



WILLING BUT WARY: ADOLESCENTS, DEMOCRACY & VOTE AT 16

The IP-PAD UK Adolescent Study



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the UK prepares to lower the voting age to 16, a major democratic question comes into view: how are adolescents approaching political life before they formally enter it? This report addresses that question through original survey research with 993 young people aged 12 to 17 across the UK, alongside a parallel survey of 801 adults on the likely democratic consequences of lowering the voting age.

The picture that emerges is clear. **Adolescents in the UK are willing to engage in democracy, but they are doing so from a position of uncertainty and distrust. While many say they would vote and are interested in politics, this willingness is paired with widespread feelings of anxiety about the future, low confidence in political institutions and lack of faith in their own ability to make a change in politics.**

Our findings do not paint a picture of youth apathy. Instead, they are better understood as a form of conditional engagement. Young people appear open to taking part, but many are less convinced that politicians will listen, represent them fairly, or improve their future. The challenge for UK democracy is therefore not simply to encourage turnout among younger voters. It is to ensure that democratic institutions appear credible, responsive, and worth engaging with in the first place.

The emotional dimension of the findings is especially important. A majority of adolescents in this study report significant anxiety about the future, especially in relation to economic and political change. This anxiety is not separate from politics. Young people who are more anxious about the future also report lower voting intentions, lower willingness to participate politically, less trust in political parties, and lower satisfaction with democracy. Future insecurity appears, in other words, to be (directly) related to democratic engagement.

The findings also reveal that adolescent democratic attitudes are not distributed evenly. Young people living in urban areas tend to report lower anxiety and higher political engagement, trust and satisfaction with democracy than those living in rural areas or smaller towns. Likewise, adolescents who report difficulty living on their household income tend to show lower engagement, lower trust, and lower satisfaction, while expressing greater anxiety about the future. These patterns suggest that the democratic experiences of adolescents are shaped not only by age, but also by place and socio-economic circumstances. Findings from the parallel survey of UK adults sharpen this picture and indicate that the general public is divided about the democratic implications of extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds. Many saw possible benefits, including broader representation, wider participation, and a more diverse democratic conversation. **But a majority of adults believed the reform would ultimately worsen democracy, often through greater polarisation, populism, instability, or extremism.** The debate over 'Vote at 16' is therefore not just about whether adolescents are ready to vote. It is also about whether the wider public believes democracy is ready and resilient enough to incorporate new younger voices well.

This tension matters. Taken together, the findings suggest that enfranchisement alone will not by itself secure democratic renewal. Lowering the voting age may widen formal inclusion, but it will not automatically produce stronger trust, deeper participation, or a greater sense of political voice. For that, young people need to feel that democratic institutions take them seriously, that their concerns about the future are heard, and that participation can lead to visible influence. The democratic task is not simply to add new voters to the register. It is to make first-time political inclusion meaningful.

WHAT WE LEARNED

1. Adolescents are willing to engage, but not fully convinced by the system

Most say they would vote, many are interested in politics, and many are willing to participate politically. But low trust and low efficacy suggest a fragile relationship with democratic institutions.

2. Future anxiety is politically important

Concern about the future is widespread and is associated with lower participation, lower trust, and lower democratic satisfaction.

3. Votes at 16 could widen inclusion, but only if trust is built alongside reform

Extending the franchise is important, but formal inclusion will not by itself resolve low trust, weak efficacy, or political alienation.

4. Adults are worried about the lowering of the voting age

Many adults view the reform with caution, often fearing that younger voters might introduce instability or deepen political polarisation.

ACTION POINTS

1. Focus on trust, not only turnout

The central challenge is not whether young people care enough to participate, but whether institutions can earn their confidence.

2. Pair enfranchisement with democratic preparation

If the voting age is lowered, it should be accompanied by stronger civic learning, clearer routes into participation, and visible efforts to make politics understandable and relevant.

3. Address the inequalities within youth experience

Responses should pay particular attention to rural disadvantage and economic insecurity, both of which are linked to lower engagement and trust.

4. Reduce harmful stereotypes about young people's ability to participate in politics

Clear, evidence-based communication about adolescents' actual political attitudes can help counter these misconceptions and build wider public confidence in the reform.

WHAT WE DID

This report draws on original survey research with adolescents and adults in the UK. We surveyed 993 young people aged 12 to 17 across the UK to understand how they think and feel about politics, political participation, democratic institutions, and the future. We also surveyed 801 adults aged 18 and over on what they believe the democratic effects of extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds would be. Both samples were recruited through online panels with quota targets for demographic balance and regional coverage.

Our aim was not only to measure whether adolescents say they would vote. We wanted to understand the wider emotional and political context in which the UK's future first-time voters are coming of age: how interested they are in politics, how anxious they feel about the future, how much trust they place in institutions, and whether they believe democracy is responsive to people like them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Votes at 16 and why this moment matters

The UK is approaching a major democratic reform. Lowering the voting age to 16 would bring around 1.6 million 16- and 17-year-olds into the electorate and mark the most significant expansion of voting rights since 1969, when the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18. This matters not only because it enlarges the electorate, but because it changes who democracy must now speak to.

Why adolescent political engagement matters for democracy

Young people's political engagement is vital for the future of democracy. But it is also a concern across the UK and internationally given that youth trust in democratic political institutions has declined and youth satisfaction with democracy is low¹: only 18% of Gen Z report confidence in the UK Parliament compared with 34% of the pre-war generation². Such low trust may lead to apathy and abstention or to increased susceptibility to radicalization, populism, and disinformation³. Both pathways pose risks for democratic stability, making it essential to understand how newly enfranchised adolescents interpret, enter, and participate in political life.

