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Title:

Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement

Date:

2021

Citation:

Fu, J., Wyn, J. & Churchill, B. (2021). Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement. Youth Research Collective, Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/275204>

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Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement

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ISBN: 978 0 7340 5650 4
Date: Jun 2021

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To cite this report: Fu, J., and Wyn, J., Churchill, B. 2021 *Young Australians' Confidence in Political Institutions and Their Civic Engagement*. Youth Research Collective, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This phase of the Life Patterns research program titled “Young People Shaping Livelihoods across Three Generations” is led by Johanna Wyn, Helen Cahill. Dan Woodman, Hernán Cuervo, Jenny Chesters, Julia Cook(Chief Investigators), Carmen Leccardi and Rachel Brooks(Partner Investigator) with Jun Fu, and Brendan Churchill. It is funded by the Australian Research Council (DP210100445).

This Life-Patterns program has maintained a tradition of a strong participatory approach to research, through regular written and verbal feedback by participants, which shaped the progress and outcomes of the research program. We deeply appreciate the generosity, willing engagement and honesty of our participants.

THE LIFE PATTERNS RESEARCH PROGRAM

The Life Patterns research program is designed to follow patterns in people's lives over time in order to gain a longitudinal and holistic understanding of the ways in which two generations of Australians are responding to our rapidly changing world. The program is based at the Youth Research Collective, in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The generosity and ongoing support of the Life Patterns participants has meant that this study has built up a unique picture of the reality of the lives of two generations.

THE LIFE PATTERNS PROGRAM:

- currently follows two generations of Australians - one that left secondary school in 1991 (corresponding to the popular notion of 'Gen X') and another that left secondary school in 2006 (corresponding to the popular notion of 'Gen Y' or the 'Millennials'). A third cohort of school leavers is being recruited in 2021 (corresponding to the popular notion of 'Generation Alpha'. Multiple comparisons can be made between the cohorts across different points in their lives.
- explores the pathways through different areas of life taken by Australian young people including their experiences in education, the labour market, their family and personal relationships, attitudes to life, concerns, and health and wellbeing.

- provides a unique picture, very different from the stereotypes of smooth transitions from education to work, or of the narcissistic or complacent generation often described in public discourse. We have argued for the importance of paying attention to the diversity of experiences that characterise young people's lives.
- allows for insights to be drawn that feed into policy advice and also into public debate. Our work is often in the media disputing the simplistic claims about young people.
- was designed to follow patterns in young people's lives over time in order to gain more than a static glimpse. We are interested in developing a more dynamic picture of young people's lives rather than a single snapshot in time.

The Life Patterns project is ongoing, thanks to the continued engagement of the participants, and the support of the University of Melbourne and the Australian Research Council.



1. INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

This report explores young Australians' attitudes toward key political institutions and their civic engagement. Data was collected from the Life Patterns Cohort 2 participants who were 32 years of age in 2020. The report is framed by debates about the expectations that might be held about young people's political engagement and participation in formal political processes, and the extent to which disengagement is simply an age-based phenomenon or a generational shift in attitudes and approaches, which is reflected in the views of young adults.

The report presents a short review of literature about citizenship experiences of Australian young people, followed by a brief overview of the methods used to collect and analyse the data. The results are presented in two parts: level of political confidence (Section 4) and level of civic participation (Section 5). The report closes with a summary of the findings, and a discussion of the implications of these findings for enhancing the robustness of Australian democracy.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS:

1. Life Patterns participants have a low level of confidence in the key institutions and processes that constitute Australia's democracy: Australia's political system, the media, and the Federal Government.
2. Despite this, Life Patterns participants revealed a strong commitment to engaging in civic action by helping members of their community, donating to causes, and were keen to be informed about community issues and events.
3. Civic action, while valued, is frequently overshadowed by work, study, family commitment, and high mobility, discouraging young adults from participating in civic activities, and creating a discrepancy between their wishes to be active in civic life and the reality.
4. We conclude that although young adults are alienated from Australia's political system, do not have a lot of faith in the Federal Government and the media, they nonetheless value democratic principles and processes. This, we refer to as a 'democracy gap'—a distrust of traditional politics but engaging more with civic society.



