

# Social Change and the Evolution of the British Electorate

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Nearly fifty years ago, Abrams and Little (1965) carried out what at the time was one of the most in-depth analyses of the political behaviour and attitudes of young people in Britain. They concluded that there “would be no necessary increase in the theoretical interest of the young to the political scientist” (Abrams and Little 1965, p109), as young people’s lower than average engagement could be explained by the life cycle, and we could be confident that they would ‘grow out of’ their political apathy.

Fast forward five decades and it is clear that their prediction was way off the mark. Young people have risen up the agenda of both the politician and the political scientist throughout advanced Western democracies as their engagement with politics has declined since the 1990s. They have become even less likely to vote (Phelps, 2005; 2012; Martin, 2012; Norris, 2002; Burgess et al, 2000; Esser and de Vreese, 2007; Henn et al, 2005; Sloam, 2007), as well as less likely than their elders to believe that voting is a civic responsibility (Clarke et al, 2004; Norris, 2002). They are also becoming less likely to associate with political parties, either through identifying with them or working with them in political campaigns (Whiteley, 2012; Phelps, 2012; Dalton, 2004; 2013; Norris, 2002; Utter, 2011; Martin, 2012; Sloam, 2007; 2012). And despite numerous efforts by governments, and continual improvements in access to education, young people’s interest in and knowledge about politics remains significantly lower than that of the rest of the electorate (Utter, 2011; Henn and Foard, 2012; Henn et al, 2005; Martin, 2012; Hansard Society, 2012; Wattenberg, 2002).

Further academic interest in young people stems from the fact that they are a window into the future behaviour of Western citizens. New generations are socialised into the contemporary social environment and will form habits of behaviour and attitude based around that experience which last into later life. Changes to the social environment, therefore, lead to changes in the habits these generations form, and subsequently in later political behaviour. As these young cohorts replace older cohort and become the dominant members of society, the behaviour of that society as a whole starts to shift. By studying the political behaviour and attitudes of young people now, therefore, we can get some idea of how society as a whole will behave, and what attitudes they will express, in the future.

As the social environment into which new generations are socialised has changed so much over the last forty years, and we are now witnessing an apparent disengagement from more and more young people from electoral politics, considering a possible link between the two becomes an important task. Since the 1970s, access to education has proliferated, technology has rapidly advanced and is becoming ever more integrated into our daily lives, and our societies have become more economically secure and prosperous than ever. These changes are starting to have a tangible effect on the way Western

citizens relate to politics, which is particularly profound among the young generations who are socialised into this new environment. The goal of this research, therefore, is to assess whether or not these changes to the social environment are responsible for the changes in the political characteristics and behaviour of young people in advanced Western democracies. Consequently, this research is also able to offer insight into the future consequences of social evolution for the political behaviour of Western electorates.

Using Britain as an example, it looks at the impact of social evolution on the wider relationship between Western citizens and politics over the last forty years, finding that this relationship is indeed changing and that this is being realised in the political behaviour and attitudes of cohorts socialised into the evolving environment. Young people's growing likelihood not to vote in elections, consider voting a civic duty, and engage with political parties, is shown to be at least in part the result of their socialisation in an increasingly secure, educated and technologically advanced environment. The most substantial consequence of that change is its impact on the way that people associate and identify with political institutions, particularly political parties. It is in the way that new generations relate to and identify with political parties, therefore, that we must look if we are to find a major part of the explanation – and solution – to young people's disengagement from formal politics in advanced Western democracies.

### **Social Change in Advanced Western Democracies**

Following the end of the Second World War, advanced Western democracies began to undergo rapid economic and social development. Unprecedented investment in social welfare and the economy saw citizens enjoy new highs of economic security and prosperity (Inglehart, 1990; Inglehart and Welzel, 2009). Governments vastly expanded their provision of education (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995; Whiteley, 2012; Fahmy, 2006), and rapid technological development saw both further improvements in the quality of people's lives and a revolution in the way people could acquire information and communicate (O'Neill, 2010; Norris, 2001).

Since the 1970s, evidence showing that this social evolution is producing tangible changes to the way that Western citizens relate to politics has started to appear. These changes are particularly apparent in the younger generations, who are socialised into this new environment. They develop their behavioural and attitudinal habits in the context of this environment, without baggage from experiences and habits developed in earlier times. They are the ones who experience the greatest benefit of superior education, who grow up never knowing the precarious states of economic and physical security associated with living during the Second World War, and who are the most likely

to embrace new technology. As these young cohorts have replaced the older generations, Western society as a whole has started to exhibit the altered relationship between citizen and politics these changes produce, leading to a wholesale change in the way Western citizens engage with and participate in politics.

The most significant components of social evolution for the changing citizen-politics relationship stem from two main sources: the proliferation of post-materialistic social and political values, and increased political sophistication. Compounding the impact of these changes has been the rise and expansion in access to information and communication technology.

The proliferation of 'post-materialist' social values in advanced Western societies is extensively documented (Inglehart, 1971; 1990; 1997; 2008; Inglehart and Abramson, 1999; Inglehart and Welzel, 2009; Norris, 2011; Dalton, 2013), and is primarily the result of the increased economic and physical security enjoyed by Western citizens since the 1940s. As they are socialised into an environment in which such security can largely be taken for granted, new cohorts in Western society come to assign more emphasis to other matters of interest or concern to them, such as their quality of life, individual freedoms, the environment, lifestyle choice, and civic engagement (Inglehart, 1971; 1997; 1990). They also start to view society and other citizens differently; they become less likely to accept or welcome the influence of hierarchical social institutions (such as churches, political parties or families), or to associate with such institutions relating to social identity (such as social class) (Inglehart, 1990; 1997; Norris, 2002; Dalton, 2013).

As these post-materialistic younger cohorts come to replace the older (more materialistic) cohorts, society as a whole exhibits a value shift – Western societies on the whole become more post-materialistic (Inglehart and Abramson, 1999; Inglehart, 1990; 1997). This doesn't mean that materialist issues go away, or that they can't become more salient in times of crisis (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010). On the whole, however, Western societies become more likely to exhibit values and behaviour associated with post-materialism, as their economic and physical security and circumstances improve.

The particular importance of post-materialism for the citizen-politics relationship stems from the significance post-materialists apply to civic participation and engagement, and their hostility towards hierarchical social and political institutions. Post-materialists value political engagement and participation as a social good in itself (Inglehart and Abramson, 1999; Inglehart, 1990; Dalton, 2004), as well as a means for pursuing their expanded social agenda (Inglehart, 1990; Dalton, 2004). They are also less likely to embrace or associate with – and may even be hostile towards – hierarchical political and social

institutions, such as political parties, churches or social class (Inglehart, 1990; 1997; Dalton, 2013). The rise of post-materialism, therefore, produces a citizenry which is both more likely to engage with and participate in politics, and to do so in a way which implies either a different relationship with political parties (and other such institutions), or the absence of any such relationship.

The increased political sophistication of Western citizens is one of the products of the vast expansion in access to – and improvements in the quality of – education in Western societies. Education has an extensive influence on the political sophistication and resources of democratic citizens; it is positively associated with political interest (Whiteley, 2012; Clarke et al, 2004; Verba and Nie, 1972), political knowledge (Hansard Society, 2012; Whiteley, 2012), political participation (Whiteley, 2012; Verba et al, 1974; Verba et al, 1995; Verba and Nie, 1972; Norris, 2002), and the ability to interpret political information and actively engage in politics (such as organising a petition or a public meeting, for example) (Norris, 2002; Verba et al, 1978; Sniderman et al, 1991; Clarke et al, 2004).

While not the sole source of political sophistication, it is clear that greater access to education for Western citizens increases their political resources and skills. As a result, they become more capable of engaging with politics without the need for the support of institutions like political parties (Norris, 2001; 2002; Dalton, 2013), they become more politically informed and confident, and more likely to participate in politics generally. As a result of increased political sophistication, therefore, younger Western citizens have the potential to develop a different relationship with both politics in general, and political institutions.