What existing evidence tells us — and what it misses

Several countries have already lowered the voting age for national elections to 16, although this remains uncommon globally. Austria, the oldest and first European democracy to enfranchise 16-year-olds for all elections in 2007, was followed by Malta (2018)⁴. Overall, Austrian 16- and 17-year-olds showed relatively high turnout, often higher than 18- to 20-year-old first-time voters, although this has certainly fluctuated in the almost last two decades.⁵ Additionally, existing research is hampered by small samples and analytical errors that have made it difficult to assess long-term impacts of 16–17-year-old voting⁶. In the UK, Scotland introduced voting at 16 for devolved and local elections in 2015, followed by Wales (2022). More recent Scottish data⁷ suggests that young people eligible to vote at 16–17 had higher turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections, up to seven years after the reform, than those voting for the first time at 18 or older. But this evidence remains limited. It tells us relatively little about how adolescents understand politics, how much confidence they feel in navigating it, or whether they see democratic institutions as responsive to people like them.

Why this report looks beyond voting intention alone

Voting is only one part of democratic life. Young people's participation is shaped by their socio-economic circumstances, political knowledge, emotional life, broader expectations of the future, and the political habits of their social environment⁸. Psychological, cognitive and affective factors also shape young people's broader political attitudes and support for democracy⁹. Overall, the mixed and methodologically limited findings that we have reveal how little we understand about the mechanisms behind young people's political engagement. The enfranchisement of 16-year-olds raises far broader questions than simply whether they will vote: how, through which influences, with what confidence, and with what longer-term consequences, do *today's* adolescents form their citizenship identities to step into political and democratic processes.¹⁰

Our aim was to understand how adolescents think and feel about political participation, democratic institutions, and their future, and to place those views in dialogue with wider adult expectations about what votes at 16 might mean for British democracy. The findings that follow tell a nuanced but consistent story. Adolescents in the UK appear willing to engage in democracy, especially through voting, but they are doing so from a position marked by future anxiety, low political agency, and limited trust in formal institutions. Their relationship to democracy is therefore neither one of apathy nor one of full confidence. It is better understood as one of openness mixed with caution.

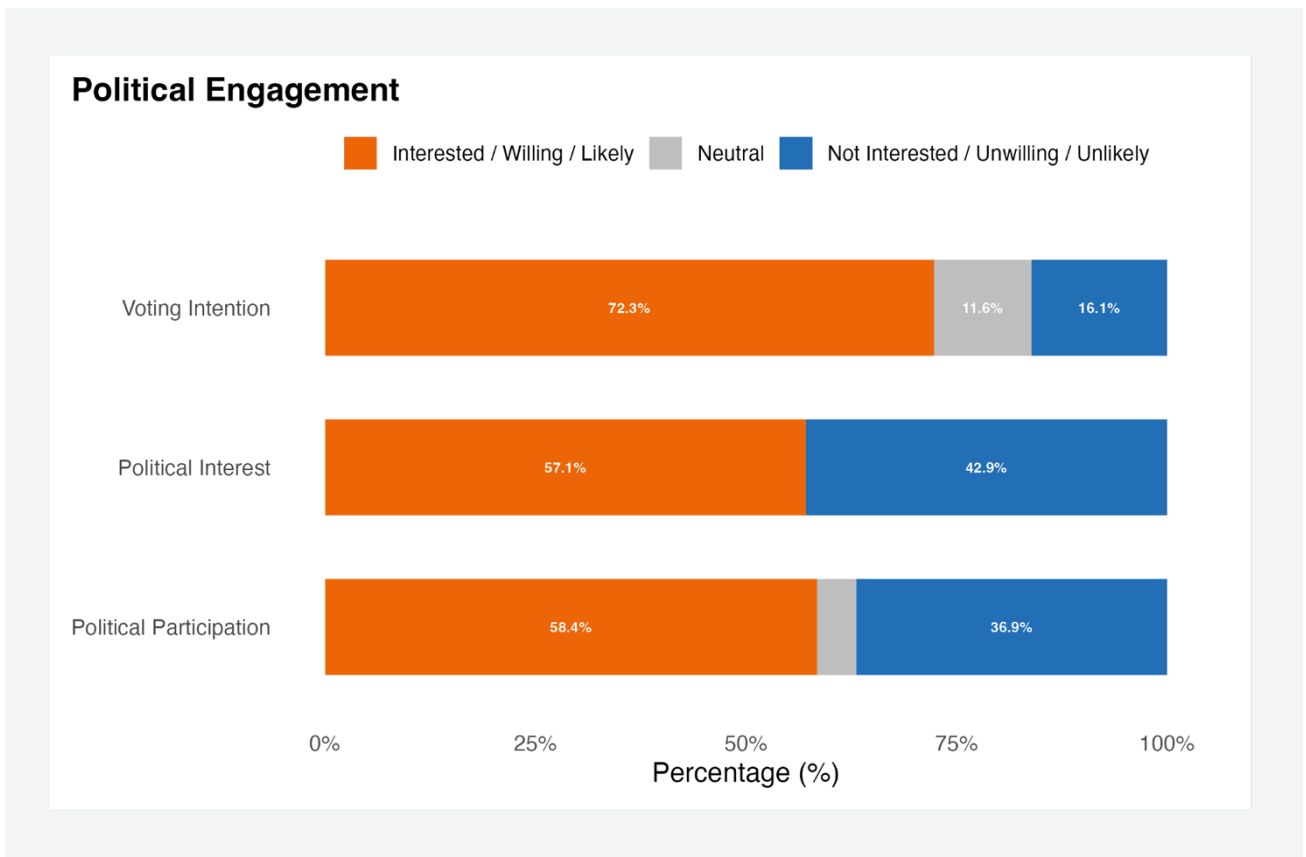
2. MAIN FINDINGS

- **High willingness to engage:** Most adolescents are ready to participate politically, especially when it comes to voting.
- **Widespread future anxiety:** Many young people feel uncertain or worried about their future.
- **Low political agency:** Adolescents trust their own political abilities more than they trust government responsiveness, but both remain low
- **Low institutional trust:** Political parties are viewed with scepticism.
- **Democratic satisfaction mirrors adults:** Levels of satisfaction with democracy are similar to those of the adult population.
- **Anxiety dampens engagement:** Higher future anxiety is associated with lower voting intentions, reduced political participation, and less trust in political parties.
- **Adults sceptical about 'Vote at 16':** A majority of adults fear lowering the voting age may harm democracy through greater polarisation, populism, instability, or extremism.