2. THE ‘PROBLEM’ OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS’ CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The idea that there is a ‘democracy/civic deficit’ amongst young Australians surfaces regularly in the media (Evans, Stoker, & Halupka, 2018), and evidence of young people’s lack of engagement in formal politics is consistently supported by research (Martin, 2012a; 2014; Norris, 2002; Print, Saha, & Edwards, 2004). Bessant’s (2020a) recent analysis of young people’s engagement in the political sphere highlights the narrowing of pathways for political engagement by young people.

For example, Abrahams and Brooks (2019) demonstrate that the scope of political participation of university students in the UK was narrowed by marketisation of higher education system and youth policies diminishing to young people’s voices. Further, their confidence in the degree of influence they could have on the wider political system was also weakened. Similarly, Biesta (2011) and Farthing (2010) remark on the limited opportunities afforded to young people to be involved in formal politics, and their negative experiences when they do attempt to engage. The impact of negative experiences of formal politics on young people is noted by Arvanitakis and Marren (2009) and Hill and Rutledge-Prior (2016), who found that young people feel they are being treated in a tokenistic manner, and that they are not heard, adding to their distrust of both individual politicians and of political processes. Other research shows that although young people desire to be heard and actively seek recognition in formal political arenas, they are often put off or feel excluded in a political institution which is primarily structured around the interests of adults (Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Stoker et al. 2017).

Yet there is also longstanding evidence of young people’s active engagement in political processes, through informal and ‘everyday’ forms of engagement (Bessant, 2020b; Harris et al., 2010). A strong body of research reveals that young people are engaged in a range of informal, collective and individualized civic activities such as volunteering, donating money, protesting, consumer boycotting, and expressing their opinions about social and political issues through arts, music, and writing, using social media and digital platforms (Bessant, 2020b; Dalton, 2008; Harris et al., 2010; Martin, 2012b; Vromen, 2003). These activities often revolve around issues closely related to their social and political concerns. They tend to discuss issues within close circles such as home, friends and school, loose

networks such as sports clubs, and in online communities in which they feel can be heard or belong to (Arvanitakis & Marren, 2009; Harris et al., 2010). Because they are easily accessible and informal, online spaces allow flexibility for young people to express their social and political concerns, share views with others, and engage in different forms of political activities (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015).

Other researchers highlight the importance of the broader context of young people’s engagement in political action. Social scientists such as Beck (2000), Farthing (2010) and Rizvi (2012) support the idea that young people’s political participation is rooted in the social and economic conditions of liberalized, neo-liberal economies, in which traditional political and social institutions that were rooted in longstanding local associations of residence and stable occupational organisation have become eroded. Loader (2007) argues that traditional political institutions are increasingly incapable of addressing issues of concern to contemporary young people, which are shaped by diversity, fluidity and instability. The normalisation of precarious employment for young people has also pushed young people to seek non-traditional avenues to express political views (Bessant, 2020; Furlong et al., 2017).

The idea of a ‘civic deficit’ amongst young people is also informed by psychologically-based research that argues for young people’s lack of maturity, suggesting that until young adulthood, they are not equipped to be partners in political decision-making (Tombourou, Kypri, Jones and Hickie, 2014). Yet, as Bessant points out, this view is contradicted by an extensive history of political action by children and young people, often issue-oriented and collective, but also local, based in the everyday and individual experience. Similarly, Hartung (2017) also highlights a rich history of children’s engagement in forms of political action that impact on their schools, communities and local environments. Both Bessant (2020) and Hartung (2017) conclude that the mixed messages about children and young people as ‘disengaged’ yet ‘active’ in politics and civic participation are both reflected in and reinforced by the discourses in which these discussions happen. Both take issue with the tendency for dominant ideas about young people to hold restricted expectations about what their political engagement should look like and where it should happen.

