The distribution of index scores for all other countries can be found in Appendix B.

**Figure 5:** Histogram showing the frequency of each PI\_index score for respondents from Australia across youth and adult age categories (WVS 2005)



## 4. Results

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The study results are reported in three sections. The first section outlines the findings of descriptive analyses of engagement in politics between age groups and countries over the last three decades. A trend emerges showing youth's engagement in politics is lower than adults' across both time and space. The impact of age on engagement in politics is shown to be statistically significant. The second section outlines the results of descriptive analyses of the distribution of progressive individualism across age groups. A statistically significant difference is likewise shown between youth and adults in progressive individualism. The third section outlines the results of explanatory analyses of the difference in engagement in politics according to age. It presents the results of five regression models per study country, which examine the individual and combined effects of both civic engagement and progressive individualism on engagement in politics. The results show progressive individualism is more effective than civic engagement in explaining why contemporary youth are less engaged in politics than adults.

### 4.1. Descriptive analyses of engagement in politics

WVS and ISSP data are analysed to examine the magnitude and historical development of youth's political engagement compared to that of adults.

The EP\_index, which is the sum of five possible expressions of political engagement, measures respondents' levels of engagement in politics. The EP\_index means according to age categories in fifth wave WVS data are listed in Table 2 (below). The EP means show that youth are consistently less engaged in politics than adults in every study country. A *t*-test is performed to demonstrate that there is in fact a statistically significant gap between the two populations. The *t*-values are all highly significant statistically (critical  $t=1.96$ ), which indicates a statistically significant difference in engagement in politics according to age group.

**Table 2:** Results of *t*-tests executed on youth and adult EP\_index means of 5th wave WVS data in all study countries

| Country     | Youth<br>(EP mean) | Adults<br>(EP mean) | Mean<br>Difference | Standard<br>Error | <i>t</i> -value (df)<br>(critical $t=1.96$ ) |
|-------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--|
| Australia   | 1.56               | 1.84                | -0.28              | 0.11              | <b>-2.55</b> (817)                           |
| USA         | 1.32               | 1.88                | -0.55              | 0.13              | <b>-4.14</b> (804)                           |
| Britain     | 1.06               | 1.57                | -0.51              | 0.12              | <b>-4.27</b> (610)                           |
| New Zealand | 1.21               | 1.97                | -0.76              | 0.16              | <b>-4.65</b> (467)                           |

Australia has a less significant gap between youth and adult political engagement than the other three countries (indicated by the *t*-value). In observing the EP means, Australia's youth are noticeably more engaged in politics than youth from other study countries. By comparison, adults in Australia engage in politics at a level roughly equal to that of other countries. It is because Australian youth are consistently highly engaged across all EP\_index indicators while Australian adults engage at a similar rate (both compared with other countries) that the *t*-value for Australia is noticeably smaller in magnitude than in the USA, Britain or New Zealand.

In Table 3 below, *t*-values are calculated for EP\_index means in ISSP data. Youth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies are again illustrated to be statistically less likely to engage in politics than their adult counterparts. Both ISSP and WVS results are consistent with existing studies reporting that compared to adults, youth are less likely to be engaged in politics (eg Putnam 2000; Edwards 2006; Henn *et al* 2005; Odegard and Berglund 2008; Gordon 2008).

**Table 3:** Results of *t*-tests executed on youth and adult EP\_index means of ISSP data (2004) in all study countries

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Youth<br/>(EP mean)</i> | <i>Adults<br/>(EP mean)</i> | <i>Mean<br/>Difference</i> | <i>Standard<br/>Error</i> | <i>t-value (df)<br/>(critical t=1.96)</i> |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Australia      | 1.91                       | 2.28                        | -0.37                      | 0.11                      | <b>-3.49</b> (1047)                       |
| USA            | 1.74                       | 2.11                        | -0.37                      | 0.11                      | <b>-3.22</b> (1028)                       |
| Great Britain  | 1.41                       | 1.91                        | -0.49                      | 0.16                      | <b>-3.01</b> (467)                        |
| New Zealand    | 1.96                       | 2.32                        | -0.36                      | 0.12                      | <b>-3.01</b> (788)                        |

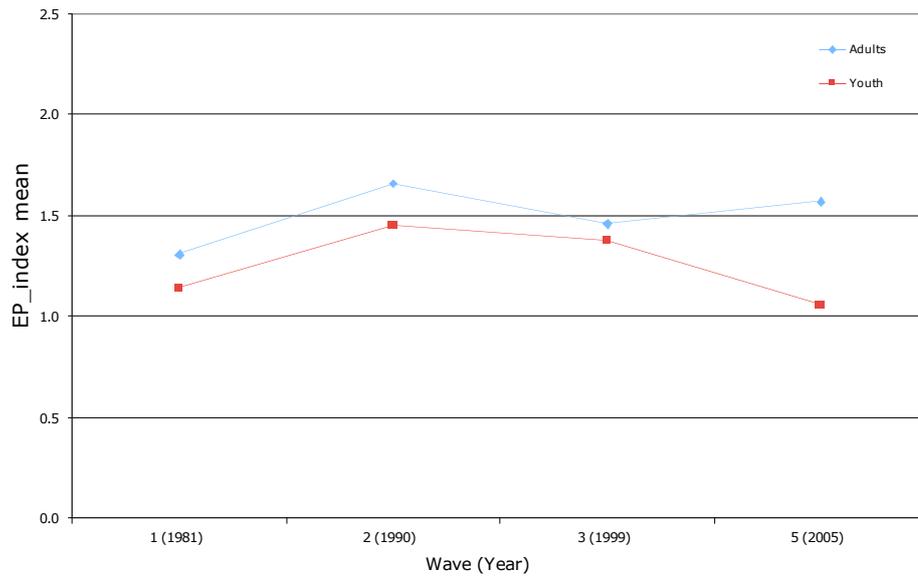
Where available, WVS data are used to examine the relationship between age and political engagement over time. The EP\_index means according to age categories for third wave WVS data are listed in Table 4 (below). Apart from Britain, youth prove to have been just as significantly disengaged in politics at the end of last century as they are now.

**Table 4:** Results of *t*-tests executed on youth and adult EP\_index means of 3th (1994-1999) wave WVS data in all study countries

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Youth<br/>(EP mean)</i> | <i>Adults<br/>(EP mean)</i> | <i>Mean<br/>Difference</i> | <i>Standard<br/>Error</i> | <i>t-value (df)<br/>(critical t=1.96)</i> |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Australia      | 1.53                       | 1.97                        | -0.45                      | 0.08                      | <b>-5.72</b> (1409)                       |
| USA            | 1.48                       | 2.07                        | -0.59                      | 0.12                      | <b>-4.78</b> (919)                        |
| Britain        | 1.37                       | 1.46                        | -0.09                      | 0.10                      | <b>-0.89</b> (654)                        |
| New Zealand    | 1.68                       | 2.06                        | -0.38                      | 0.12                      | <b>-3.14</b> (611)                        |