2.1 Willing to Politically Engage

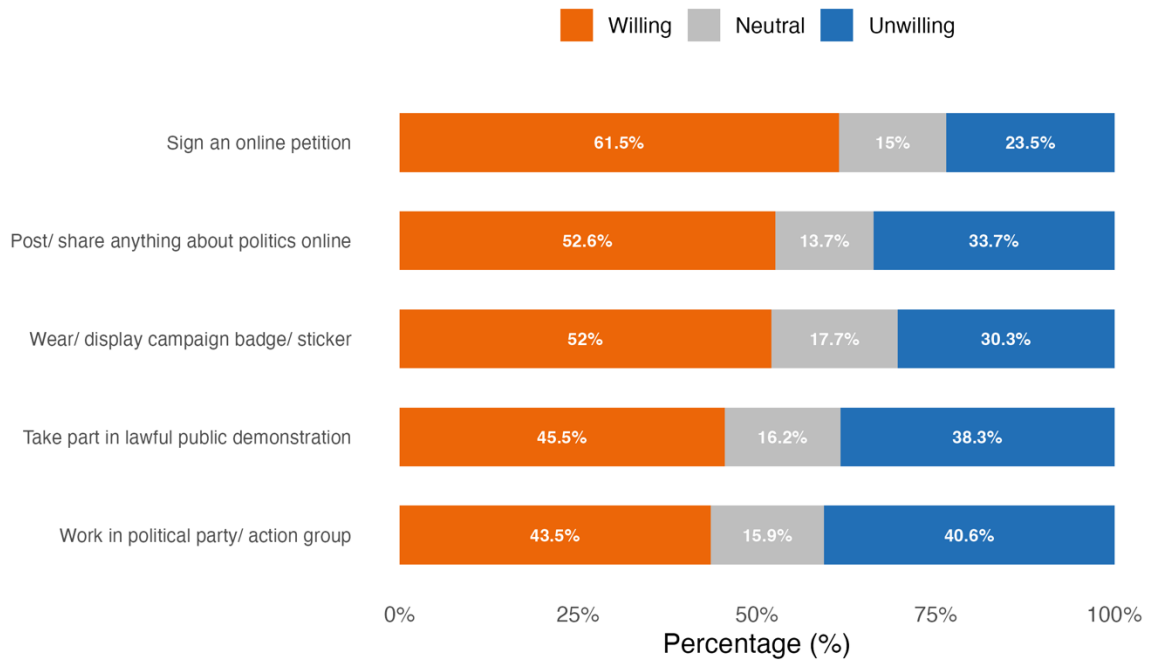
We find an overall willingness to politically engage across ages 12 to 17. Nearly three quarters of respondents said they would vote if given the opportunity (**72.3%**). While this measures intention rather than actual behaviour, it is far above the most recent voter turnout in the 2024 general election (59.7%)¹¹ A majority also said they were interested in politics (**57.1%**) and willing to participate politically across five different forms of participation (**58.4%**). Preference was stronger for online than in-person participation, but willingness to participate in offline and organised ways was still notable. Despite this, willingness to participate in offline and organized ways (e.g., working in a political party or action group) were still higher here than what has been observed among young adults (16-29 year olds).¹²



Note on the measure: Levels of willingness to engage were reported on a 1 (Not at all willing) to 7 (Very much willing) scale. The "Willing" category represents scores 5 to 7, "Neutral" represents 4, and "Unwilling" represents 1 to 3.

Together, these results suggest that young people are politically engaged to a meaningful degree and that enfranchising 16- and 17-year-olds could have a marked effect on democratic life. Girls and boys showed similar levels of willingness to engage. Adolescents living in urban areas reported higher engagement, while those experiencing greater income discomfort reported lower engagement, especially lower interest in politics.

Political Participation by Activity



Note on the measure: Levels of willingness to engage were reported on a 1 (Not at all willing) to 7 (Very much willing) scale. The "Willing" category represents scores 5 to 7, "Neutral" represents 4, and "Unwilling" represents 1 to 3.