These apparently paradoxical findings from previous research form the backdrop to our analysis of young adults' levels of confidence in key Australian political institutions. We found that young people had the least confidence in those institutions that relate directly to political processes, such as the Federal Government and the Australian political system. The lowest level of confidence of all was earned by the media, a crucial element of constitutional liberal democracy (Huq & Gingburg, 2018). These assessments of young adults about Australia's formal political processes and the dominant means by which they are communicated, provide some insights into the attitudes of young adults, suggesting that the well-documented lack of engagement in formal political processes during youth appears to be reinforced as they become adults. Other research on the attitudes of young adults in Australia concludes that young adults are no different from older age groups in terms of their commitment to democratic principles and processes (Chowdhury, 2021). Chowdhury's study suggests that across all age groups, Australians are sensitive to contemporary issues, such as the concentration of power in 'big business' and in the media (Chowdhury, 2021: 14), for which they are likely to hold politicians to account.

In taking up these issues, this report contributes to discussions about young people's political participation that argue for a shift from a binary view of young people as either politically apathetic or engaged in alternative ways (Farthing, 2010). It suggests that the disconnect between formal electoral politics and everyday life politics of young adults is a response to contemporary developments, which is likely to be reflected in a range of formal and informal political expressions. This report brings insights into this disconnect, presenting young adults' perceptions about different institutions, the nature of their civic and political participation, and identifying the hopes and aspirations of young adults.



3. METHOD

This report is based on the data from the Life Patterns research program which has collected longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data from two cohorts of young Australians. We present findings from survey data collected in 2020 from participants of Cohort 2, who were aged 32 years in 2020. The survey was completed by 485 participants from all states. Two thirds of the participants were women. The majority of participants (94%) had completed at least one post-school qualification (University or Vocational Education and Training). Most of the participants (84%) were living in metropolitan centres or regional cities. Sixty percent of participants were working full time, 24% part-time, with men more likely to be working full-time (83% vs 49%), while women were more likely to be employed to work part-time (29% vs 13%).

In the 2020 survey, participants were asked about their level of confidence in institutions with the question: “How much confidence do you have in the following organisations?”. Four answer categories were offered: ‘a great deal of confidence’, ‘quite a lot of confidence’, ‘not very much confidence’ and ‘none at all’. In reporting on the findings from the survey data, we have collapsed the last two (‘not very much confidence’ and ‘none at all’) into the category of ‘low confidence’. The institutions included:

1. the armed forces,
2. the legal system,
3. the media,
4. trade unions,
5. the police,
6. the federal government in Canberra,
7. the public service,
8. the major Australian companies,
9. banks and financial institutions,
10. universities,
11. the Australian political system, and
12. the health system.

This question is followed by an open-ended question inviting participants’ comments on their confidence in these 12 institutions. The findings of this survey question and the open comments are presented in Section 4.

Participants were also asked to indicate their level of participation in seven forms of civic activity on a scale of 0 (never) to 10 (always). The seven forms of civic activities are:

- A. I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community.
- B. I work with others to make changes in the community.
- C. I help members of the community.
- D. I stay informed of events in the community.
- E. I post my views about issues affecting the community on a website.
- F. I participate in discussions that raise issues of social responsibility.
- G. I contribute to charitable organizations within the community.

This question was followed by an open-ended question asking participants to comment on their participation in activities in the community. The findings are presented in Section 5.



4. CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS

Participants' responses to the questions about their confidence in institutions indicated that they have the least confidence in media (84% have low confidence), which concurs with Bean's (2015) study of confidence in institutions of Australian citizens. Following this, 63% of participants expressed low confidence in the Australian political system, and 57% expressing low confidence in the Federal government. About half of the participants expressed confidence in the legal system and major Australian companies. The public service, armed forces and police received relatively higher level of confidence (see Figure 1).

Participants were invited to provide written comments to elaborate on their survey responses. A thematic analysis of 181 comments was conducted using NVivo 11 to identify the main themes about their confidence in key institutions in Australia. Regarding the comments coded under the theme of media, the following comments summarise the tone of the majority of written responses: "mainstream media is dramatised, negative and one-sided", and they "always have an agenda and use manipulative techniques, so cannot be trusted". Publicly funded media were regarded as being somewhat more reliable than private media corporations, for example:

I am disgusted by the Murdoch Media empire. ABC and SBS and some independent news mediums are the only news sources I will rely on at this stage.