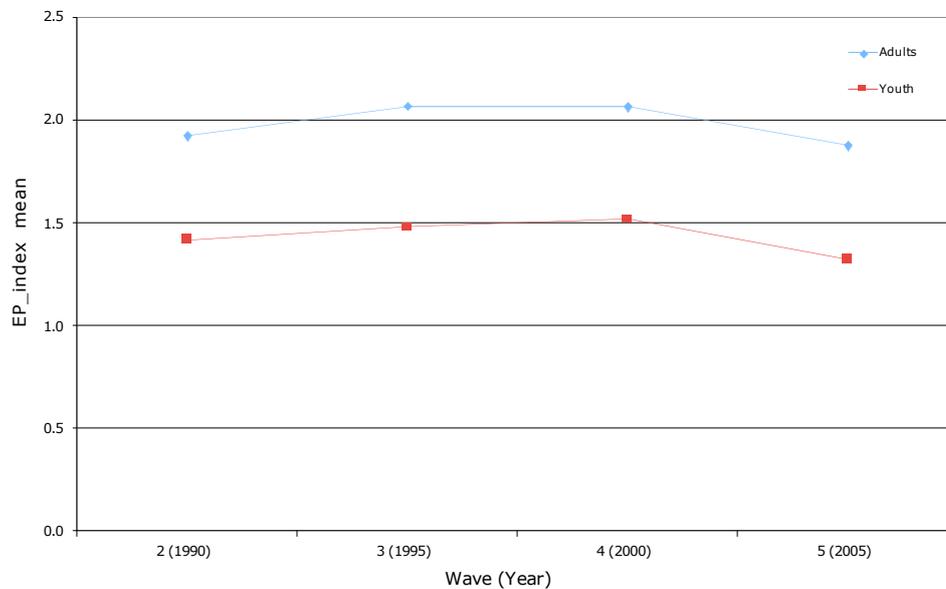
Britain is the only country which shows no statistical significance of age (because  $t < 1.96$ ) for the third wave of WVS data. Figure 6 illustrates the impact of age on engagement in politics in Britain between 1981 and 2005. The graph shows that adults' slight drop in engagement in politics in 1999 disrupts what would be a smooth transition between waves. The reason for such a noticeable drop in adult engagement could have been be the nature of the 1997 general election. Often, citizens will only engage in politics if they believe their actions will have an impact on decision-making. If there is no 'contest' in the political sphere, citizens become uninspired to create change (Catt 2005). Britain's general election in 1997 saw the Labor party win with a landslide victory to claim the most seats the party had ever held. Possibly due to the lack of contest during this election campaign, political engagement of the adult age category slipped in 1999.

**Figure 6:** Time series graph showing changes in the rate of political engagement in Britain between 1981 and 2005 for youth and adults (WVS 2005)



Historical rates of political engagement in Britain contrast with the USA's smoother transitions shown in Figure 7. The time series graphs for both Australia and New Zealand are informed by only two WVS waves and so can be found in Appendix C. In summary, all graphs show that youth are consistently less engaged in politics than their adult counterparts.

**Figure 7:** Time series graph showing changes in the rate of political engagement in the USA between 1990 and 2005 for youth and adults (WVS 2005)



## 4.2. Descriptive analysis of progressive individualism

The PI\_index assembles indicators that measure the extent to which respondents' values reflect those of late modernity. Means of PI\_index according to age group for fifth wave WVS data are reported in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Results of *t*-tests executed on youth and adult PI\_means of 5th wave WVS data in all study countries

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Youth<br/>(PI mean)</i> | <i>Adults<br/>(PI mean)</i> | <i>Mean<br/>Difference</i> | <i>Standard<br/>Error</i> | <i>t-value (df)<br/>(critical t=1.96)</i> |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Australia      | 5.80                       | 4.85                        | 0.95                       | 0.16                      | <b>6.01</b> (775)                         |
| USA            | 5.95                       | 4.99                        | 0.96                       | 0.18                      | <b>5.38</b> (754)                         |
| Britain        | 5.97                       | 5.18                        | 0.80                       | 0.16                      | <b>5.02</b> (542)                         |
| New Zealand    | 2.01                       | 1.45                        | 0.57                       | 0.08                      | <b>7.13</b> (550)                         |

Note: Number of PI\_index indicators for Australia and the USA=10; Britain=9; New Zealand=3

A *t*-test is performed to check whether there is a statistically significant difference in levels of progressive individualism between youth and adults. The difference in progressive individualism according to age is found to be highly significant (critical  $t = 1.96$ ) in all study-countries. This finding indicates that progressive individualism is significantly higher among youth than adults in all study countries.

## 4.3. Explanatory analyses of engagement in politics

Linear regression models are used to identify the variables that influence the difference in engagement in politics between youth and adults. This process examines the individual and combined effects of both civic engagement and progressive individualism on engagement in politics. If either variable increases or decreases the significance of age in determining political engagement, it can be argued to identify a unique age related trait that shapes engagement in politics.

The linear regressions consist of five models that are executed separately for each country's dataset. Regression models for all countries use the EP\_index derived from fifth wave WVS data as the dependent variable. In each model of the regression, new independent variables are included to test whether they can explain the role of age in determining levels of engagement in politics.

In Model 1 of the regression analyses, engagement in politics is used as the dependent variable and age (youth versus adults) is introduced as the independent variable. Since there are only two variables in Model 1 (age and EP\_index), the regression model performs the equivalent of a *t*-test to check the significance of age gap. For example, the coefficient of age (-0.35 units in Table 6: Model 1) reflects the Mean Difference value in Table 2 (for Australia). There is a small difference between the coefficients in Tables 2 and 6 because there are more respondents with available data for two variables (in Table 2:  $n=817$ ) than there are for the seven variables used in the linear regressions (in Table 6:  $n=698$ ).

Model 2 in each regression table below includes control variables of sex, education and income. As for Model 1, the coefficients of variables in Model 2 show how much each variable accounts for of the variation of engagement in politics among respondents. Model 3 introduces the CE\_index as an

independent variable alongside the control and age variables. In Model 4, the PI\_index replaces the CE\_index to investigate the impact of progressive individualism on differences in engagement in politics depending on age. Subsequently, both the PI\_index and the CE\_index variables are included alongside the control and age variables in Model 5.

### 4.3.1. Engagement in Politics in Australia

The results of the regression models for Australia are summarised in Table 6. In Australia, 698 subjects reported data for all seven variables. Most notably, where the CE\_index is not successful in minimising the significance of age in determining engagement in politics (Model 3), the PI\_index is (Model 4).

**Table 6:** Results of regression analyses (Models 1 to 5) for Australia using fifth wave WVS data (dependent variable = EP\_index; n=698)

| <i>Variable</i>      | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> | <i>Model 3</i> | <i>Model 4</i> | <i>Model 5</i> |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| [constant]           | 1.86***        | 0.73**         | 0.76**         | -0.10          | -0.06          |
| <b>Age</b>           | <b>-0.35**</b> | <b>-0.39**</b> | <b>-0.40**</b> | <b>-0.11</b>   | <b>-0.12</b>   |
| Sex                  |                | -0.09          | -0.10          | -0.10          | -0.11          |
| Education            |                | 0.14***        | 0.12***        | 0.08**         | 0.07**         |
| Income               |                | 0.04*          | 0.03           | 0.02           | 0.01           |
| CE_index             |                |                | -0.11**        |                | 0.08*          |
| PI_index             |                |                |                | -0.27***       | -0.27***       |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>0.01</b>    | <b>0.07</b>    | <b>0.08</b>    | <b>0.20</b>    | <b>0.21</b>    |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The results for Model 1 show that when no other variables are controlled, age is a significant indicator of political engagement (Table 6). The low R<sup>2</sup> value (1%) indicates that age alone explains very little of the overall variability in political engagement.

In Model 2, sex, education and income variables are controlled. Education is the variable with the greatest impact on political engagement, even more significantly than age. Income also appears as significant. The rise in magnitude in coefficients for the age variable (from -0.35 in Model 1 to -0.39 in Model 2) indicates that age is a more significant variable in political engagement when the controls are accounted for.

Model 3 includes the CE\_index as an independent variable alongside the controls. Although CE\_index is highly significant in its impact on engagement in politics, it does not explain the age gap in engagement in politics. Instead, when the CE\_index is introduced in Model 3, the magnitude of the coefficient for age marginally increases. If society's political disengagement is due to young generations increasingly disengaging in politics because they are increasingly disengaging from civic life, the result would show that once civic engagement is controlled, variation in engagement in politics is minimised. Yet the age coefficient increases in magnitude from -0.39 in Model 2 to -0.40 in Model 3 indicating that when the CE\_index is controlled, the difference in youth and adult EP\_index levels actually *increases*. In other words, controlling for civic engagement creates a *bigger* difference in political engagement between youth and adults. This result shows that Putnam's theory of intercohort change through civic engagement does not explain broader shifts in engagement in politics in Australia in 2005. There is some other variable associated with being 'young' in contemporary society which affects engagement in politics.