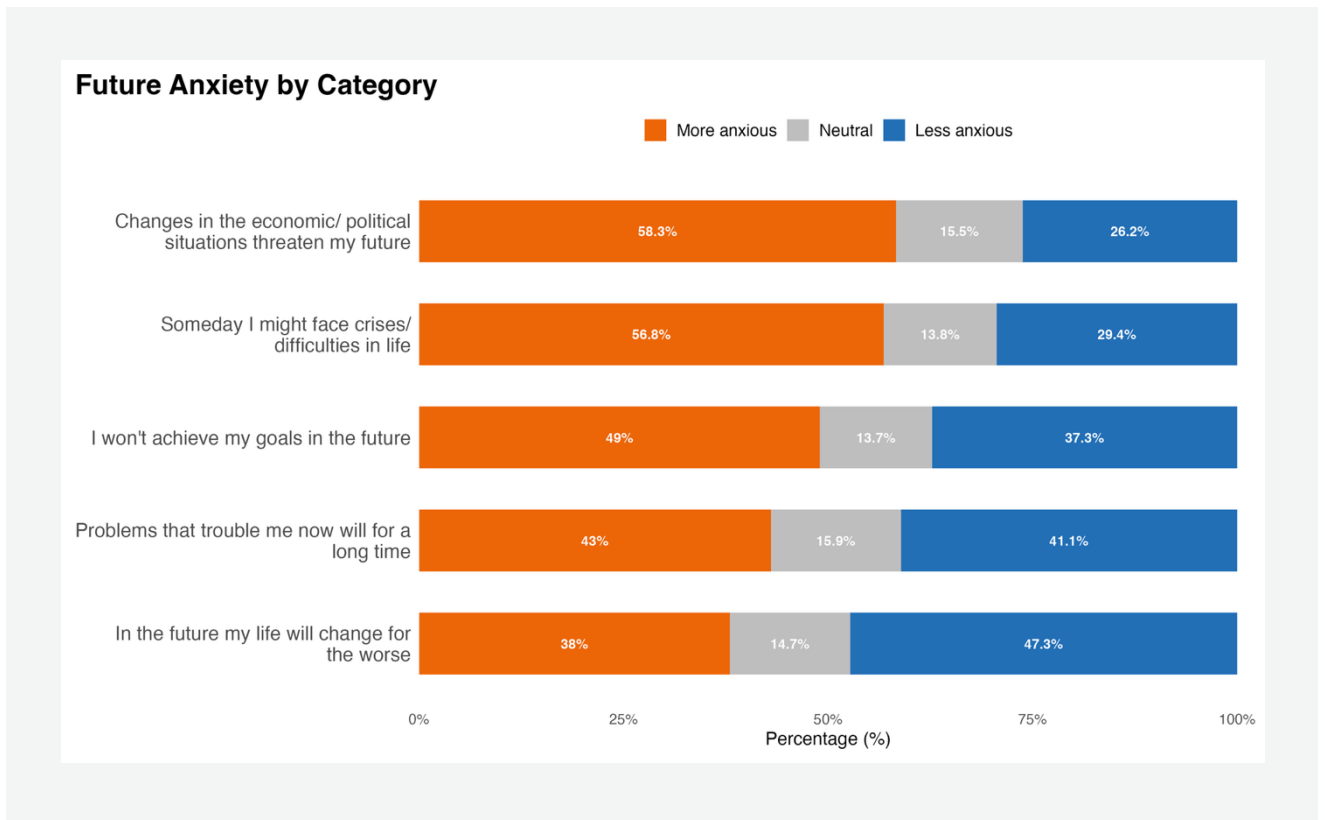


2.2 Yet Anxious about the Future

The majority of adolescents in our survey reported significant anxiety about the future (55%). The strongest concerns related to changes in the economic and political situation that might threaten their future. Girls reported somewhat higher anxiety than boys, though the gap was small. A stronger difference appeared between urban and rural areas, with those living in rural areas showing higher levels of anxiety. Greater discomfort living off current household income was also associated with higher future anxiety.



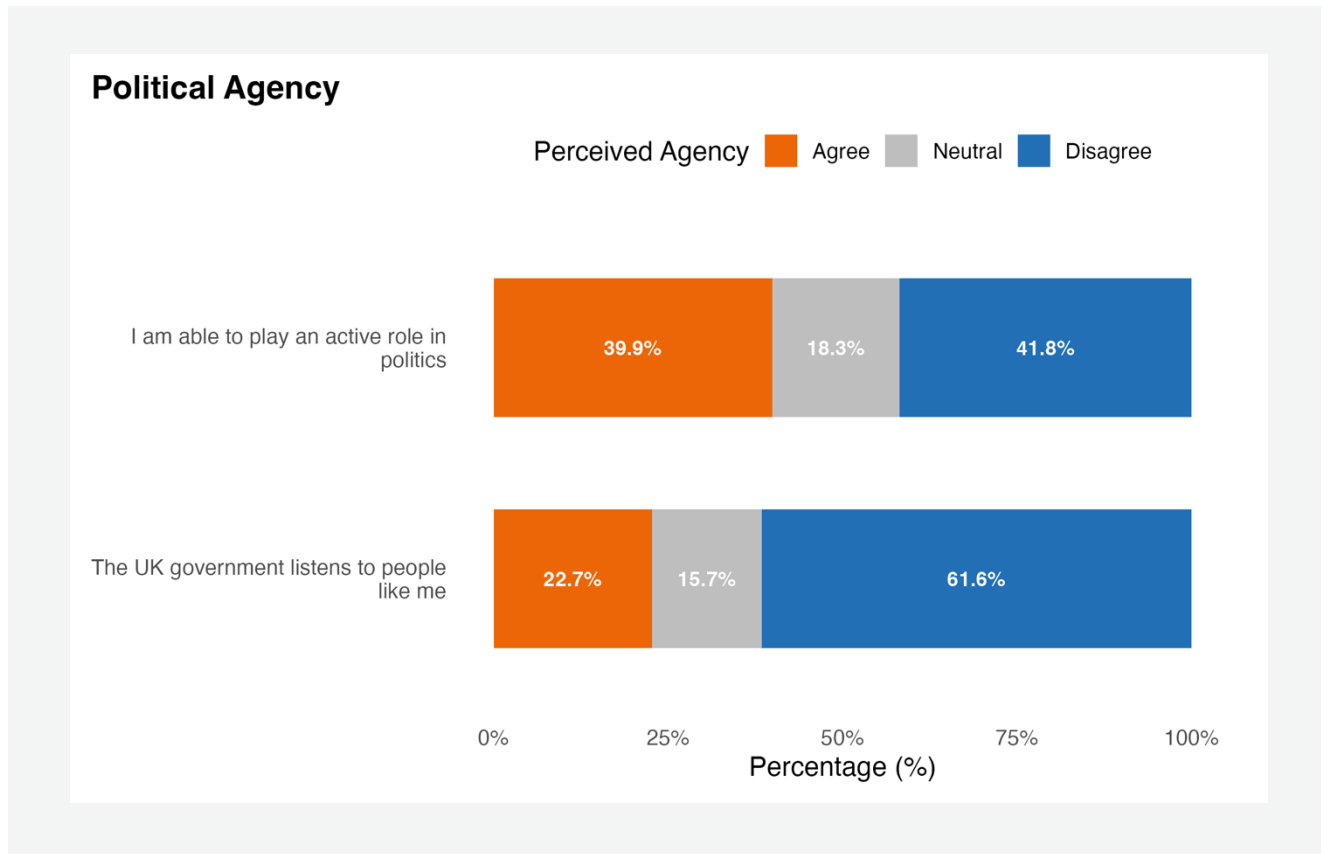
Future anxiety is more than a general sense of unease. It seems that it is of high political relevance. In our findings, young people more anxious about the future report lower voting intentions, lower broader participation, less trust in political parties, and lower satisfaction with democracy. Anxiety appears to shape not only how adolescents feel about the future, but how they approach democracy in the present.