The final component of social evolution which is altering the citizen-politics relationship is information and communication technology, which has almost revolutionised the means by which citizens can acquire information and communicate, both with each other and political actors or institutions. The unique opportunities for communication presented by such technology gives Western citizens the potential to engage with politics independently of many traditional political institutions which were essential for doing so in earlier years, such as political parties or trade unions (O'Neill, 2010; Norris, 2001; 2002; Fahmy, 2006). This doesn't mean that they *do* act independently of such institutions, but it does mean that more and more people in Western society do not *need* to engage with political parties, churches, families, trade unions and similar institutions to get their political information, to learn how to influence political outcomes and to participate in the political process.

While much of the evidence surrounding this issue is anecdotal, there are examples of the potential of ICT being realised through the emergence of new forms of political participation (such as 'hacktivism') (Theocharis, 2012). Such evidence also suggests that it is the people who are exhibiting the most drastic alterations to their relationship with politics owing to their exposure to the key elements of social evolution who are the ones making use of technology to express themselves politically; the young, well-resourced (i.e. economically secure) and well educated (Theocharis, 2012; Di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Norris, 2011).

This trinity of components of social evolution, therefore, - the growth and proliferation of post-materialistic values, increased political sophistication, and access to advanced information and communication technology - all have the potential to significantly alter the citizen-politics relationship for a growing portion of Western society. People socialised into an environment dominated by these forces can be expected to be more politically skilled and capable, more motivated to engage with politics, less likely to embrace hierarchical, traditional political institutions - or at least to do so in the same way as previous generations -, and more likely to exploit the opportunities afforded by technological advancement to engage with and participate in politics.

There is already extensive evidence supporting the view that social change is altering the citizen-politics relationship in a specific way, stemming from the literature on how people relate to political parties. This change - referred to as partisan dealignment - also has the potential to further alter the citizen-politics relationship, and so is a key part of our understanding of the political characteristics of young people.

### **Social Change and the Citizen-Politics Relationship: Partisan Dealignment**

Partisan dealignment is just one way in which the relationship between an individual and political parties can change - in this instance, it refers to the weakening or break down of the bonds of association between them (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). This psychological bond is represented through the concept 'party identification', which refers to an individual's long standing psychological orientation towards or against a particular political party (or cluster of similar parties) (Green and Schickler, 1993; 2009; Dalton, 2004; Dunleavy, 2005; Whiteley, 2012; Miller, 1974; Crewe, 1974; 1992; Burden and Klofstad, 2005). This orientation is generalised beyond any individual assessment about a party's policy or candidate, and even beyond an individual decision about whether or not to vote for that party in an election (Dalton, 2004; Green and Schickler, 1993). Rather, party identification is causally prior to such assessments; it influences the way that people judge policies and candidates, as well as decisions about who to vote for in an election, and the performance of a political party in government (Van der Eijk and

Franklin, 2009; Green et al, 2002; Dalton, 2013; Bartle and Bellucci, 2009; Budge et al, 1974; Miller, 1974; Crewe et al, 1977). In short, an individual's party identification represents their psychological association with (or against) a political party (or group of parties), which influences the way that they judge the policies, candidates and performance of both their party and other parties they don't identify with, as well as their political behaviour. Partisan dealignment, by contrast, refers to the erosion of this psychological link, and so the decline of this influence on political behaviour, attitudes and judgements.

The significance of party identification, and so of changes to it, stems from the importance of political parties in a representative democracy, and the impact that identifying with parties has on the way that individuals relate to politics. Political parties are potentially the most important political institution in representative democracy; "if they didn't exist, they would have to be invented, such is their importance to the political system" (Whiteley 2012, p.57; see also Webb, 2002; Mair and Katz, 1992; Norris, 2002; 2011; Schumpeter, 1947; Wattenberg, 2000; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000b). They do far more than simply fight to win elections; they are central to the operation and understanding of politics at every level. Not only are they vital for ensuring operable government and policy making, parties represent key markers for understanding the political system and debates, they mobilise political engagement and participation, give people a means of accessing government and political decisions, and facilitate political and democratic competence (Norris, 2002; 2004; 2011; Whiteley, 2012; Key, 1964; Dalton, 2013; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a; Webb, 2002a; Bartle, 2003). They are so central to the operation of representative democracy, to citizens' understanding of democracy and to the way that they engage with the political process, that any change in the way an individual relates to a political party will have significant consequences for the way they relate to the wider political system of which that party is a part.

This understanding is reinforced by the fact that party identification is hugely influential in shaping people's political attitudes and behaviours, and not just those directly related to the interests of, or engagement with, political parties. For instance, individuals who identify with a party are shown to be more likely to participate in politics, more politically interested, more politically knowledgeable, and to have a more positive opinion of the operation of democracy and of the party system in general (Dalton, 1984; 2004; 2007; 2013; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1995; Heath, 2011; Nie et al, 1979; Parry et al, 1992; Whiteley, 2012; Phelps, 2012; Miller, 1974; Borre and Katz, 1973; Rahn, 1993). When we look at party identification, therefore, we are looking at more than just the way an individual associates themselves with a political party (or parties), but with the wider

political system and the institutions which make up that system, of which the political party is a part.

So what of the link between changes in party identification and social change, and therefore, with young people's changing behaviour? Partisan dealignment, just like social evolution, is occurring in just about every advanced Western democracy (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Crewe et al, 1977; 1992; Franklin et al, 1992; 2009), suggesting a potential link between the two. While there are multiple causes of partisan dealignment, there are numerous studies which show that among the most influential causes are the consequences of social evolution.

As was highlighted above, Inglehart (1990; 1997) shows that people exhibiting post-materialistic social values are more likely to be hostile towards hierarchical social or political institutions like political parties, as well as towards influential social cleavages upon which most mainstream political parties in Western democracies are based (such as social class in Britain). The result is that people with post-materialistic values are less likely to develop an identification or association with mainstream political parties (Inglehart, 1990; 1997; Franklin, 1985; 1992; Dalton, 2004; 2013; Norris, 2011).

In addition, people with higher levels of education and political sophistication are less likely to identify with political parties because they have less need for their identification to act as a heuristic device for interpreting the political world and reaching reasonable judgements about political issues (Crewe et al, 1977; Dalton, 2012; 2013; Borre and Katz, 1973; Schaffer and Streb, 2002; Kroh and Selb, 2009; Schmitt-Beck et al, 2006; Rahn, 1993; Kaase, 1974; Converse, 1962; Sniderman et al, 1991; Budge et al, 1974; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009; Campbell et al, 1964). This doesn't mean that educated people don't identify with political parties – they do. But it does mean that people with higher levels of political sophistication are less likely to identify with a political party because they have less *need* for that identification to allow them to meaningfully engage with the political process.

Finally, just as young people are the primary vehicle through which the impact of social evolution on the citizen-politics relationship is realised, it is young people who are the least likely to develop a party identification in Western democracies, or who tend to exhibit a weaker attachment to those parties than their elders (Dalton, 2004; Clarke et al, 2004; Phelps, 2012; Crewe et al, 1977; Crewe, 1992; Norris, 2011; Franklin et al, 1992; Utter, 2011; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a). There is strong evidence of a link, therefore, between partisan dealignment and the socialisation of new cohorts entering society, suggesting a significant link between changes in the social environment and changes to partisan relationships. This link is supported by research showing that the

primary source of partisan dealignment in Western democracies is young people entering the electorate (Dalton, 2004; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000a; Norris, 2011; Crewe et al, 1977).

In partisan dealignment, therefore, we have a measurable process indicating a change in the nature of the relationship between Western (particularly young) citizens and politics, and one that is being (at least in part) driven by social evolution. The influence of party identification on citizens' political attitudes and behaviour suggest that partisan dealignment is both a symptom and cause of the changing citizen-politics relationship; changes in the political sophistication and values of the citizen following social evolution leads to a change in the nature of the relationship between the citizen and politics, which in turn drives a change in the way that citizen relates to political parties, which in turn drives further change in the way that citizen relates to politics.