Model 4 replaces the CE\_index with the PI\_index as an independent variable. When the PI\_index is introduced, the coefficient for age decreases in magnitude from -0.39 in Model 2 to -0.11. In other words, in Model 4 the remaining age gap after controlling for PI\_index is statistically insignificant. Rather than having low levels of engagement in politics because the respondent is ‘young’, Model 4 shows that having low levels of engagement in politics is due to the respondent being progressively individualist. Model 4 shows that it is because youth are more likely to be progressively individualistic that they disengage from politics.

Model 5 includes both the CE\_index and the PI\_index as independent variables with age and controls. The effect of age and control variables remain relatively stable from Model 4 ( $\pm 0.01$  unit). When the CE\_index and PI\_index are considered together, the PI\_index continues to play the greatest role in explaining the difference in engagement in politics between youth and adults. The effect of the CE\_index is not as strong when included alongside the PI\_index which means progressive individualism is a stronger determinant of engagement in politics than civic engagement. Furthermore, the residual impact of age on engagement in politics in Model 5 is still not statistically significant.

Effectively, the linear regression in Table 6 shows that the PI\_index can explain why age has such a strong impact on levels of political engagement in Australia.

#### 4.3.2. Engagement in Politics in the USA

The regression models for the USA are summarised in Table 7 and show similar trends to those in Australia.

**Table 7:** Results of regression analyses (Models 1 to 5) for the USA using fifth wave WVS data (dependent variable = EP\_index; n=693)

| <i>Variable</i>      | <i>Model 1</i>   | <i>Model 2</i>   | <i>Model 3</i>   | <i>Model 4</i> | <i>Model 5</i> |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|
| [constant]           | 1.91 ***         | 0.45             | 0.55 *           | -0.16          | -0.05          |
| <b>Age</b>           | <b>-0.67 ***</b> | <b>-0.50 ***</b> | <b>-0.52 ***</b> | <b>-0.30 *</b> | <b>-0.32 *</b> |
| Sex                  |                  | -0.17            | -0.16            | -0.15          | -0.15          |
| Education            |                  | 0.24 ***         | 0.19 ***         | 0.11 **        | 0.07           |
| Income               |                  | 0.05             | 0.04             | 0.05           | 0.04           |
| CE_index             |                  |                  | 0.24 ***         |                | 0.22 ***       |
| PI_index             |                  |                  |                  | -0.27 ***      | -0.26 ***      |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>0.03</b>      | <b>0.10</b>      | <b>0.14</b>      | <b>0.20</b>    | <b>0.23</b>    |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

In the USA, the significance of age decreases when progressive individualism is controlled. Between Models 2 and 4 (in Table 7) the coefficient for age drops by 0.20 units on the EP\_index, which is similar to the 0.28 unit drop in Australia. However, because the age coefficient begins as a larger value (in the USA), age remains significant in all Table 7 models. As for Australia, progressive individualism is significantly more effective than civic engagement in explaining why youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults.

When the CE\_index is controlled in Model 3, the magnitude of the coefficient for age increases marginally (from -0.50 to -0.52). The same trend was identified for Australia. Compared to results for Australia however, the CE\_index coefficient in the USA data is much stronger. This result confirms Putnam’s work, which was developed specifically with reference to the USA. Putnam writes that, in

America, democracy is strongly rooted in the voluntary organisations that build civil society (Putnam 2000: 31). It is therefore expected that of all study countries, the CE\_index would have the greatest impact on the EP\_index in the USA. However, although respondents who are civically engaged are more likely to engage in politics, it is not the case that youth are not as engaged in politics (as adults) because they are not as civically engaged. This is illustrated in the juxtaposition of the CE\_index being highly significant in both Models 3 and 5, however having no diminishing effect on the magnitude of the coefficient for age.

Even in the USA, then, variation in civic engagement is not able to explain why youth are less engaged in politics than adults. It is only when the PI\_index variable is included in Model 4 that the significance of age in determining political engagement declines. Table 7 shows that it is because more youth (compared to adults) are characterised by progressive individualism that they show lower levels of engagement in politics.

#### 4.3.3. Engagement in Politics in Britain

The regression models for Britain are summarised in Table 8 and show similar trends to those of both Australia and the USA.

**Table 8:** Results of regression analyses (Models 1 to 5) for Britain using fifth wave WVS data (dependent variable = EP\_index; n=415)

| <i>Variable</i>      | <i>Model 1</i>  | <i>Model 2</i>  | <i>Model 3</i>  | <i>Model 4</i> | <i>Model 5</i> |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| [constant]           | 1.67 ***        | 0.48            | 0.57            | -0.06          | 0.07           |
| <b>Age</b>           | <b>-0.50 **</b> | <b>-0.49 **</b> | <b>-0.48 **</b> | <b>-0.27</b>   | <b>-0.29 *</b> |
| Sex                  |                 | -0.05           | -0.02           | 0.01           | 0.02           |
| Education            |                 | 0.16 ***        | 0.11 ***        | 0.07 **        | 0.04           |
| Income               |                 | 0.03            | 0.01            | 0.02           | 0.00           |
| CE_index             |                 |                 | 0.29 ***        |                | 0.22 ***       |
| PI_index             |                 |                 |                 | -0.29 ***      | -0.26 ***      |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>0.03</b>     | <b>0.10</b>     | <b>0.16</b>     | <b>0.21</b>    | <b>0.24</b>    |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The coefficient for age does not show a substantial drop until the PI\_index is introduced in Model 4. Although age is still significant in the fifth model, it is only because of the inclusion of the CE\_index which, as in both Australia and the USA, mildly increases the impact of age on political engagement. This observation is supported by the absence of statistical significance of age in Model 4, where the CE\_index is not included.

Both civic engagement (CE\_index) and progressive individualism (PI\_index) are highly significant in explaining engagement in politics. However in contrast to the effect of the PI\_index, the CE\_index does not minimise the impact of age on engagement in politics.

#### 4.3.4. Engagement in politics in New Zealand

The regression models for New Zealand are summarised in Table 9. Although the strength of the PI\_index for New Zealand is substantially compromised by being assembled from only three indicators, echoes of the results reported in Australia, the USA and Britain can be traced in Table 9.

**Table 9:** Results of regression analyses (Models 1 to 5) for New Zealand using fifth wave WVS data (dependent variable = EP\_index; n=407)

| <i>Variable</i>      | <i>Model 1</i> | <i>Model 2</i> | <i>Model 3</i> | <i>Model 4</i> | <i>Model 5</i> |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| [constant]           | 1.97 ***       | 0.91 **        | 0.75           | 0.64           | 0.46           |
| Age                  | -0.83 ***      | -0.83 ***      | -0.75 ***      | -0.72 ***      | -0.63 ***      |
| Sex                  |                | -0.13          | -0.11          | -0.14          | -0.12          |
| Education            |                | 0.15 ***       | 0.12 **        | 0.15 ***       | 0.12 **        |
| Income               |                | 0.01           | 0.01           | 0.01           | 0.01           |
| CE_index             |                |                | 0.23 ***       |                | 0.24 ***       |
| PI_index             |                |                |                | -0.20 *        | -0.22 **       |
| <b>R<sup>2</sup></b> | <b>0.05</b>    | <b>0.10</b>    | <b>0.16</b>    | <b>0.11</b>    | <b>0.17</b>    |

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

The regression models for New Zealand are not as effective as those for the previous three study countries in explaining the significance of age in determining engagement in politics. This is because the PI\_index, which has proven to play a central role in explaining the age gap between youth and adults in engagement in politics, is only constructed of three indicators, rather than the full ten (see section 3.6). This dramatically reduces the reliability and statistical power of New Zealand's regression models. Nonetheless, the coefficient of age still falls by 0.11 units from Model 2 to 4. If the PI\_index were to have been applied in its complete form of 10 indicators, a much stronger impact would be expected. Like in the USA and Britain, the CE\_index is always very highly significant when included in New Zealand analyses. This confirms Putnam's (2000) theory that civic engagement is an important marker of engagement in politics. Nonetheless, even in its incomplete form, the PI\_index has a greater impact than CE\_index on minimising the age gap in engagement in politics in New Zealand.