Note on the measure: Levels of future anxiety were reported on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale regarding a statement pertaining to each anxiety category. The 'More anxious' category is represented by scores 5 to 7, 'Neutral' by 4, and 'Less anxious' by 1 to 3.

2.3 Low in political agency

How much political agency do adolescents experience? We looked at two different aspects of political agency. First, we asked them about their belief in their capability or competence to understand, participate and have an impact in political processes. This is often discussed in political science as *internal* political efficacy. Second, we looked at their beliefs about the responsiveness of the government and political institutions to their demands, also known as *external* political efficacy. In other words, to what extent do adolescents believe that government and institutions listen to them?



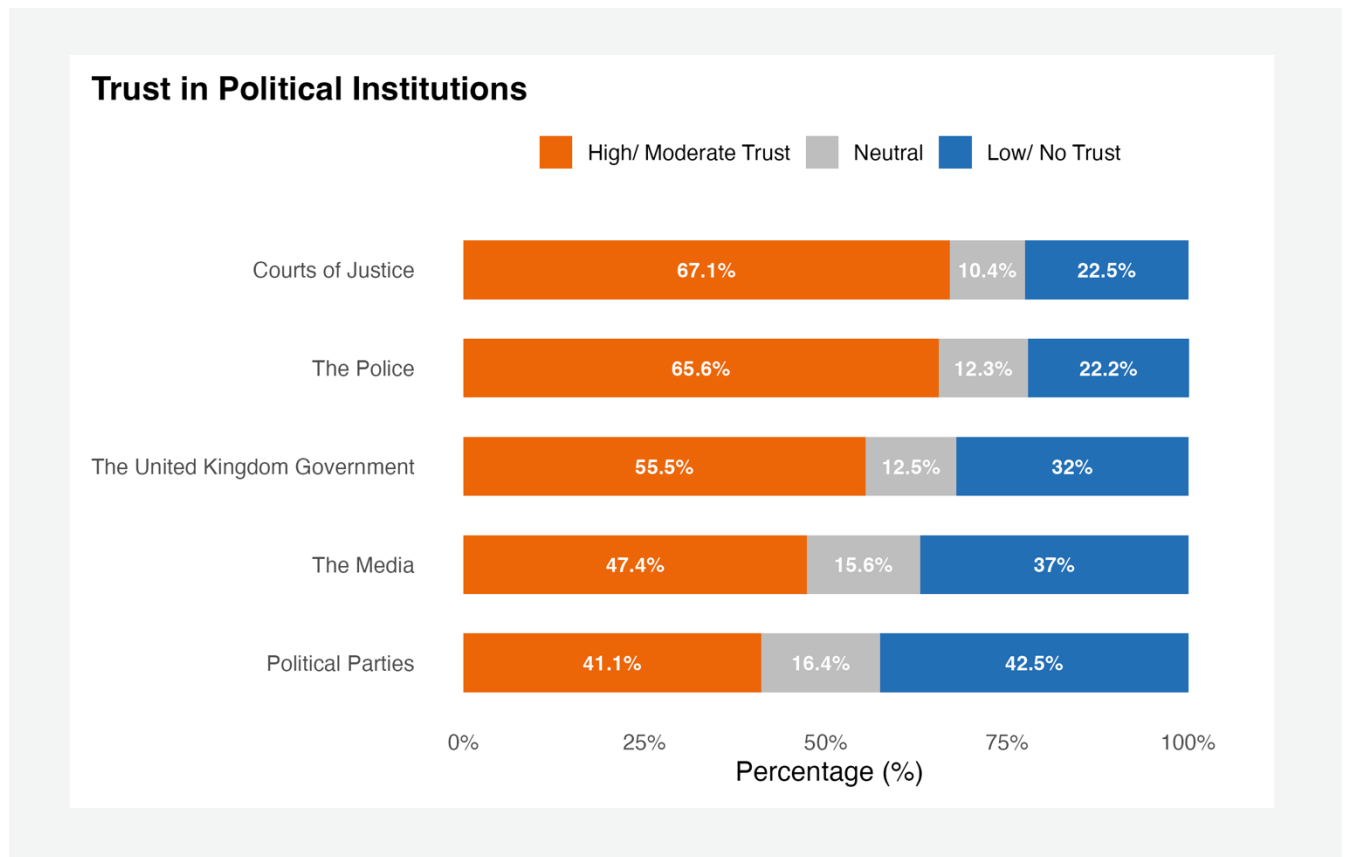
Note on the measure: Levels of internal and external political efficacy were reported on a 1 (fully disagree) to a 7 (fully agree) scale. The 'Agree' category is represented by 1 to 3, 'Neutral' by 4, 'Disagree' by 5 to 7.

Adolescents express a lack of faith in British democratic institutions as shown by their answers to questions around their political agency. Adolescents exhibited low levels of both internal and external efficacy. 41.8% of participants reported low internal political efficacy, compared to only 39.9% reported believing they can have an impact on politics. This is much lower than internal political efficacy levels reported by young adults of 16-years-old and above.¹³ External political efficacy was even lower, with a majority of 61.6% adolescents reporting low efficacy compared to 22.7% reporting high external efficacy. Together, these findings suggest that young people have higher faith in their ability to make a political impact than in the fact that the political system in the UK will actually allow them to have an influence, although both are low. Levels of efficacy were similar across girls and boys and rural and urban regions.