The next task of this research is to bring the consequences of these key factors of social evolution together – post-materialistic values, greater political sophistication, and partisan dealignment – and examine just how the relationship between the citizen and politics is changing in advanced Western democracies, and what this change implies for the political attitudes and behaviour of young people.

### **Observing the Change: Dalton's Typology**

To empirically document how citizens' relationships with politics are evolving as a result of the consequences of social evolution, we can employ a typology designed by Dalton to do just this in the United States (US) (Dalton, 1984; 2013). Dalton's typology usefully captures some of the effects of social evolution on the citizen-politics relationship by accounting for three key indicators discussed above: i) party identification, which represents an individual's psychological relationship and association with key political institutions; ii) political sophistication, and iii) the motivation to engage with politics.

These three factors are divided into two axes. The first accounts for party identification, while the second combines political sophistication and political motivation into a single construct: cognitive mobilisation. An individual who has high cognitive mobilisation, therefore, is someone who is both politically sophisticated and has the motivation to use their political skills to engage with politics (Dalton, 1984; 2013). This gives us a simple typology of citizens based on their party identification, and their cognitive mobilisation, illustrated in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A short-coming of this typology – as Dalton (2013) himself acknowledges – is that by placing cognitive mobilisation and party identification on distinct axes, it is assumed that they are independent of each other. We know this isn't the case, not least because – as outlined above – higher levels of education are associated with partisan dealignment in some cases. This does not mean, however, that they typology is useless, as it isn't

**Figure 1: Dalton’s Typology Summarising Relationships with Politics**

	Partisan Identification	
Cognitive Mobilisation	No Party ID	Party ID
Low Cognitive Mobilisation	Apolitical	Ritual Partisan
High Cognitive Mobilisation	Apartisan	Cognitive Partisan

Source: Dalton 2013, p.40

This produces four ‘types’ of democratic citizen. Those with low cognitive mobilisation but who identify with political parties are known as ‘Ritual Partisans’. Ritual Partisans have largely dominated Western electorates for the past 50 years, and tend to be made up of older voters (Dalton, 1984; 2013). They are loyal to their political party, and are of limited political sophistication and interest – they draw heavily on party cues to reach judgements about political events and to motivate them to engage with politics (Dalton, 1984). Ritual Partisans are highly likely to vote, and may be seen taking part in election campaigns for their party, but are much less likely to be active outside of an electoral context where the influence of political parties in driving political participation is weaker and less salient (Dalton, 2013).

Those who are also of low cognitive mobilisation but who do not identify with a political party are Apoliticals. Apoliticals are of limited political sophistication, and lack any significant motivation to engage with politics – they have little to no interest in it and no loyalty to a political party (Dalton, 1984; 2013). They lack party cues to help them interpret political events or mobilise them to participate in politics, making them unlikely to do either (Dalton, 2007). They are the least likely to vote in elections, and beyond this their participation is almost non-existent (Dalton, 2013). In general, Apoliticals are a small yet constant group of Western citizens who sit on the fringes of political life, with no particular age profile (Dalton, 2013).

Those citizens who identify with a political party and are of high cognitive mobilisation are the Cognitive Partisans. Like Ritual Partisans, they have a strong loyalty to their political party which mobilises them to engage with politics and influences their political judgements and decisions, but they are also highly politically sophisticated and

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the case that education or the motivation to engage with politics completely determine party identification anymore than party identification completely predicts an individual’s political sophistication and political interest. The two axes, while not independent, are sufficiently different that treating them as independent still allows us to reach some valid conclusions about the nature of an individual’s relationship with politics, as will be demonstrated below.

motivated to engage with politics without the aid of a party (Dalton, 2013; 1984; 2007). They are also more likely to be more discerning in their loyalty to their party – that loyalty is more likely to be dependent on the party continuing to behave as the Cognitive Partisans wishes than is the case for the Ritual Partisan (Dalton, 2013).

Cognitive Partisans are the most politically active of the four groups, being motivated to engage both out of their own interest and their party loyalty (Dalton, 2013; 1984), and their participation is not limited to elections or even the formal political arena (Dalton, 2013). Cognitive Partisans are one of the main products of the proliferation of post-materialist values and increased access to education associated with social evolution – they are, therefore, generally young, particularly between the ages of 25 and 34 (Dalton, 1984).

Finally, those citizens who are cognitively mobilised but who do not identify with a political party are the Apartisans. Apartisans are politically sophisticated and motivated to engage with politics, but they have no loyalty to a political party (Dalton, 2013). This makes them likely to engage with politics, but less so than the Cognitive Partisans as they are not drawn into the political process by a party. While they retain a high likelihood to vote, they are particularly likely to be active in informal political arenas, such as their local community (Dalton, 2013). Apartisans are the other main product of social evolution – they are politically sophisticated and exhibit post-materialist social values, but have a different relationship with political parties and other institutions from the Cognitive Partisans (Dalton, 2013). They too are young, but are particularly likely to be under the age of 25 (Dalton, 1984; 2013).

In Dalton's own analyses, he applied this typology to the United States (US) (Dalton, 1984; 2007; 2013) and West Germany (Dalton, 2012). In both cases, he demonstrated that changes to Western society were producing a growing number of citizens who were less likely to identify with a political party but more likely to be cognitively mobilised. In America, for example, Dalton (2007) shows that in 1964/66 47% of Americans were Ritual Partisans, 16% were Apolitical, 27% were Cognitive Partisans and 10% were Apartisan. Forty years later, the proportion of Ritual Partisans had halved to around 26%, while the Cognitive Partisans made up 35% of the electorate, the Apoliticals 19%, and the Apartisans made up around 20% (Dalton, 2007; 2013).

In West Germany, in 1976 65% were Ritual Partisans, 17% were Cognitive Partisans, 15% were Apoliticals, and 4% were Apartisan (Dalton, 2012). By 2009, the electorate had changed considerably, such that Ritual Partisans now made up 29% of it, Cognitive Partisans were 40% of it, 18% were Apoliticals, and 13% were Apartisans.

Given that social evolution as outlined above and partisan dealignment are occurring in similar ways throughout advanced Western democracies, Dalton (2013) suggests that this pattern is being approximately replicated throughout the advanced Western democratic world. The citizen-politics relationship is changing such that unsophisticated party loyalists are in decline, steadily being replaced by sophisticated party loyalists or sophisticated independents, and to a lesser extent unsophisticated and unengaged Apoliticals.

In the following section, this typology will be applied to Britain, to see if the changes to Western electorates can improve our understanding of young people's political characteristics. The paper will assess whether the same trend Dalton (2007; 2012) describes is apparent, and whether it is not only present but exaggerated among the younger generations (18 – 24 year olds), as would be expected if young people do represent a more 'extreme' version of their predecessors in terms of exhibiting the consequences of social evolution in their political behaviour. The analysis will then go one step further and examine the political attitudes and behaviour of the four groups. This will allow us to see whether or not the political characteristics young people have exhibited since the 1990s, such as their declining likelihood to vote and to engage with political parties, match up with what we would expect to happen based on the changes illustrated through Dalton's typology. If they do, it will demonstrate that social evolution is at least in part responsible for the distinct political behaviour and attitudes of modern young people.

### **Social Change and the Citizen-Politics Relationship in Britain**

This typology will be applied to the British electorate using the British Election Study (BES) from 1974 to 2010. To measure cognitive mobilisation, the motivation to engage with politics (operationalised through reported interest in politics) is combined with political sophistication (operationalised through the respondents' education).

Respondents are then split into two groups representing 'high' and 'low' cognitive mobilisation<sup>2</sup>. To measure party identification, we employ the party identification

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<sup>2</sup> Political motivation is operationalised through examining the respondents' interest in politics (1 = no interest at all, 2 = not much interest, 3 = some interest, 4 = a great deal of interest), while political sophistication is operationalised through a measure of the age at which they left full time education (1 = 15 or under, 2 = 16, 3 = 17, 4 = 18 or older). Respondents answering 'don't know' to, or refusing to answer, either of these questions are omitted from the analysis. The overall cognitive mobilisation score is derived by combining the scores from these two variables together, giving a cognitive mobilisation variable ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 8. Individuals who score 6 or higher on this variable are considered to have 'high cognitive mobilisation', while those who score below 6 have 'low cognitive mobilisation'. This is a slight deviation from Dalton's approach (Dalton 1984; 2007; 2012; 2013), who used a threshold of 5 to signify high vs. low cognitive mobilisation. However, owing to the way the BES variables are constructed, this would potentially lead to people who have interest in politics at all but left full-time education aged 18 or older, or people who are very politically interested but left full-time education aged 15 or younger, being considered to have high cognitive

question battery used in the BES<sup>3</sup>, and split respondents based simply on whether or not they identify with or feel closer to a political party.