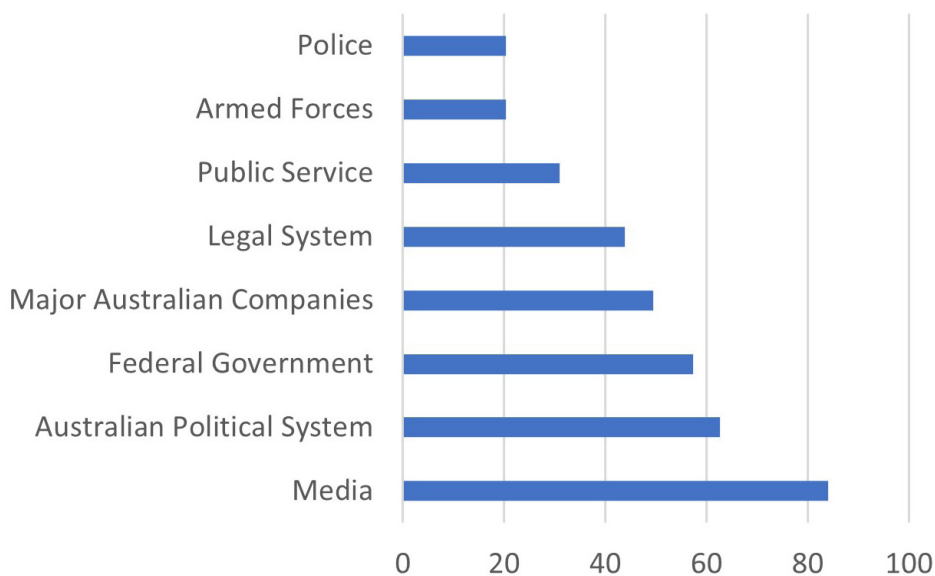
(male dentist living in a capital city)

The ABC just had major funding cuts, so the other avenues of media (Fairfax and channel 7, 9 & 10) will have disproportionate funding from the private sector which can skew their journalistic integrity.

(male physician living in a capital city)

The low confidence of Life Patterns participants in the media was reflected in the online petition initiated by the former prime minister Kevin Rudd calling for a royal commission into media diversity and accuracy which was signed by more than 500,000 Australians (Jacques, 2020).

Figure 1 Percentage of participants who have low confidence in different institutions (%)



Low confidence in the Australian political system and the federal government is also consistent with declining political support documented in contemporary studies of political attitudes in most of the western liberal democratic societies (Dalton, 2005; Norris, 1999). This trend was reflected in studies conducted in Australia, which revealed distrust of politicians, skepticism about democratic institutions, and a sense of a lack of responsiveness by government to the concerns of citizens (Cameron & McAllister, 2019; McAllister & Cameron, 2014). Under the theme of confidence in key Australian political institutions, two points that are frequently criticized about Australian politics are the lack of leadership of Australian politicians and the disconnection of politicians and the federal government from Australian citizens. This issue, as demonstrated in the comments below, was also reflected in our previous report which highlighted a widening gap between the collective goals of young Australians to achieve a sustainable environment, income and housing security, and good physical and mental health and confidence in the institutional supports for these goals (Chesters & Wyn, 2020).

Leadership is something lacking in aspects of Australia especially our political system. Especially given recent events - bushfires and COVID-19 currently impacting our society now. I am counting down until the current government is voted out...time and inaction will tell

(female midwife living in a capital city)

I don't agree with politicians and often feel like they are more interested in lining their own pockets than actually helping the Australian people, especially in these trying times when we need to help one another and help the economy recover - but safely and slowly

(female consultant living in a capital city)

I believe the Federal Government are not connected with the needs of all Australians - even as a white middle class family we don't feel represented let alone our friends from diverse backgrounds

(female community service leader living in a country town).

As a public servant, I have confidence in what we do, but the politicians don't give much confidence

(female public servant living in a capital city)

The low confidence that Life Patterns participants have of the Federal Government, the Australian Political System and the media underline a broader pattern identified by other researchers of alienation from key political institutions (Bessant, 2020, Chowdhury, 2021; Stoker, 2016). This finding suggests that focusing on young people's alienation from formal politics may obscure a broader pattern amongst young adults to eschew political institutions while at the same time, continuing to hold a positive value for democratic processes. In the following section, we discuss some of the ways in which young adults bridge this conflict.