This matters because enfranchisement assumes more than legal inclusion. It also assumes that new voters feel able to participate and believe their participation can matter. Our findings suggest that many adolescents are not yet fully at that point. That does not argue against lowering the voting age. It argues for pairing the reform with campaigns and actions that boost young people's confidence in their abilities to make a change in their democracies.¹⁴

2.4 Distrusting Political Parties

We asked our participants to tell us how much they trust different institutions. Trust varied across institutions, with respondents showing more trust in the Courts of Justice and the Police than in institutions more directly associated with policymaking and executive power, such as the UK government. Distrust of political parties was especially pronounced, ranking lowest of all included institutions. However, this is still much higher than trust for political parties as reported by adults (around 15%). Trust in the media was also low.



Note on the measure: Levels of Trust were reported on a scale of 0 (No trust at all) to 10 (Complete trust) regarding each institution. The 'High/ Moderate Trust' category is represented by 6 to 10, 'Neutral' by 5, and 'Low/ No Trust' by 0 to 4



These findings are consistent with low external political agency. They suggest that many young people lack faith in the institutions through which democracy is most often experienced. Although this low trust has not yet translated into complete disengagement given the willingness to participate in politics, the findings imply that giving young people the vote may not be enough on its own. Making politics feel meaningful, accessible, and responsive may be just as important as legal inclusion itself. Trust levels were not affected by gender, but those living in cities were generally more trusting than those living in rural areas. Greater income discomfort was also strongly associated with lower trust.

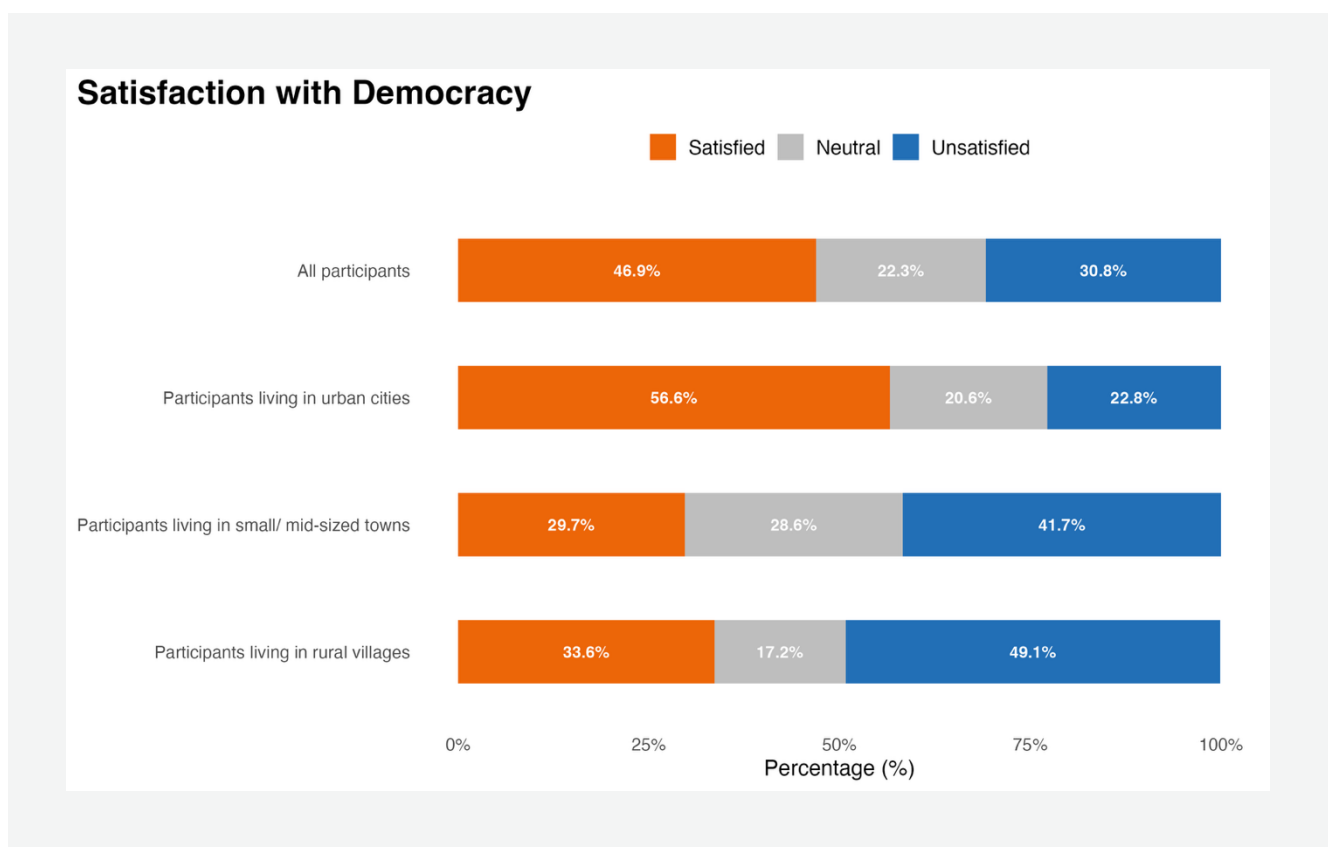
Importantly, trust among adolescents is still often higher than trust among British adults. Adults expressed similar trust rankings, with courts at the top and political parties at the bottom. Yet, adults' levels of trust were much lower for the UK government, the media, and political parties – 27%, 19%, and 12% respectively¹⁵ - compared to the adolescents. This suggests that while adolescent trust is low, it has not yet hardened into the deeper scepticism seen among older generations. That may matter for how political engagement develops after enfranchisement.