The British electorate is divided into the four citizen types outlined above using the BES for 1974 (February), 1979, 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010. The surveys for 1983, 1987 and 1992 do not contain comparable measures of political interest on which to base an assessment of the motivation to engage with politics, and so the typology cannot be produced for those years. Instead, a simplified version of the typology (based only on education and party identification<sup>4</sup>) is produced and examined using all of the BES between 1974 (Feb) and 2010. This will allow us to determine whether or not there is at least a high likelihood of the same basic trend implied in the more complete analysis being continued throughout the 1983, 1987 and 1992 surveys.

Figure 2 classifies respondents to the BES (excluding the 1983 – 1992 period) into the typology, showing how the distribution of different voter types has changed over the last forty years. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the simplified typology for all of the surveys between 1974 (Feb) and 2010.

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mobilisation. This is not consistent with the theoretical conceptualisation of ‘high cognitive mobilisation’ set out by Dalton (1984; 2013), or the theoretical approach used in this paper. Therefore, the slightly higher threshold is considered justified.

<sup>3</sup> The party identification variable is a dummy variable, and combined responses from both the initial question asking whether or not the individual identifies with a political party (“Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, or what?”), and the follow-up question for respondents who report that they do not identify with a party (“Do you generally think of yourself as a little closer to one of the parties than the others?”). Individuals who identify with a party or state that they feel closer to one party over another are scored a 1; individuals who do not identify with a party nor feel closer to a party (in other words, those truly independent of a party) are scored a 0. This replicates the approach employed by Dalton (1984; 2007; 2012; 2013). Respondents answering ‘don’t know’ or refusing to answer either question are omitted from the analysis.

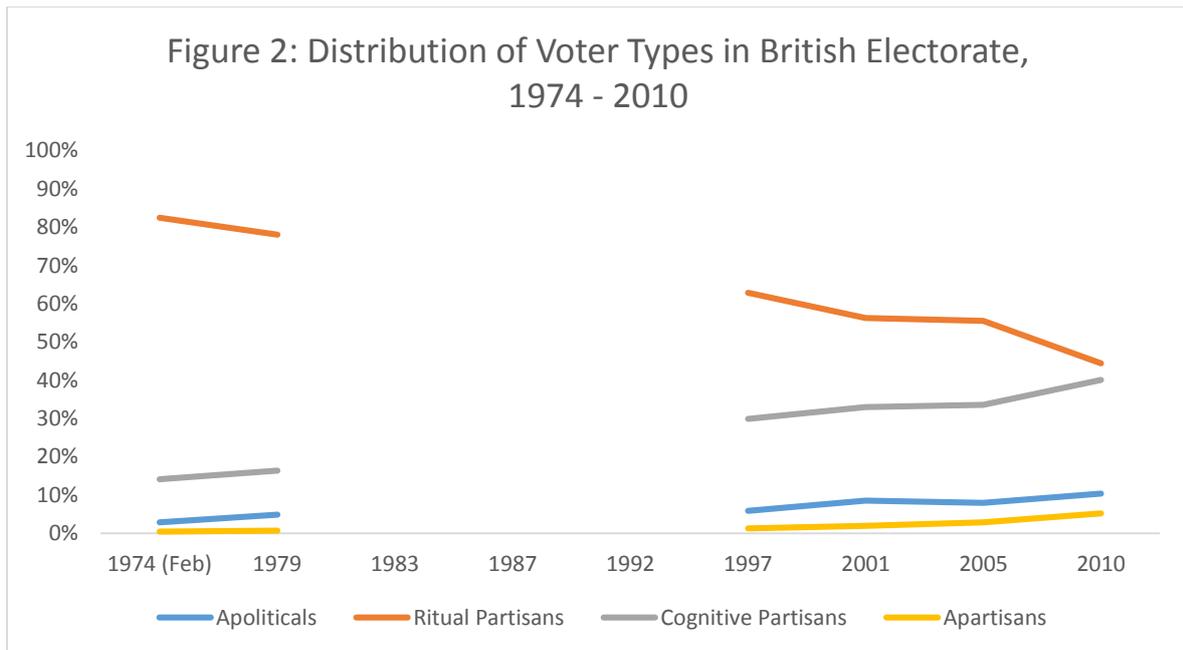
<sup>4</sup> The education variable is identical to that used for the prior analysis – the age at which respondents’ left full-time education. Those who left full-time education aged 17 or over are classed as having ‘high education’, those who left aged 16 or younger (i.e. who at the same age or earlier than the current statutory minimum of 16 in Britain) are classed as having ‘low education’. The party identification variable is used in the same manner as the more complete analysis. The typology, therefore, takes the form of:

Low education + party identification = Ritual Partisan

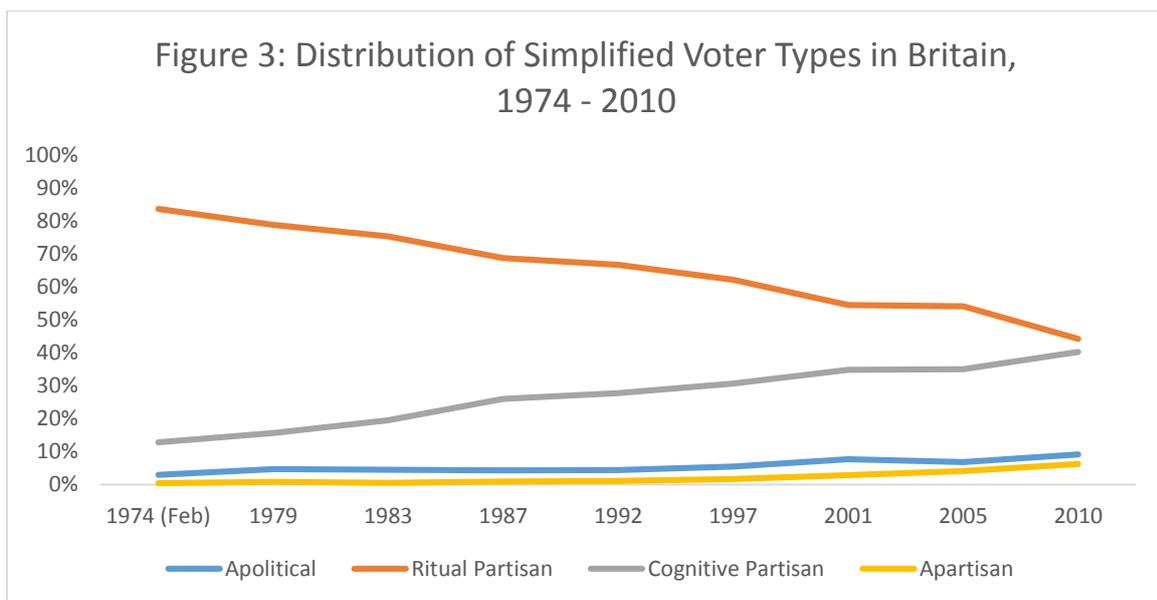
High education + party identification = Cognitive Partisan

Low education + no party identification = Apolitical

High education + no party identification = Apartisan



Source: British Election Study face to face survey, 1974 (Feb), 1979, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010.



Source: British Election Study face to face survey, 1974 (Feb), 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010

The immediate observation from comparing Figure 2 and Figure 3 is that the trend appears to be remarkably similar in both graphs. While also demonstrating that levels of political interest do not appear to have had much impact on the changing distribution of voter types in Britain, it shows that we can be very confident that the trend suggested in Figure 2 proceeded as we would expect in the three surveys for which we have insufficient data.