5. AREAS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Despite having a low level of confidence in political institutions and processes, when asked about what civic activities they are routinely involved in, it becomes apparent that participants are not apathetic and nor are they disengaged in civic life. For each type of civic engagement included in the question, we collapsed responses which marked between 6 to 10 on the scale as high participation. In Figure 2, we see the civic activities in which participants most frequently engaged were to ‘stay informed of events in the community’, followed by ‘contribute to charitable organisations within the community’, and ‘help members of the community’. Participants are less involved in ‘discussions that raise issues of social responsibility’, and ‘work with others to make changes in the community’. The activities they were least likely to participate in were ‘structured volunteer positions in the community’ and ‘post views about issues affecting the community of website’.

Participants were also invited to give examples of their participation in civic activities. The thematic analysis of their 247 comments shows that, in contrast to their low level of involvement in structured volunteer positions in the community, participants’ engagement in highly diversified volunteer work dominates their civic participation. Volunteering was the most important activity identified in the analysis. The content coded under the theme of volunteer work covers 49% of all the comments participants gave to the open-ended question about their participation in activities in the community. Examples of their volunteer work includes volunteering at local clubs such as coaching or committee membership, help with churches services and organizing charity events. They also contribute to local events. Using their professional position to support their local community is another common form of volunteering. Participants from the professions are involved in providing free legal and medical advices, accounting assistance, and support to young people with mental health issues in the local community.

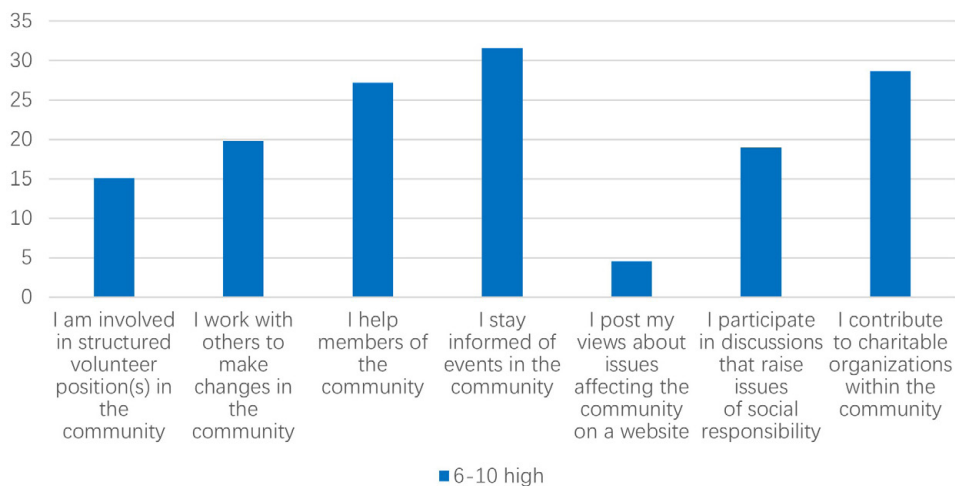
In line with their contribution to charities and fundraisers, donation was the second most frequently mentioned form of civic participation. Content coded under the theme of donation covers 12% of all the participants’ comments on their participation in activities in the community. Participants are engaged in regular donations of money, blood, and supplies to local and Australia wide charities and fundraisers. Other forms of civic participation, such as helping local people and staying informed about community issues, were mentioned much less, although they were indicated as frequently engaged activities in participants’ response to the survey question. This might be because of participants’ different understanding about what can be counted as legitimate civic participation. This calls for more contextualized studies of civic participation which may open up neglected sites and strategies for enacting citizenship (Harris & Wyn, 2009).

Commenting on their civic participation invoked a sense of guilt from some participants, who wrote about not being engaged enough in the local community, expressing a desire to participate more. This is summed up by a participant who said:

I feel bad about this one. I could do a lot more. I currently do not donate time and use work, social, family commitments as an excuse. I hope to change this in the future.