2.5 Dissatisfied with Democracy

Almost half of young people (**46.9%**) expressed satisfaction with democracy, while **30.8%** said they were dissatisfied. These figures are similar to those of adults (**47%** satisfied and **28%** dissatisfied).¹⁶ Alongside moderate to low political efficacy, this suggests that many young people feel neither fulfilled nor empowered by current British democracy. Satisfaction did not differ much by gender, but it was higher among young people living in urban areas and lower among those experiencing greater income discomfort.

This is important because it places adolescents within, rather than outside, the UK's wider democratic mood. Young people are not uniquely cynical in isolation. They are coming of age in a period of broader institutional fragility. That makes the first experience of enfranchisement especially important. Done well, it could help establish durable habits of participation. Done poorly, it could reinforce the idea that democracy is formally open but substantively unresponsive.



Note on the measure: Satisfaction with democracy was measured on a scale of 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree) regarding a statement asserting satisfaction with British democracy. The 'Satisfied' category is represented by scores 5 to 7, 'Neutral' by 4, and 'Unsatisfied' by 1 to 3. Participants' guardians were also asked what type of area they and their child they lived in and were given three options: a rural area or village; a small or middle-sized town; and a large town or city.

3. INTEGRATING OUR FINDINGS

How anxiety, trust and engagement connect

Some of the most important findings in this study are interrelated. Young people who are more anxious about the future also report lower voting intentions, lower willingness to participate politically, lower trust in political parties, and lower satisfaction with democracy. Increased trust in institutions, by contrast, is associated with higher political engagement. This suggests that future anxiety and low trust may stifle democratic participation at the very moment when young people are approaching first eligibility to vote.

Why place and socio-economic circumstances matter

Future anxiety and political trust are not equally distributed across the country. Adolescents living in urban areas report lower future anxiety, higher political trust, and greater satisfaction with democracy than those living in smaller towns and villages. This suggests that the environment in which a young person grows up may influence their orientation to politics and their expectations of democratic life, in line with another recent report by Public First¹⁷, which conducted four in-depth focus groups with 40 Year 8 pupils in two very different parts of England – County Durham and Bristol – and similarly found that young people’s political identities and civic confidence diverge sharply by place.

Greater discomfort living off household income is also associated with lower engagement, lower trust, higher future anxiety, and lower satisfaction with democracy. These findings suggest that democratic confidence is shaped not only by age, but also by socio-economic experience. Adolescents who feel materially less secure may also feel politically less secure.

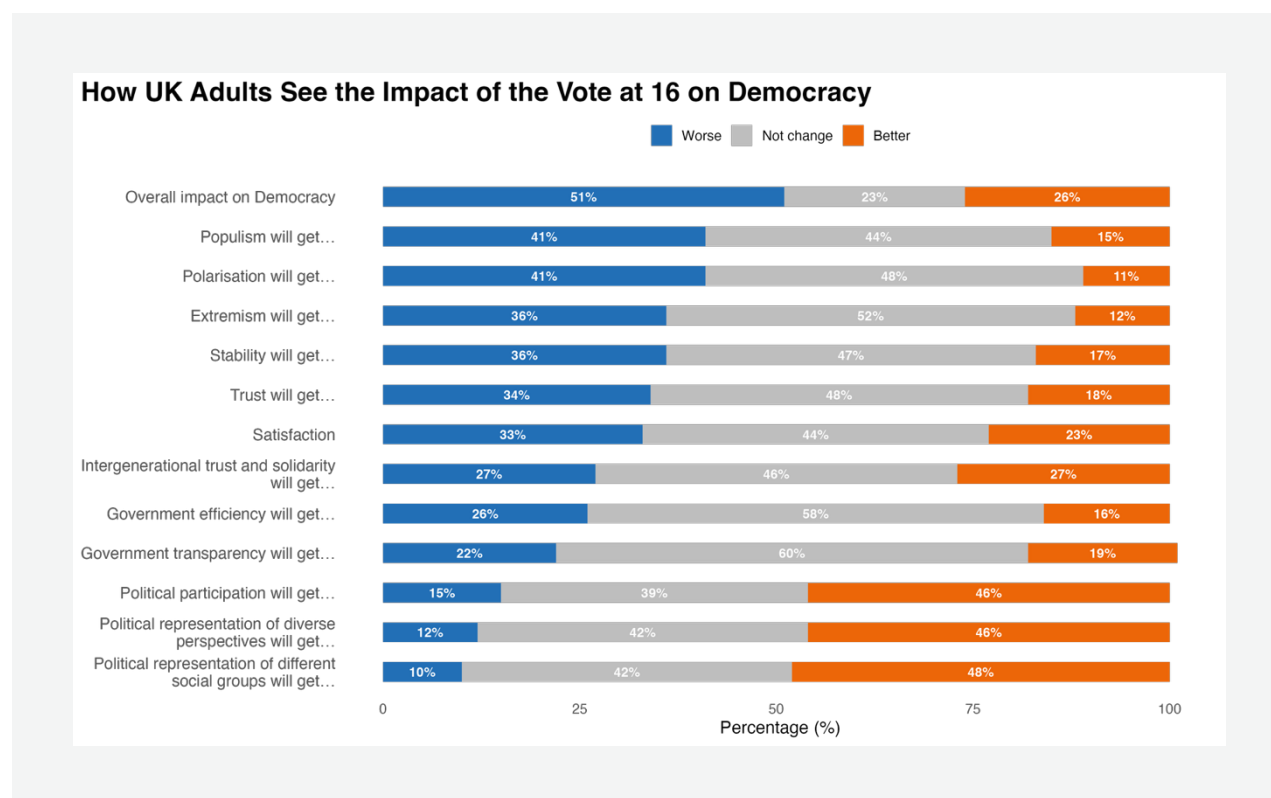
What this tells us about adolescent democratic inclusion

Taken together, our findings point to a model of adolescent democratic engagement shaped by both emotion and inequality. Willingness to participate remains clearly present, but it is mediated by anxiety, trust, place, and socio-economic conditions. The challenge is not simply generational. It is social, emotional, and geographical. If the UK wants votes at 16 to succeed as a democratic reform, it will need to treat inclusion not only as a legal change, but as a wider political and institutional responsibility.