#### 4.4. Results Summary

There are two main results of this study's empirical analyses. The first is that age has a significant impact on determining contemporary levels of engagement in politics. This result confirms existing studies which measure the extent of youth's engagement in politics in conventional domestic politics (eg Putnam 2000; Edwards 2006; Henn *et al* 2005; Odegard and Berglund 2008; Gordon 2008). This is first demonstrated using data from all study countries in 2005. Analyses of 2004 ISSP data subsequently confirm the result that youth are significantly less engaged in politics than adults. The same finding emerges in analyses of third wave WVS data. The time series graphs for Britain and the USA illustrate that the mean of youth's political engagement has, since the 1980s, been consistently lower than adults'. Together, these analyses illustrate that youth's engagement in politics is lower than adults' across both time and space.

The second finding is that progressive individualism is significantly more effective in explaining why youth are less engaged in politics than adults. Civic engagement, which within the research field is widely recognised to explain political engagement, is always highly significant (Tables 6 to 9). It does not, however, explain the contemporary age gap in political engagement. This result emphatically outdates Putnam's argument that youth are disengaging from politics because they are retreating from

civic life. This further calls into question Putnam's (2000) theory of intercohort change as the generator of political disengagement.

Instead, the effect of progressive individualism on the age gap in engagement in politics indicates that youth are less engaged in politics because they are more likely than adults to support progressive individualist values. This involves a general relinquishment of authority and socialisation as well as the belief that rights should be liberalised to allow the creativity of each person to take effect. Although the effect of age on engagement in politics is not eliminated, these results indicate that it is because progressive individualist values vary systematically by age that there are significantly different levels of political engagement between youth and adults. In this way, progressive individualism largely explains the age gap in engagement in politics.

## 5. Discussion

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The results of this study have three important implications. First, this study's analyses of WVS data do not support Putnam's (2000) theory that youth are less engaged in politics because they are disengaging from civic life. Rather, there is something else about belonging to 'youth' in contemporary society that results in their lower rate of political engagement. Second, respondents who are highly socialised and respectful of authority are more likely to be politically engaged. This raises the concern that contemporary democracies are surrendering their capacity to keep themselves in check through disruptive politics. Third, youth disengage from politics because they carry progressive individualist values. Progressive individualist values are a consequence of late modernity's effect on employment, education and social organisation. In disembedding, lengthening and destabilising youth's transition from childhood into adulthood, late modernity proliferates values of progressive individualism by placing the onus of self-realisation on each individual young person.

### 5.1. Youth's disengagement from politics is not due to disengagement from civic life

Putnam (2000) argues that civic engagement is a strong predictor of political engagement. Model 3 in the regression analyses for all study countries supports this argument by illustrating that civic engagement has a highly significant impact on engagement in politics. This confirms that the more civically engaged respondents are, the more likely they are to engage in politics. However, Putnam (2000) also argues that contemporary political disengagement is a result of intercohort civic disengagement. He argues that new generations are not as civically engaged as preceding generations and projects that as new generations replace older generations, social change of widespread civic disengagement occurs (2000: 35). Accordingly, Putnam argues that youth are less engaged in politics because they are less engaged in civic life. Putnam's argument implies that differences in political engagement due to age should be accounted for if civic engagement is controlled (Model 3 in Tables 5, 6, 7 and 8). The results of this study, however, find that although civic engagement *is* a significant predictor of political engagement, it *does not* account for the difference in youth and adult engagement in politics. This signals that it is not because contemporary youth are less civically engaged than adults that they are consequently less politically engaged. Rather, there is some other factor associated with belonging to 'youth' in contemporary society that stunts engagement in politics.

The time series graphs (Figures 6 and 7) also challenge Putnam's argument that intercohort change generates contemporary political and civic disengagement. Time series graphs for the USA and Britain show that since the 1980s youth have consistently engaged in politics at lower rates than adults. This relationship is relatively stable overtime. According to Putnam's theory of intercohort change, Figures 6 and 7 should show synchrony between adult and youth engagement in politics. If rates of political engagement change because new generations, which increasingly represent a larger portion of society, introduce new behaviour and ideas, one would expect trends in youth's political engagement to be reflected in the next stage of adult political engagement as the cohort makes their transition from youth into adulthood. Instead, rates of youth and adult engagement in politics are largely stable over time. This

means that as youth transit into adulthood, they adopt a new level of political engagement. The complete set of regression analyses of political engagement (Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9) and the time series graphs of political engagement (Figures 6 and 7) do not support Putnam's theory of political disengagement through intercohort change.

Putnam (2000: 51) argues that civic engagement needs to be active and current to support political engagement. Kim *et al* (1999: 379) argue that civic engagement develops the citizen's 'political habitus'. This means that to be engaging in civic life, individuals develop a willingness to argue with those who have different opinions. Borrowing from Bourdieu, Kim *et al* write that civic engagement allows citizens to "feel entitled to claim a personal opinion" (Bourdieu 1984: 414 cited in Kim *et al* 1999: 379). However Kim *et al* (1999) do not suggest that once a respondent ceases to engage civically, their 'political habitus' evaporates. Bourdieu formulates the role of habitus in relation to the field in which the individual acts. Each field is constituted of a range of positions which agents adopt when interacting with the field. Positions, however, are defined by their relationship to surrounding positions. So in the case of the political field, the value of one's political habitus changes if 'the rules of the field' change (Bourdieu 1993: 30-31). Bourdieu's conception of 'habitus' indicates that individuals must remain active in their political engagement for their political habitus to be relevant in contemporary politics. However this does not necessarily need to be achieved through civic engagement. Since 'habitus' refers to a set of dispositions that exist beyond the conscious, once developed, a citizen's political habitus can continue to inform political engagement without civic engagement.

Alternatively, rates of civic engagement in youth and adults may be similar, but produce different effects on political engagement due to qualitative differences in civic engagement. In finding that youth are more likely to disengage from politics because they have progressive individualist values, it seems a contradiction that youth continue to engage in civic life. It is expected that greater individualism among youth would catalyse a decline in civic engagement. The civic engagement literature (esp. Putnam 2000) advocates that civic engagement develops a citizen's appreciation and support for collective action. From the findings of this study, it can be argued that late modernity's fragmentation of linear time induces a different performance and experience of civic engagement to that of the mid-twentieth century. Sennett (1997) writes that constant movement within the workforce prevents deep social bonds from developing (1997: 169). Consequently, if youth *do* engage in a specific civic group, they do so temporarily with self-serving motivators. For example an individual's engagement in religious, sporting, leisure, artistic, musical or educational organisations can be easily framed as the individual pursuing their own interests in a social environment. Civic life is increasingly "obscure[d] as collectivist traditions weaken and individualist values intensify" (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 2). Consequently, youth limit the depth of their civic engagement because they are constantly influenced by a project of reflexive risk assessment. Future research into values of progressive individualism among youth (developed in this study's generational approach) could indicate the motivators behind contemporary youth's engagement in civic life.