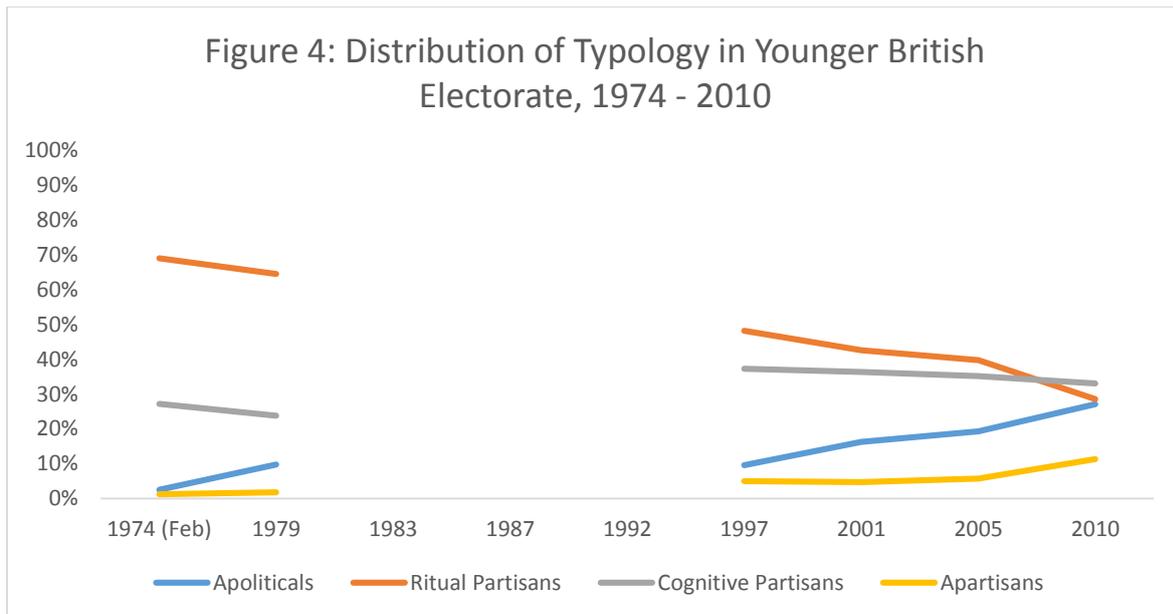
As for the trend itself, Figures 2 and 3 suggest that there has indeed been a significant shift in the nature of the relationship between British citizens and politics since the

1970s. In 1974, that vast majority of British citizens (83%) were Ritual Partisans. 14% were Cognitive Partisans, 3% were Apoliticals, and less than 1% were Apartisans. The majority of the British electorate, therefore, could have been classified as relatively unsophisticated party loyalists, with a few more sophisticated loyalists, and a tiny number who did not identify with a political party.

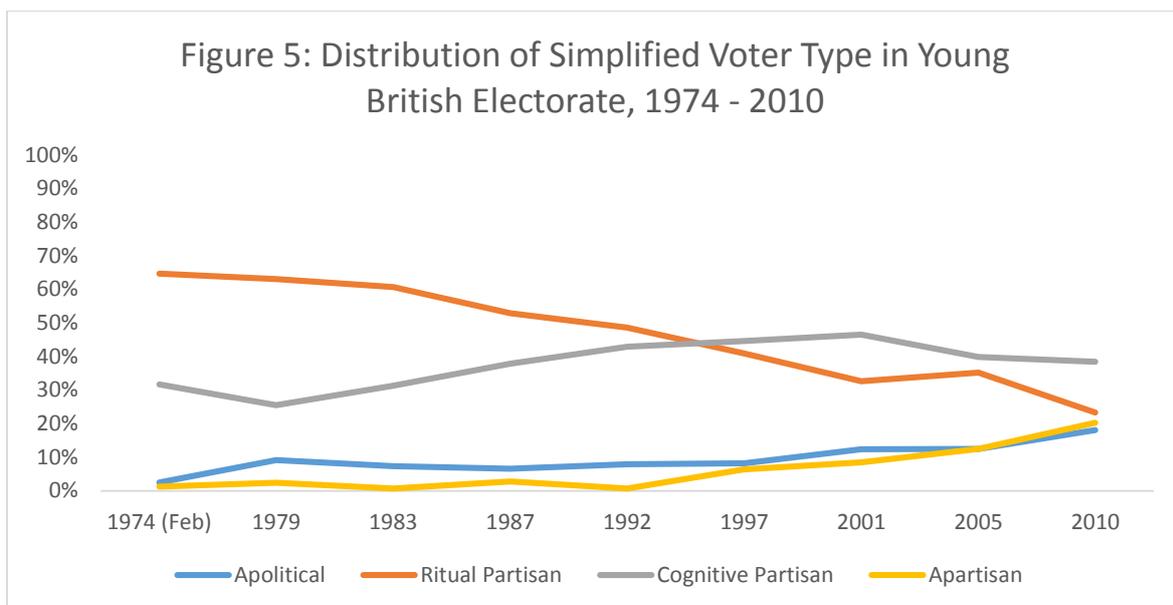
By 2010, however, things were looking very different. The proportion of Ritual Partisans almost halved to 44%, while the Cognitive Partisans nearly doubled in size to 40%. The other two groups also saw growth, but by far smaller amounts – the proportion of Apoliticals rose to 10%, while the Apartisans reached 5%. Overall, therefore, the evolution of the citizen-politics relationship in Britain is seeing the Ritual Partisans decline and being replaced by Cognitive Partisans, and to a lesser extent Apoliticals and Apartisans.

The most significant aspect of that evolution is the transition which has seen more than a third of British citizens become sophisticated, motivated and politically capable party loyalists as opposed to unsophisticated party loyalists. A less significant aspect (in terms of the number of people involved) reflects the small but growing number of British people who are not developing any loyalty to a political party, which by 2010 was about 15% of the electorate. Most of these (about two thirds) have low cognitive mobilisation and so are becoming largely disengaged from politics, while a small proportion have higher cognitive mobilisation and so are engaging with politics but without any attachment to – or support from – a political party.

The next question is to see whether or not young people are, as expected, leading the way in this transition. If so, we would expect young people to exhibit a more 'extreme' approximation of the trend apparent in the wider electorate i.e. the replacement of Ritual Partisans by Cognitive Partisans, Apoliticals and Apartisans should be more pronounced among the younger elements of the electorate in each year. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the typology from 1974 to 2010 (excluding the 1983 – 1992 period) for just those aged 18 – 24, while Figure 5 shows the distribution of the simplified typology for the entire 1974 – 2010 period.



Source: British Election Study face to face survey, 1974 (Feb), 1979, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010.



Source: British Election Study face to face survey, 1974 (Feb), 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010

Figure 5 confirms that once again the general trend hinted at in the more complete typology (Fig 4) seems to run as expected between 1983 and 1992, with some minor differences<sup>5</sup>. We can also see that young people have been exhibiting a more extreme

<sup>5</sup> There are some more notable differences between Figures 4 and 5 than there were for Figure 2 and 3, suggesting that political interest is a more volatile factor for the 18 – 24 year olds than the wider electorate. When we compare Figures 4 and 5, we can see that removing the effect of political interest makes younger people more likely to be either Apartisan or Cognitive Partisan i.e. removing political interest tends to raise the cognitive mobilisation score of young people. This is not surprising – it is well established that young people are less interested in politics than older people, and that political interest increases as people approach middle age (Parry et al, 1992; Whiteley, 2012; White et al, 2000). This does show, however, that life cycle factors are

version of that trend throughout the series; in 1974, 69% of young people were Ritual Partisans (compared to 83% of the wider electorate), 27% were Cognitive Partisans (compared to 14%), 3% were Apoliticals (this is almost the same as the figure for the wider electorate), and 1% were Apartisans (compared to less than 1%).