4. THE ADULT VIEW

How adults think votes at 16 would affect democracy

Alongside the adolescent survey, we asked a sample of adults in the UK what they thought the impact of extending the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds would be on democracy. Overall, adults tended to see this change negatively: **51%** said it would worsen democracy, compared with **26%** who thought it would improve democracy.



Note on measure: The foreseen consequences of lowering the voting age were measured in a five-point scale from “It would decrease substantially” (1) to “It would increase substantially” (5). The “worse” category in the figure includes respondents who answered 1-2, the “no change” category includes respondents who answered 3, and the “better” category includes respondents who answered 4-5.

Where adults see democratic benefits

Adults did recognise several possible advantages. Many thought that lowering the voting age would improve political representation for different social groups (**48%**), improve the presence of diverse perspectives in public life (**46%**), and improve political participation (**46%**). These responses suggest that many adults acknowledged the inclusive and representative potential of the reform.

Where adults see democratic risks

At the same time, many adults feared that lowering the voting age would worsen aspects of democratic life. **41%** thought it would worsen populism and polarisation, while **36%** thought it would worsen stability and even extremism. In other words, adults often recognise the inclusion benefits of the reform while simultaneously doubting its effect on democratic quality and resilience.

What this means for the wider debate

These findings are important because they show that the debate over 'Vote at 16' is not only about adolescents' readiness. It is also about the expectations and anxieties of the wider electorate. Both sides of the debate are visible here: inclusion may broaden democracy, but public concerns remain about whether democratic institutions are robust enough to absorb new voices without intensifying instability.



5. CONCLUSIONS

Adolescents are willing, but wary

Our findings point to a consistent conclusion: young adolescents in the UK are not politically disengaged, but neither are they approaching democracy with full confidence. They are willing to engage, especially through voting, but they are doing so from a position marked by future anxiety, low trust, and weak beliefs in institutional responsiveness. Their democratic outlook is best described as one of openness mixed with caution.

Enfranchisement alone will not be enough

Lowering the voting age matters. It is a meaningful democratic reform and an important extension of political rights. But enfranchisement by itself may not secure democratic renewal. Formal inclusion cannot substitute for trust, political agency, and the feeling that institutions are listening. If new voters enter a political system, they experience as distant or unresponsive, the democratic gains of reform may be limited.

Trust, efficacy and future security as democratic conditions

Three conditions seem to matter especially for democratic inclusion: trust, agency, and future security. Young people are more likely to engage when they feel less anxious, more heard, and more confident in their own political capacity. These conditions are central to whether democratic participation becomes meaningful and lasting.

What this means for the UK debate on votes at 16

The UK's debate on votes at 16 should therefore move beyond the narrow question of whether adolescents are mature enough to vote. A more productive question is whether democratic institutions are prepared to include younger citizens well. The evidence here suggests that the promise of reform is real, but so is the risk of symbolic inclusion without deeper democratic belonging. The real test will not be whether younger citizens gain the right to vote, but whether they gain reasons to believe that voting matters.



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

For policymakers

Youth inclusion is a trust challenge, not simply a turnout challenge. Lowering the voting age should be accompanied by visible efforts to improve institutional responsiveness, public communication, and the sense that young people's concerns are taken seriously.

For political parties and democratic institutions

Political parties emerged as the least trusted democratic actors in this study. Parties and possibly UK's political institutions should therefore invest in forms of engagement that are accessible, credible, and clearly connected to outcomes. Young people are more likely to participate when they believe politics can respond.

For educators and civic learning providers

As the voting age is lowered, civic and political education are becoming even more important. Adolescents will need practical democratic knowledge, confidence in how institutions work, and opportunities to discuss politics in ways that are relevant to their own lives and futures.

7. METHODS

Study design

This report draws on two original surveys conducted in the UK: one with adolescents aged 12 to 17, and one with adults aged 18 and over. The survey on the adolescents was designed by Irene Arahal-Moreno, Olaf Borghi, Dr Kaat Smets, and Professor Manos Tsakiris. The survey on adults was designed by Irene Arahal-Moreno, Jakub Kasper, Jule Kegel, Christiana Nika, Melina Niraki and Manos Tsakiris.

Adolescent Sample

We analysed data from $N = 993$ young people aged between 12 and 17 living in the UK. Respondents were recruited in collaboration with Survation from curated online panels between 23rd July 2025 until 1st September 2025. To ensure that our data represents a wide range of young people in the UK as best as possible, we used proportional quota to include equal numbers of girls and boys across different ages. We further used representative quota to ensure the representation of young people from twelve regions across the UK. Some of these quotas were relaxed at the end of August 2025 to conclude the data collection. Our final sample was composed of 52.0% boys, 47.6% girls, and 0.4% respondents identifying with another gender. The mean age of participants was 14.6 years old ($SD = 1.7$). In line with the UK's population, the majority of participants lived in regions within England, and further 10.5% respondents living in either Northern Ireland, Wales, or Scotland.

Adult Sample

We analysed data from $N = 801$ participants above 18 years old living in the UK. Participants were recruited in collaboration with Bilendi from online panels, between 10th July 2025 and 19th July 2025. The sample's quotas were representative of gender, age group, education level, and region in the UK, and these were relaxed at the very end of data collection. This sample was comprised of 50.3% men and 49.7% women, with just over 15% of participants living outside of England in Northern Ireland, Scotland, or Wales.

Notes on interpretation and limitations


This report is based on survey responses rather than observed behaviour. Measures such as voting reflect stated intentions rather than real-world turnout. The surveys were conducted through online panels, which provide broad reach but may not capture every segment of the population equally. The findings should therefore be read as a robust snapshot of attitudes and orientations rather than a definitive prediction of future behaviour. Even so, they offer a valuable picture of the emotional and political context in which the UK's future first-time voters are coming of age.

Notes

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