## **5.2. Youth who are highly socialised are more likely to be engaged in politics**

The observed result that progressive individualism is a key factor in understanding youth's disengagement from politics indicates that youth are not as politically engaged as adults because they are

dislocated from the socialising forces of family and general social authority. Conversely, this result shows that the more politically engaged a respondent is, the more respectful they are of authority, social norms and parental standards. By this line of reasoning, politically engaged youth can be framed as conservative and highly socialised. The relationship between socialisation and political engagement is examined in the literature on youth's political engagement within the civic engagement framework. McFarland and Thomas (2006: 402) write that civic groups facilitate processes of social reproduction and social learning both of which socialise youth to engage in politics in a legitimate way. Existing literature on civic engagement, however, does not make the explicit argument that political socialisation 'tames' youth's values and ideas to make them fit into existing political frameworks. Under this interpretation, the process of becoming politically socialised by society involves adopting motives and capacities from existing political agents (whether from within the family unit or within an individual's community) and engaging in the political game whilst abiding by established rules.

For a true state of democracy to exist, the political space must constantly keep itself and the policies it upholds in check. Liberal democracies triumph not when they are stable and least active in challenging themselves, but when they disrupt the social space in pursuing equality and communication (Rancière 1999). This study presents a paradox where youth who engage in politics after being groomed into positions of legitimacy are in reality restricted in the extent to which they can engage in democratic processes. When citizens' political identities are highly socialised, they surrender their capacity to evaluate political issues from all angles. By adopting prevailing norms and attitudes such as political efficacy, political interest and political knowledge (Pacheco and Plutzer 2008: 575) young citizens relinquish their capability to progressively drive social change. One hesitates to advocate support for increased youth political engagement if this can only be achieved by encouraging conformist and reproductive rather than creative behaviour. There is something inherently *undemocratic* about reproducing the status quo because the very core of democracy revolves around its ability to question itself through the politics of equality and representation (Rancière 1999). Political engagement should be advocated as a mechanism for constantly keeping the democratic political system in check through disruption. Politically socialised citizens, however, are impaired to this end.

As youth transit into adult statuses they become 'new' citizens with great potential to redemocratised the political space. Democracy is at its most successful when floating subjects, which are deemed invisible by the sensible, empower themselves to disrupt and deregulate the social truth (Rancière 1999: 99-100). As new citizens (eg youth) acquire legitimate political positions, they pressure the democratic system to reconsider existing policies and ideologies in light of new ideas and values. In this way, democracy should be most concerned with "eliminating [the] floating count" of people whose voices are not represented in the political sphere (Rancière 1999: 76). Diminishing the 'floating count' should not be achieved by shaping new citizens to fit into political positions already recognized by the political system, but rather by realigning the political system to encompass all political positions occupied. The finding that politically engaged citizens tend to be respectful of authority, conform to social pressure and have a limited exposure to new ideas suggests that contemporary democratic systems are relinquishing a system that is truly 'of the people, by the people and for the people.' Youth's political engagement should be an instrumental strategy in re-invigorating the democratic qualities of contemporary democracies.

The most relevant example of youth (as floating subjects) disrupting the political space, is the student upheaval across America, Europe and Australia in 1968. Kevin Mattson (2003) writes that if today's youth activism seems lethargic it is because it exists in the shadow of the 'golden age' of the 1960s, when youth's political engagement experienced an unprecedented surge. The protests of 1968-9, a youth-led phenomenon, came in the wake of mass entry into universities and a new ease of travel for the young middle class (Klimke and Scharloth 2008; Jobs 2009). The simultaneous occurrence of the two dislocated youth from wider society, exposing youth to new ideas, values and strategies for change and ultimately allowing youth to organise a collective response to their dissatisfaction with politics. Klimke and Scharloth emphasise that youth were effective in being noticed and consequently creating a disruption to politics because they were formally organised. Universities housed student organizations that proliferated attendance to events such as the International Vietnam Congress (Klimke and Scharloth 2008). A high degree of organisation helped youth prepare (over a very short time period) a "global revolution strategy that would result in a revolutionary transformation of the Cold War system" (Klimke and Scharloth 2008: 4). Although education and globalisation have continued to move towards universalism, progressive individualist values that rise out of late modernity prevent youth from re-enacting the political upheaval of 1968.

### **5.3. Progressive individualist values lead to disengagement from politics**

Although increasing numbers of youth choose to continue their education to a tertiary level, the contemporary organisation of disruptive and collective student action does not compare to that of the 1960s. Arguing that universities have stopped new ideas from infiltrating the minds of youth or that youth have experienced a sudden disabler of physical mobility does not solve this contradiction. Rather, the marketisation of education and the growth of a competitive 'human capital' mentality has transformed students' experiences (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 11). Unlike the 1960s, tertiary education now prepares students for an economy which is highly fragmented, specialised and competitive (Giddens 1991: 214). In doing so, tertiary education exists as an explicit facilitator of the accumulation of human capital (Becker 1975). The marketisation of education has increased the number of courses on offer by narrowing the scope of what is taught in individual courses (Coffey 2001). Consequently, fewer students are making a 'general investment' in education because more students are making 'specific investments' by gaining skills that respond to only a particular firm or trend in industry (Becker 1975: 26). Investing in specific skills seems unwise if the job market is highly fragmented and unstable, yet Becker (1975) argues that this is what is necessary to have the 'cutting edge' on other employees. The consequence of this style of education is that students obtain an individualised perception of their identity, they see each other as competition and evaluate collective action to be too risky.

In being individually responsible for negotiating a risky and independent transition into adulthood, youth become individualised creators of change. The PI\_index measures how important individual decision-making and autonomy is to the respondent. It is hypothesised that because youth are highly exposed to individual processes of self-actualisation (Giddens 1991), they will be progressive supporters of individualistic rights and strategies for change. In fragmenting the social and economic space by proliferating the scope of professional specification, individuals who develop in late modernity experience a subjective weakening of social bonds due to the illusion of a greater diversity in life

narratives (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 113). What the results of this empirical study suggest is that progressive individualism accounts for much of the age gap in political engagement. This means that because youth are more likely to value progressive individualism, they are less likely to engage in collective forms of political expression. Beck *et al* (1994) and Giddens (1991) argue that weakening social bonds are a consequence of perception rather than reality, as the growth of specialisation actually results in a growth of interdependency. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995: 40) write “the means which encourage individualism also induce sameness.... The situations which arise are contradictory because double-faced: individual decisions are heavily dependent on outside influences”. This indicates that disengagement from politics in late modernity is not necessarily a natural response to flexible economic and social interactions. With increased individualisation and specialisation, centralised institutions such as parliaments have an even greater role in coordinating fragmented yet also interdependent structures. So in the individualistic world of late modernity, collective action and organisation are not futile but should be encouraged.

In measuring values, and not actions, the progressive individualism index represents the extent to which late modernity influences people’s decision-making. The results show that there is a statistically significant age gap in the distribution of progressive individualist values (see Table 4), which indicates that late modernity has a greater impact on the values of youth than it does on adults. This finding supports the argument that a ‘generation gap’ leads to different rates of contemporary political engagement. However because it is easily argued that ‘generation gaps’ are a trait of all societies, it is necessary to conduct deeper analyses of *why* that generation gap exists in contemporary society to understand differences in contemporary modes of engagement in politics. In understanding youth’s development to be shaped by competitive, unstable and risky environments, it is logical that youth surrender formal social organisation both among themselves and with other age groups. Because progressive individualism arises as a consequence of the extent to which individuals *perceive* their risk in late modernity, the results of this study do not imply that progressive individualism is *necessary* to manage that risk. However perceptions, as opposed to reality, are no easier to remedy.

## 6. Conclusion

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This study is motivated by the role of politics in facilitating collective determination and empowerment. To disengage from politics is not only to deny oneself a voice in collective decision-making but also to decimate the health and robustness of contemporary democracy. In a world where democracy is acclaimed to be an ideal form of social organisation, studies that investigate how to move towards a more vigorous state of democracy are of tremendous value. Youth are chosen as a study population because in their ‘new citizens’ status, they present great potential for disrupting and re-democratising the political space. The act of considering new citizens and ideas forces the political system to democratize by realigning itself with its active citizenry. In neglecting their great capacity to disrupt and create a democratic political order, youth in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies allow their political systems to glaze over the imperative procedure of keeping themselves in check. The answers that arise from asking *why* youth are disengaging from politics reveal the options for re-energizing strategies to encourage engagement in politics.