By 2010, the proportion of young Ritual Partisans more than halved to 29% (compared with 44% in the wider electorate), the proportion of Apartisans reached 11% (compared with 5%), and the proportion of Apoliticals hit 27% (compared with 10%). The only area in which the distribution of citizen types did not run as expected among young people was in the proportion of Cognitive Partisans, which by 2010 reached 33% compared with 40% in the wider electorate.

Broadly speaking, therefore, young people have represented a more extreme version of their elders in the distribution of the typology once we account for the influence of the life cycle. The decline of Ritual Partisans, and their replacement by Cognitive Partisans, Apoliticals and Apartisans, has been more pronounced. For the most part, it appears that most young people take their increased tendency to be a Cognitive Partisan, Apartisan or Apolitical with them into later life, as demonstrated by the steady growth of these categories shown in Figure 2. Overall, therefore, the data supports the theory that new cohorts entering the electorate are exhibiting a changed relationship with politics as a result of social evolution, as evidenced by their political sophistication, motivation to engage with politics, and declining likelihood to identify with political parties.

The evidence also suggests, however, that the transition from the electorate of the 1970s – made up mostly of unsophisticated party loyalists – to that of 2010 – which has far more sophisticated loyalists alongside a growing minority of non-identifiers – is more complex than first suggested. The differences the data in Figures 2/3 and Figures 4/5 – specifically the lower proportion of Cognitive Partisans among young people than the wider electorate in 2010, the more substantial impact of political interest on the distribution of the typology for young people than everyone else (see footnote 5), and much higher proportion of young Apoliticals than older Apoliticals, particularly from 2001 – suggest that there are life cycle factors to take into account as well as generational factors in determining which group an individual is in, and how stable their membership of that group is.

For example, younger people are generally less politically interested than older people, and they become more interested as they approach middle age (Parry et al, 1992;

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clearly important in determining which group an individual is located in, alongside generational factors reflecting the effect of social evolution. This point will be returned to in the conclusion, and recommended as an area for further research. The most salient observation at this point, however, is that the general trend among young people reflects that of the wider electorate for the most part.

Whiteley, 2012). They are also less likely to develop a party identification, a tendency which also increases with age (Clarke et al, 2004; Jennings and Niemi, 1981; 1968; 1974; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 2009). We would expect, therefore, people under the age of 25 to have a significantly higher likelihood of being an Apolitical (reflecting low political interest and the tendency not to identify with a party), a slightly higher likelihood of being Ritual Partisan (reflecting low political interest) or Apartisan (reflecting a tendency not to identify with a party), and a lower likelihood of being a Cognitive Partisan (reflecting all of the above), than someone over the age of 25 if the generational effect of being socialised in a more socially evolved environment was held constant.

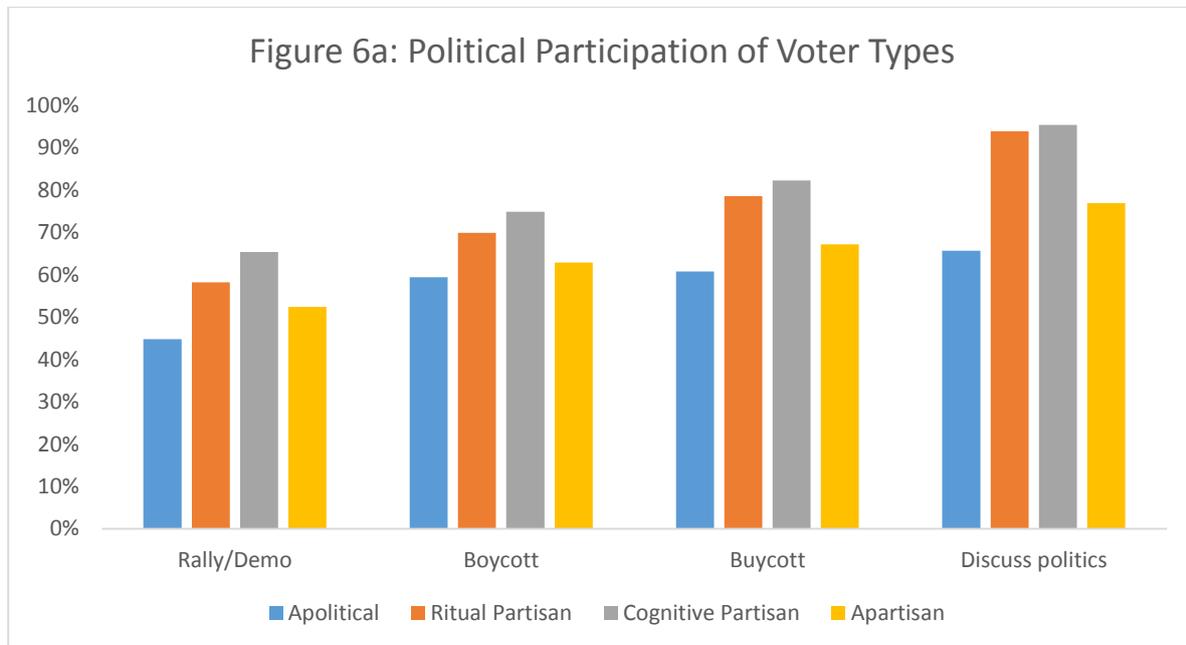
While it is clear that with time the distribution of the groups settles down and reflects the effects of social evolution (i.e. with time in each generation there are fewer Ritual Partisans and more Cognitive Partisans, Apartisans and Apoliticals than in the preceding generation), therefore, it is important that we acknowledge that there is strong evidence of the life-cycle playing a role in the distribution of these groups as well. Life-cycle factors appear to have an effect on the distribution and stability of the group, particularly for younger people. While we can be confident that the process outlined above – of social evolution driving changes in the electorate represented through the decline of Ritual Partisans and growth of the other three groups – is supported by the evidence, therefore, we must exercise caution when speculating about the stability of the typology distribution when looking at younger people in particular.

### **The Consequences of Social Change and Young People**

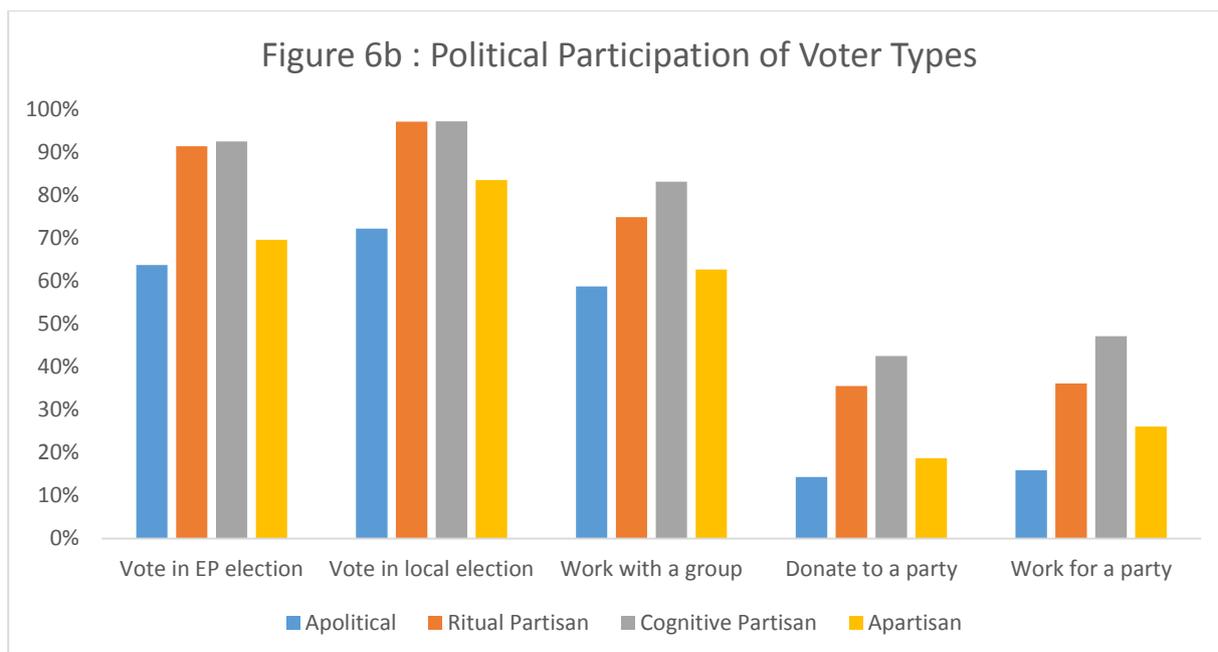
Having established that social evolution is indeed changing the nature of the citizen-politics relationship and that young people are leading the way, the next question is what are the consequences of this change, and can it explain the changes to young people's characteristics? Using the 2010 BES to look at the behavioural and attitudinal consequences of the change, we can get the beginnings of an answer to this question.