(Male learning designer living in a capital city)

Figure 2 Percentage of high participation



Many participants name civic participation as an area in their life they need to improve. Some even set it as a goal to achieve:

Increasing my volunteer contribution to the community is a priority for the next 12 months.

(Female receptionist living in a capital city)

One area I would like to contribute to more is helping out the community, I aim to pursue this in the following years.

(Male golf course greenkeeper living in a capital city)

Participants' desire to participate more in communal activities and their strong interest in staying informed of events in the community echo with Evans and Stoker's (2016) argument about contingent citizenship behaviours of Australian citizens which suggests that many Australian citizens are on standby to participate and would have the skills and knowledge of political issues to do so.

Participants' desire for more civic engagement was often expressed together with the barriers that discourage them from doing so. As the participants are in their early 30s, work and family commitment pose the biggest barrier for their community engagement.

Having two jobs and a mortgage as well as fitting in friends, family, long distance partner and gym means little time to give back which I do feel terrible about.

(Female marketing supervisor living in a regional city)

I struggle to find motivation to participate in volunteer work. This is probably due to my work being so time-consuming and because I study a post-graduate degree outside of work hours. I do intend to use this knowledge and experience when circumstances better afford me the opportunity.

(Male environmental technician living in a capital city)

Mobility also makes participants' community engagement difficult. One participant commented:

I guess the fact of moving around a lot has kept me from becoming very involved in my local community. Now that I feel more settled it seems like the next step.

(Female book editor living overseas)

Lack of information turn out to be another barrier for people's participation, illustrating a disconnection between the civic and community organisations and community residents. Some participants commented:

My social interaction with the community could be much larger and my partner often brings this up. I guess part of what has been stopping me is the awareness of what is on offer to help people with and my selfish wants to spend time doing what I like in my free time.

(Male teacher living in a capital city)

I'd like to contribute where I can, but I don't really know where or how to even start looking for ways to help.

(Female office manager living in a capital city)

Aside from the above-mentioned barriers, participants tend to ascribe their low levels of participation to not trying hard enough. For example, participants commented 'I wish I gave it more effort', and 'I really should try harder to participate and volunteer'. This speaks to the increased acceptance of personal responsibility as a salient aspect of young Australian's subjective experience of adulthood (Wyn and Woodman, 2006). Although personal factors play an important part in determining one's level of participation, there are chances that participants individualise the responsibility of low participation which can also be ascribed to contextual and structural factors. This is because positive citizenship is closely associated with a supportive civic context (Zaff, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2008) which many of the participants are unlikely to have due to the identified barriers for their civic participation.



6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This report adds to an established body of work that documents a troubling lack of active engagement by young people in formal politics. The findings of this report, which focus on young adults aged 32 in 2020, suggest that a sense of alienation from the key civic institutions (the political system, the media, and the Federal Government,) is not only felt by the young. In keeping with findings about Australians' commitment to democratic practices by Chowdhury (2021), our analysis suggests that there is a gap between aspirations for democratic and civic engagement of young adults and their low confidence in formal political institutions and processes. Previous analysis of the Life Patterns data reveals that these young adults feel strongly about the environment, job insecurity, and are concerned for the lives of future generations (Chesters, Cuervo, Cook & Wyn, 2020). Their cynicism about formal political processes is understandable in the context of the erosion of young people's social and economic rights in the liberalized economies and restructured labour markets of the past few decades (Bessant, 2004; Furlong et al., 2017; Mizen, 2003).

The effect of this general context was also directly reflected in the barriers faced by our respondents in pursuing civic engagement. Young adults often find their aspirations and capacity to participate are limited by the time and effort it takes to hold lives together and make sense of the fractured life-course storylines of their generation (Cahill & Leccardi, 2020). In other words, current conditions threaten the nature and quality of the spaces in which young adults can participate in civic life. In drawing this conclusion, our analysis highlights the importance of moving beyond the assumption that alienation from formal political processes is simply an age-based phenomenon, to take account of the context of young adults' lives. Finally, we agree with others that there is an onus on institutions and on government to recognise the lives of those they represent, and in doing so, re-open spaces where young adults' democratic aspirations can be achieved.



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