This study seeks to understand *why* contemporary youth engage in politics at a lower rate than their adult counterparts. It does so by testing two models of political engagement – the civic engagement and generational models. The former represents Putnam’s (2000) theory that in disengaging from civic life youth no longer accumulate social capital which is instrumental in supporting political engagement. Youth’s engagement in politics consequently decreases. This model is tested because although there is widespread support for it, there is also evidence that youth are in fact still civically engaged (eg Odegard and Berglund 2008; Vromen 2003). Using explanatory regression models (Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9), this study tests whether civic engagement can account for the impact of age on variation in political engagement. If youth are disengaging from politics because they engage in civic life at a lower rate, it is expected that when civic engagement is held constant across the whole population, differences in political engagement due to age would be minimised. The results of this empirical study do *not* reflect this pattern (Tables 6, 7, 8 and 9), which implies that there is ‘something else’ about being young in contemporary Anglo-Saxon democracies that stunts political engagement.

The generational model of political engagement is developed to test whether the instability and competitiveness of late modernity affect youth’s political engagement. This model grows out of the structure and agency literature, which argues that youth’s political agency is shaped by the political institutions within which they develop. In this study, progressive individualist values of individualism, democratisation and creativity are seen as youth’s reaction to developing within the unstable and competitive education and employment structures characteristic of late modernity. This study argues that because self-determination and actualisation function as individualised projects in late modernity, youth perceive collective action to be an ineffective vehicle for change. The generational model is tested by controlling variation in progressive individualism with the aim of minimising variation in engagement in politics due to age. Although age remains a predictor of political engagement, progressive individualism noticeably decreases its strength in all study countries. This result indicates that because youth are more progressively individualistic, they are more likely to disengage from politics. Alternatively, this result finds that citizens who *are* engaged in politics are respectful of authority, respectful of social norms and do not highly regard individual empowerment.

Reservations about the framing of this result should be embraced. Although it is argued that progressive individualism is a generational trait, the values embodied within progressive individualism could have arisen due to a number of social and economic conditions other than late modernity. For example the ‘generation gap’, a concept which has long been instrumental in understanding youth’s development, emphasises that ‘youth’ is a phase allocated to questioning authority and tradition often through antagonistic and conflict ridden relations with the adult world (Esman 1990: 17). Where this study frames questioning of authority and social norms as actions which increase flexibility and creativity, cultural understandings of youth development see it as a generic process adopted by all youths. In the same light, creativity, individualisation and democratisation can be framed as conditions that characterise all youth across time. Although this study demonstrates that progressive individualism is significantly more common among youth than adults, there is insufficient data to prove that the contemporary adult age group did not embody progressive individualism in their youth. It is also unknown whether progressive individualist values will subside in contemporary youth when they successfully complete their transitions from childhood into adulthood. Upon availability of more data, it would be rewarding to make such investigations.

Apart from executing the quantitative analyses used in this study on other populations (esp non Anglo-Saxon democracies) this study would be enriched by complementary qualitative research. The indicators used to assemble the CE\_index show active and inactive membership in civic organisations. If further research questioned whether youth engage in civic organisations to foster their own interests in an individualistic mentality, the generational model developed in this study could explain why the civic engagement model is no longer successful in accounting for impact of age on political engagement. If youth engage in civic life in a highly individualistic and competitive way, they disrupt the accumulation of social capital which Putnam identifies as necessary in supporting political engagement. If youth experience civic engagement in a qualitatively different way to adults, we can expect the relationship between civic engagement and political engagement to be different also.

The findings of this study would be further strengthened by qualitative research that investigates youth’s understandings of the merits or needs for progressive individualism. If youth frame progressive individualism as a step towards developing their adult independence, a youth focused model might be more appropriate. Alternatively, if youth frame progressive individualism as a condition necessary to manage the instability of education and employment in late modernity, the generational model would be confirmed.

Existing strategies to engage youth in politics neither promise to be nor are successful. This is evident in the plethora of studies, including this one, that find that contemporary youth engage in politics at a lower rate than adults. Strategies that are currently used to engage youth in politics can be divided into three broad categories. First, the government may set up a channel through which to communicate with youth. For example, the Australian Youth Forum is run by the Australian government as a space within which the government, young people and youth organizations can work together to address issues that concern youth. This strategy is capable of magnifying the effect of youth’s political engagement, however it does not adopt strategies that would pull disengaged youth out of their disengagement. Second, campaigns like Rock The Vote in the USA use music, popular culture and new technologies to advocate the benefits of registering and voting in every election. Campaigns like Rock The Vote give

youth the opportunity to identify, learn about and take action on political issues in ways which are relevant to youth's lives and ways of living. In focusing on voting, however, these campaigns do not provide youth with the ongoing support needed for their development of political identities, opinions and behaviours. Third, Internet-based movements advocated by new politics theorists impassion youth on political issues by facilitating diversity in opinion and discussion; there is no limit to how many people or how many issues can be discussed at one time. However new politics is disconnected from traditional representational politics. Just as youth do not often transfer their cyber political activity into traditional forms of political expression, governments rarely refer to new politics to inform political decision-making.

If youth are disengaging from politics because of the effects of wider structural changes in the economy, education and social organisation, there is a need for the practice of politics to also react to these changes. Yet the dissynchrony between contemporary youth and politics is exacerbated because as youth become more flexible, uncertain, individualised and disengaged from politics, politics becomes more stable, rigid and institutionalised. To transform the political sphere so that it embodies flexibility and greater empowerment of the individual would be to not only allow politics to become more relevant for youth, but also to allow politics to be generally more susceptible to embracing elementary principles of democratic representation. Particularly in a world where changes in individual lives occur quickly and unpredictably, politics needs to be flexible in its response.

The onus of change lies with both contemporary Anglo-Saxon governments and their citizens. Governments need to become more accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens just as citizens must pressure the political system to democratise. This study shows that a strong motivator of political disengagement among contemporary youth is progressive individualism. Since this is perceived as a reaction to the instability and uncertainty of late modernity, it is likely that even if these values subside as contemporary youth become adults, they will persist in influencing individuals' decision-making. More accountable and transparent government responds to these values by encouraging progressive values of democratisation. Making politics more relevant to the experiences of citizens in late modernity increases the possibility of citizens, particularly contemporary youth, engaging in politics. Employing strategies that emphasise increased interdependence in a time of individualism would revalidate the merits of collective empowerment and determination and in so doing give rise to a robustly democratic polity.

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## Appendix A

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This appendix describes how each indicator used in the EP\_index, CE\_index or PI\_index is coded. Each indicator draws data from a particular survey question. Responses are dichotomised to show:

- EP\_index: 'engagement in politics' or 'disengagement from politics'
- CE\_index: 'civic engagement' or 'civic disengagement'
- PI\_index: 'progressive individualism' or 'conformity'

### EP\_index (WVS 2005)

- EP1: The respondent engages in politics if they are "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in politics. They disengage if they are "not at all interested" or "not very interested"
- EP2: The respondent engages in politics if they have signed a petition. They disengage if they "might in the future" or "would never in the future"
- EP3: Same as EP2 but for boycotting
- EP4: Same as EP2 but for demonstrating
- EP5: The respondent engages in politics if they are an active member of a political party. They disengage from politics if they are inactive or non-members

### EP\_index (ISSP 2004)

- EP1: Is coded the same as for WVS data
- EP2: The respondent engages in politics if they have petitioned in the past year. They disengage if they have petitioned "in the distant past", if they "have not but might" or if they "have not and wouldn't"
- EP3: Same as EP2 (ISSP) but for boycotting
- EP4: Same as EP2 (ISSP) but for demonstrating
- EP5: The respondent engages in politics if they "belong and actively participate". They disengage if they "belong but don't participate", "used to belong" or "never belonged"