Looking first at political behaviour, the 2010 BES asked respondents a series of questions about how likely they were to engage in a range of participatory acts. Specifically, respondents were asked how likely they were to take part in a rally or demonstration, take part in a boycott of a product or store, deliberately buy certain products or from a certain store (called 'boycotting'), discuss politics with friends or family, vote in the next election for the European Parliament, vote in the next local election, work with a group to solve a problem in the community, donate money to a

political party, or work for a party or candidate during an election campaign<sup>6</sup>. This series of questions, therefore, provides an indication of how likely the different groups are to engage in a wide range of participatory acts, spanning the electoral and informal political arenas and requiring a range of different skills and resources. Based on logistic regression analysis, Figure 6 shows the predicted likelihood of each of the groups engaging in each of the above acts in the near future.



<sup>6</sup> All of these measures are based on responses to questions asking how likely – on a 0 – 10 scale – the respondents were to participate in that particular act: “Now a few questions about how active you are in politics and community affairs. Let’s think about the next few years. Using a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that you will...” (BES 2010 face to face post-election survey, p.35). For the purposes of this analysis, the variables have been recoded into a simple dummy category: 0 = no chance of doing the act, 1 = any chance at all (i.e. scored between 1 and 10) of doing the act.



Source: British Election Study 2010, Face to face post-election survey. Figures derived from logistic regression analysis, controlling for age, education, social class, gender and ethnicity – each held at their means for the generation of predicted probabilities.

The data show that the most active group by far are the Cognitive Partisans. There is considerable variation in their likelihood of participating depending on the act, ranging from as low as a 43% likelihood of donating money to a political party to a 93% likelihood of considering voting in the next local election, but in every case they are more likely than all of the other groups to participate.

The second most active group is the Ritual Partisans. They are less likely to be active than the Cognitive Partisans – sometimes by a fairly large amount (such as the 11% difference in likelihood of working for a party in a campaign), sometimes by a negligible difference (such as the 0.1% difference in likelihood of saying they may vote in a local election) – but in every case they remain more likely to participate than either the Apartisans or Apoliticals.

The next most active group is the Apartisans, however the gap between them and the Ritual Partisans is substantial. On average, the Apartisans were 10.5% less likely to consider doing any of these acts, with the actual difference ranging from as little as 6% to as much as 22%. By contrast, the average difference between the Ritual Partisans and the Cognitive Partisans was 5%. The Apoliticals are, as expected, the least active group. They are not completely dormant – they still have a greater than 50% likelihood of saying they have at least some chance of engaging in most of the acts – but they are significantly less likely to engage than any of the other groups (the average gap in likelihood between them and the Apartisans is 7.2%).

In general, therefore, there is not much difference in the participatory patterns of the four groups, nor does the relationship between cognitive mobilisation/party identification and political participation appear to be that complex. All four groups are more likely to engage in certain political acts (such as discussing politics with friends or voting) than others (like working for a party in a campaign). There are no apparent differences in the relative likelihoods of the different groups engaging depending on the characteristics of the acts in question, such as whether or not it implies working with a political party, or requires contact with other like-minded people. Regardless of the type of act, the Cognitive Partisans are the most likely to do it, and the Apoliticals are the least likely. Any suggestions that a different relationship with politics is leading to nuanced and complex patterns of participation (such as people choosing to be particularly active in areas where parties are not dominant like protest or boycotting, while avoiding areas where parties are more dominant like elections) (e.g. Sloam, 2013; Dalton, 2013; Norris, 2011) are not supported by this data. Instead, a simple hierarchy is apparent – if you identify with a party you are more likely to participate in politics than someone who does not, and within these two categories the more politically sophisticated you are the more likely you are to participate.

Turning to political attitudes, we can once again use the BES to get an idea of the general attitudes towards politics these different voter groups exhibit. Specifically, we look at how likely the different voter types are to care which party won the 2010 general election<sup>7</sup>, to feel that the government treats them fairly<sup>8</sup>, to feel politically efficacious<sup>9</sup>, to feel that voting is a civic duty<sup>10</sup>, and to be satisfied with democracy<sup>11</sup>. Figure 7 shows the likelihood of each of the groups expressing these views.

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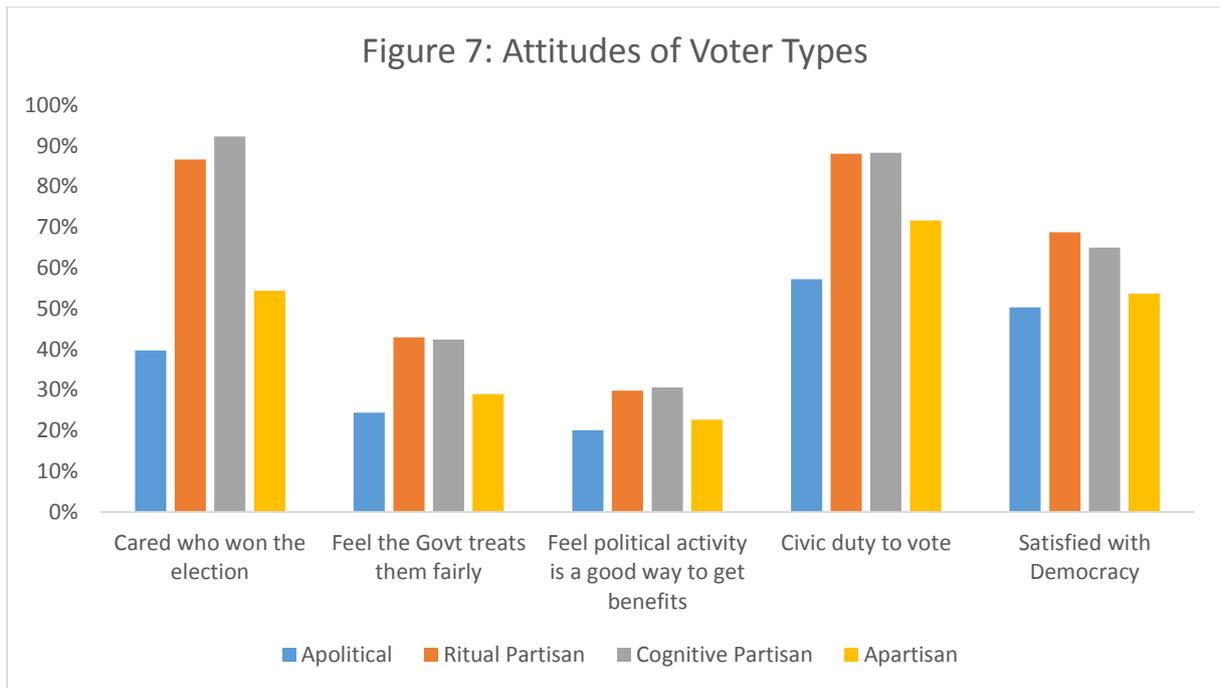
<sup>7</sup> This is taken from responses to the question “Did you care which party won the general election held on May 6<sup>th</sup>?” from the BES 2010 Mail back questionnaire. Respondents who ‘cared a good deal’ scored 1, respondents who ‘didn’t care very much’ scored 0. Those answering ‘don’t know’ were omitted (=4.5% of sample).

<sup>8</sup> This is in response to the question “Please tell me how far you agree or disagree with each of the following statements...The Government generally treats people like me fairly” from the BES 2010 post-election face to face survey. The data was recoded into a dummy variable with those who agreed scoring 1 and those who neither agreed nor disagreed, or disagreed, scoring 0. ‘Don’t Know’ was omitted (=0.8% of sample).