### CE\_index (WVS 2005)

- CE1: The respondent is civically engaged if they believe people can "always" or "usually" be trusted. They are not civically engaged if they believe people should "always" or "usually" be treated with caution
- CE2: The respondent is civically engaged if they are "active" members of religious organizations. They are not civically engaged if they are "inactive" or "not members" of religious organisations
- CE3: Same as CE2 but for sports or leisure organizations
- CE4: Same as CE2 but for trade union organizations
- CE5: Same as CE2 but for artistic, musical or educational organisations
- CE6: Same as CE2 but for consumer organisations

### PI\_index (WVS 2005)

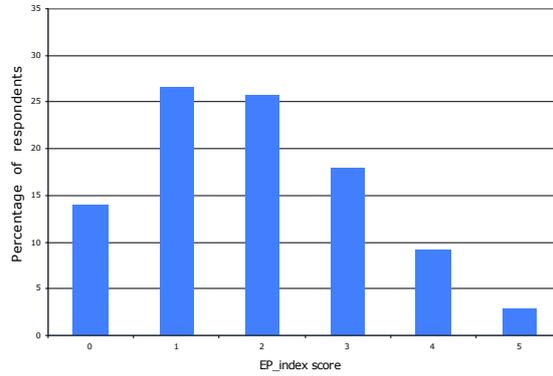
- PI1: The respondent is individualist if, on a scale from one to ten ranging from 'not an essential characteristic of democracy' to 'an essential characteristic of democracy', they rank the essentialness of free elections in democracy in the top two deciles. They are conformist if they rank the essentialness of free elections in democracy in the bottom eight deciles

- PI2: The respondent is individualist if, on a scale from one to ten ranging from ‘not an essential characteristic of democracy’ to ‘an essential characteristic of democracy’, they rank the essentialness of protecting civil rights against oppression in the top two deciles. They are conformist if they rank the importance of civil rights protection in the bottom eight deciles
- PI3: The respondent is individualist if, on a scale from one to ten ranging from ‘not at all important’ to ‘absolutely important’ they rank the importance of democracy in the top two deciles. They are conformist if they rank the importance of democracy in the bottom eight deciles
- PI4: The respondent is individualist if it is ‘very like them’, ‘like them’, ‘somewhat like them’ or ‘a little like them’ to think up new ideas and be creative. They are conformist if it is ‘not like them’ or ‘not at all like them’ to think up new ideas and be creative.
- PI5: The respondent is individualist if they did use the Internet in the past week. They are conformist if they have not used the Internet in the past week
- PI6: The respondent is individualist if it is ‘not like them’ or ‘not at all like them’ to always behave properly and to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong. They are conformist if it is ‘very like them’, ‘like them’, ‘somewhat like them’ or ‘a little like them’ to ‘behave properly’
- PI7: The respondent is individualist if they believe a greater respect for authority would be ‘bad’. They are conformist if they ‘don’t mind’ or believe it would be ‘good’
- PI8: The respondent is individualist if they believe a greater emphasis on family life would be ‘bad’. They are conformist if they ‘don’t mind’ or believe it would be ‘good’
- PI9: The respondent is individualist if they ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ that one of their main goals in life has been to make their parents proud. They are conformist if they ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’
- PI10: The respondent is individualist if they do not live with their parents. They are conformist if they do live with their parents

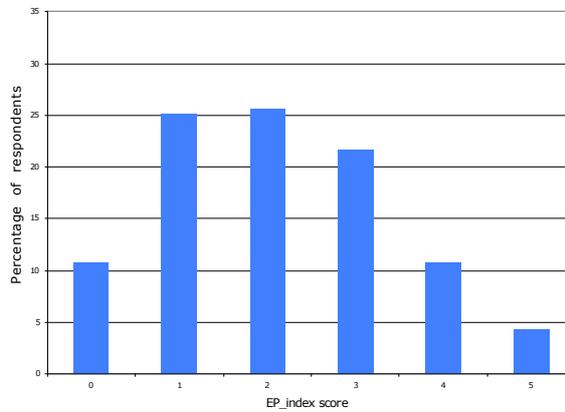
## Appendix B

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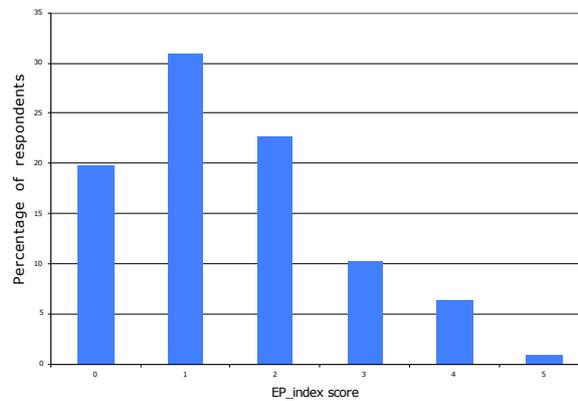
**Figure B1:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from the USA across all age categories (WVS 2005)



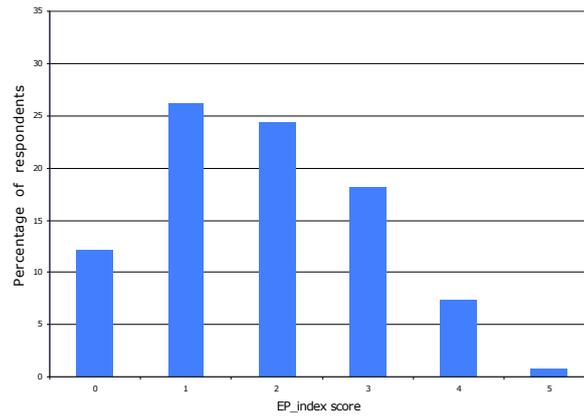
**Figure B2:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from the USA across all age categories (ISSP 2004)



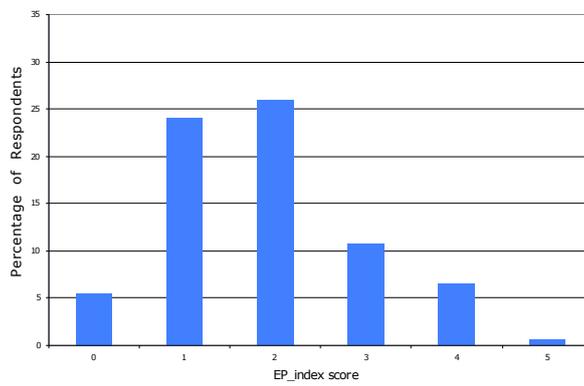
**Figure B3:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from Britain across all age categories (WVS 2005)



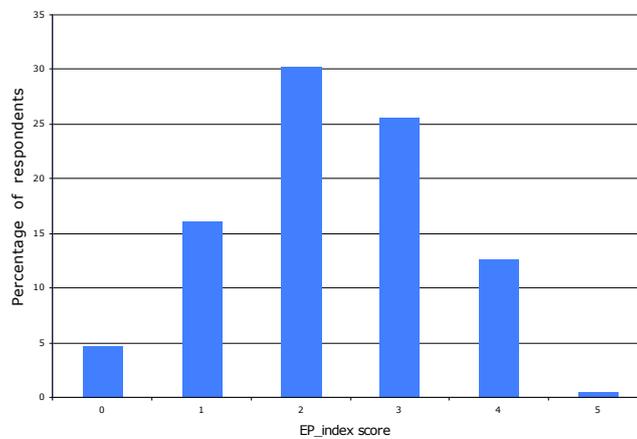
**Figure B4:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from Great Britain across all age categories (ISSP 2004)