<sup>9</sup> This measure is based on one of the questions relating to political efficacy in the 2010 BES post-election face to face survey. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that “Being active in politics is a good way to get benefits for me and my family”. The data was recoded into a dummy variable with those who agreed scoring 1 and those who neither agreed nor disagreed, or disagreed, scoring 0. ‘Don’t know’ was omitted (=1.3% of sample).

<sup>10</sup> This is from the 2010 BES post-election face to face survey, asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that “It is every citizen’s duty to vote in an election”. Those who agreed scored 1, those who neither agreed nor disagreed, or disagreed, scored 0. ‘Don’t Know’ was omitted (=0.3% of sample).

<sup>11</sup> This is from the 2010 BES post-election face to face survey, with respondents asked “On the whole, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in this country?” Those who said they were at all satisfied scored a 1, and those who were at all dissatisfied scored a 0. ‘Don’t Know’ was omitted (=4.3% of sample).



Source: 2010 BES mail back and post-election face to face survey. Figures derived from logistic regression analysis, controlling for age, education, social class, gender and ethnicity – each held at their means for the generation of predicted probabilities.

A similar picture to that outlined for political participation is presented. The Cognitive Partisans and Ritual Partisans express similar attitudes (the difference in likelihood between them is never greater than 6%), and are the most likely to hold what could be loosely termed as positive attitudes towards British democracy; they are the most likely to care who wins the election, to feel politically efficacious, to feel that voting is a civic duty, and to be satisfied with British democracy.

There is then a large gap to the Apartisans, followed by the Apoliticals. Once again, there is no evidence of a particularly complex arrangement of attitudes depending on an individual's relationship with politics - there is a simple hierarchy: those who identify with political parties are the most likely to exhibit positive attitudes about democracy, and within that categorisation those who are cognitively mobilised are more likely to express the positive attitudes (although the impact of cognitive mobilisation among party identifiers is minimal).

Overall, therefore, this analysis suggests that despite the complexities underpinning an individual's relationship with politics, the expression of that relationship in political attitudes and behaviour is relatively straight forward. Those citizens who identify with political parties are more likely to hold positive attitudes about British democracy, and are more likely to participate in the political process, regardless of the 'type' of act in question (e.g. protest, voting, campaigning etc.). Within the basic categorisation of party identifiers versus non-party identifiers, an individual's cognitive mobilisation is an important determinant of how positively they view British democracy, and how active

they are. At no point, however, does the effect of being cognitively mobilised come close to over-riding or compensating for party identification. The single most important predictor of an individual's view of British democracy, and how likely they are to participate in it, is whether or not they identify with a political party.

### **Conclusion: It's about Young People and Parties**

This research has demonstrated that the relationship between Western citizens and politics is changing, and that at least part of the cause of that change is social evolution in Western democracies. Thanks to increasing economic and physical security giving rise to post-materialistic social values, increased access to education endowing citizens with more political skills and resources, and the development of technology giving these people the opportunity to express their values and use their skills without needing an institution to help them, Western citizens are being socialised in an environment which makes them both less likely to identify with political parties and more cognitively mobilised, which in turn changes the way they relate to, and participate in, politics.

Young people are at the leading edge of this trend. Young people in Britain are shown to be (almost) more 'extreme' versions of their predecessors in terms of their changing relationship with politics. They are less likely to be Ritual Partisans, and more likely to be Apartisans and Apoliticals than people over the age of 25. While 1 in 3 young people are also Cognitive Partisans in Britain, they remain less likely than the over 25s to be Cognitive Partisans, suggesting that the life cycle – in particular the fact that political interest is low in youth and increases with age – also has a significant part to play in determining the nature of young people's relationship with politics. What this transition means in practice is that young cohorts entering the British electorate are becoming increasingly cognitively mobilised, and less likely to identify with political parties.

The analysis above showed that it is the changes to the way that young people relate to political parties which are having the most significant effect on their political behaviour and attitudes, and are largely responsible for the changes in young people's political participation witnessed in advanced Western democracies since the 1990s. This research suggests that as young people become less likely to identify with parties, despite their growing cognitive mobilisation, they should become less likely to participate in politics, through any means, and more likely to exhibit negative attitudes and orientations towards the practices and institutions of politics. Studies examining the changing political characteristics of young people in advanced Western democracies confirm that this is largely what is happening – young people are becoming less likely to vote, less likely to believe it is a civic duty to vote, less likely to engage or associate with political parties in campaigns, and remain unlikely to be interested in or knowledgeable about politics.

Further research has also shown, however, that 'young people' as a political group are becoming less homogenous with time, and that a small portion do remain engaged with politics and are becoming increasingly likely to utilise 'cause-oriented' forms of political participation to further their political agendas (such as protesting, signing petitions or boycotting) (Norris, 2011; Sloam, 2013). This study also supports this view, showing that since the 1970s young people have become more fragmented in terms of their relationship with politics. Given that roughly 1 in 3 British young people are Cognitive Partisans, we would expect some of them to exhibit a high interest in politics the broad participatory repertoire suggested by Norris (2011) and Sloam (2013).

The conclusions of this research, therefore, are consistent with current literature on young people's political characteristics in Britain, and to the extent that Britain is comparable, in advanced Western democracies. It has demonstrated that in looking at the consequences of social evolution on the way that young people relate to politics – accounting, however, for the significant of the life cycle – we can further our understanding of the changing ways that young people engage and participate with the political process. The key observation from this analysis is that for all the effects of social evolution and new opportunities for relating to politics presented by cognitive mobilisation and the development of technology, it is in the way that young people – and democratic citizens in general – relate to political parties that has by far the most significant impact on the way that they participate in and engage with politics.

While this analysis has managed to shed considerable light on understanding the changing nature of the citizen-politics relationship in Western democracies, there are still numerous questions which remain unanswered and provide fertile grounds for further research. While most of the changes in the way that young people engage with politics in advanced Western democracies can be in some way explained by the approach suggested in this research, there are nonetheless some inconsistencies. For example, the growth of Apoliticals and Apartisans among the younger generations would suggest that we should see a sharp increase in the proportion of young people who are not satisfied with democracy, in addition to exhibiting other negative attitudes such as not believing that voting is a civic duty. This, however, is not the case – Henn and Foard (2012), Dalton (2013) and Sloam (2013) show that young people consistently exhibit a high level of satisfaction with democracy.

In addition, while Sloam (2013), Norris (2001; 2011) and Dalton (2013) suggest that we should see a small and growing core of young people who are politically active and employ a broad – more 'cause-oriented' – political repertoire, they also suggest that these young people are largely turning away from party politics. Dalton (2013) even suggests that cognitively mobilised non-party identifiers – i.e. Apartisans – will be highly

politically active in areas in which political parties are not prevalent, such as their local community. The findings in this analysis do not support either of these positions, instead suggesting that the growth of Apartisans and Apoliticals should see the growth of negative attitudes towards politics, and a general decline in political participation. There is a need to reconcile the findings and expectations of this research with the conclusions elsewhere which paint a slightly different picture of young people and their relationship with politics.

There is also a clear need for more analysis of the way that the life cycle influences young people's wider relationship with politics. The analyses above suggest that the life cycle has a significant role to play in determining the stability and distribution of the citizen groups in the electorate, and therefore a significant role in determining how Western citizens relate to politics. More research, particularly making use of panel studies, into how the citizen-politics relationship evolves as citizens move through the early years of the political life cycle will greatly enhance our understanding of the way that young people relate to politics, and how that might be changing as a result of social evolution.

Despite the questions raised and the clear need for further research, this study has nonetheless offered a convincing account of how the relationship between young democratic citizens and Western democracy is changing, and how this changing relationship may be responsible for the changing political behaviour and attitudes of young people. It has clearly shown that it is in the relationship between young people and political parties - not the Internet, or pressure groups, and not reality TV - that we should be focussing if we are to get to the heart of the reason for young people's disengagement from politics.

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