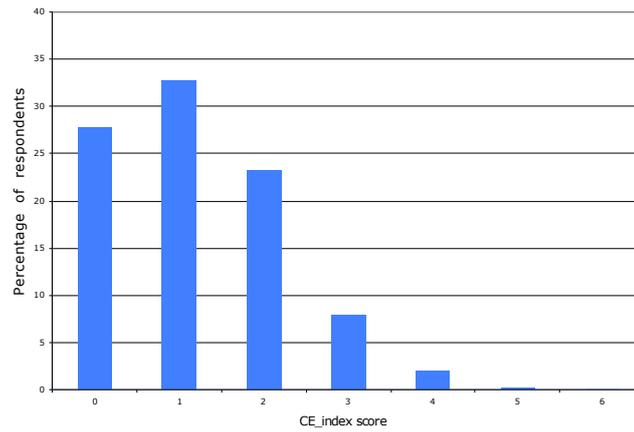
**Figure B5:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from New Zealand across all age categories (WVS 2005)



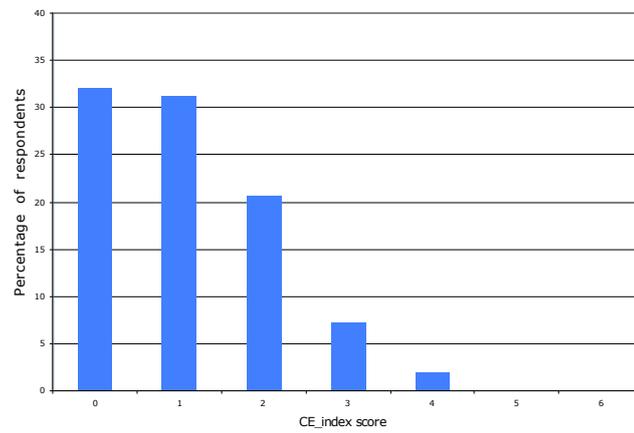
**Figure B6:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Engagement in Politics (EP\_index) score for respondents from New Zealand across all age categories (ISSP 2004)



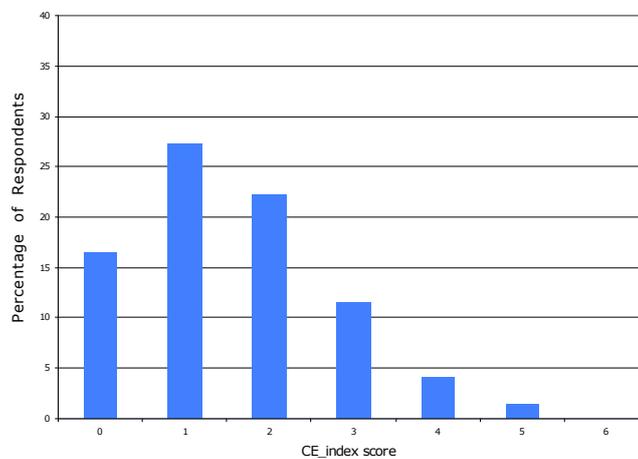
**Figure B7:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Civic Engagement (CE\_index) score for respondents from the USA across all age categories (WVS 2005)



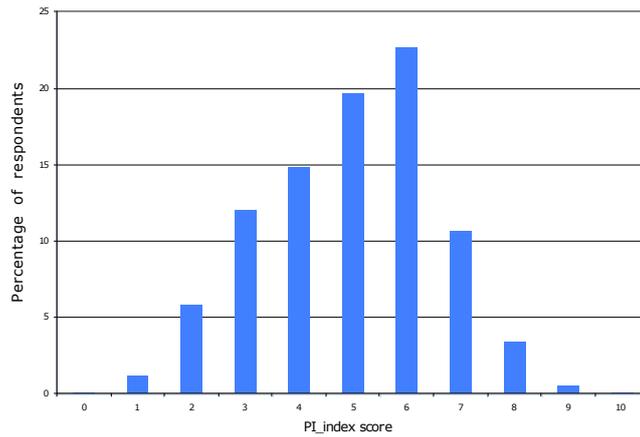
**Figure B8:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Civic Engagement (CE\_index) score for respondents from Britain across all age categories (WVS 2005)



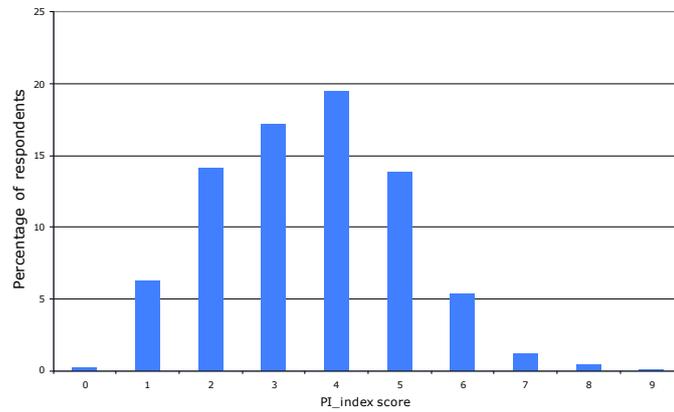
**Figure B9:** Histogram showing the frequency of each Civic Engagement (CE\_index) score for respondents from New Zealand across all age categories (WVS 2005)



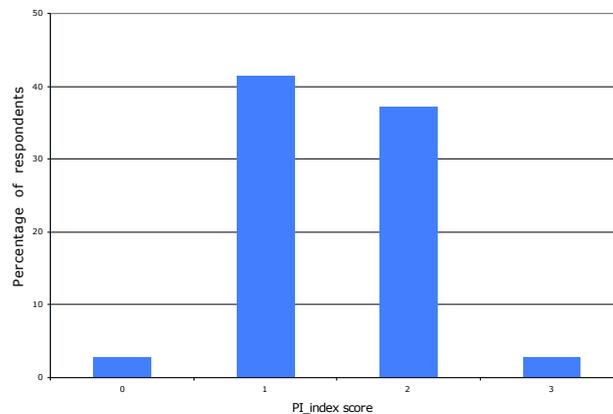
**Figure B10:** Histogram showing the frequency of each progressive individualism (PI\_index) score for respondents from the USA across all age categories (WVS 2005)



**Figure B11:** Histogram showing the frequency of each progressive individualism (PI\_index) score for respondents from Britain across all age categories (WVS 2005)



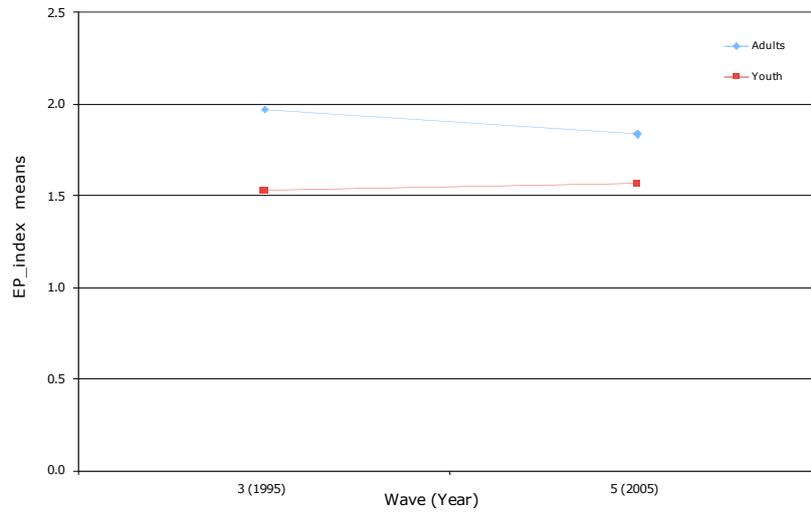
**Figure B12:** Histogram showing the frequency of each progressive individualism (PI\_index) score for respondents from New Zealand across all age categories (WVS 2005)



## Appendix C

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**Figure C1:** Timeseries graph showing changes in the rate of political engagement in Australia between 1995 and 2005 for youth and adults (WVS 2005)



**Figure C2:** Timeseries graph showing changes in the rate of political engagement in New Zealand between 1998 and 2005 for youth and adults (WVS 2005)

