



Cumberland Lodge

exchanging views, inspiring minds

Youth & Democracy: Re-Imagining our Political Future

Globally there is increasing dissatisfaction with democracy, particularly among young people. Economic and social exclusion is compounding frustration in governments seemingly unable to take action on growing crises, including environmental collapse. Less than half of young people across OECD countries express trust in their politicians¹. As populist and authoritarian leaders re-emerge, there is a downward trend in youth participation in institutional politics (parties, voting), leading to a common misperception that young people have become politically apathetic.

These findings are echoed in our work at Cumberland Lodge in past years, including a series of workshops discussing ‘The Future of Democracy’ with young people from the UK and internationally. Frequent observations are ‘we face a more difficult future than our parents’, ‘there’s a lot of corruption in politics’ and ‘action on climate change is too slow’.

To address these challenges Cumberland Lodge has launched a new project to bring young people together from across the country, to listen to their concerns, and develop their skills in political debate, media literacy and ethical leadership. The project will culminate in a Citizen’s Assembly where young people will redesign the UK’s political system in order to revitalise our democratic institutions.

This work is imperative. Long term mistrust in governments and other civic institutions has the potential to erode the legitimacy of democratic systems, exacerbated by the spread of misinformation. Checks and balances have already been tested in recent times by populist leaders challenging the rule of law. The level and content of civic education varies considerably across the UK and internationally, and may exclude disadvantaged and marginalised cohorts.

If young people are not encouraged or enabled to engage with democratic institutions, the effectiveness of political institutions and processes will be further eroded.

Yet, far from being politically apathetic, young people are demanding better opportunities to have a genuine say in the way they are governed, turning to non-institutional forms of political engagement, including organic social movements and online activism.² Harnessing the desire of young people to participate in democratic life, our challenge is to create practical interventions to encourage and energise youth engagement with democratic systems, from local to global scales.

Our *Youth and Democracy* project aims to do this through:

- Establishing a network of regional youth organisations across the UK, documenting key concerns of young people around the country.

¹ See, for example, the following reports: OECD (2020), *Governance for Youth, Trust and Intergenerational Justice: Fit for All Generations?*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/c3e5cb8a-en>; Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand. A., and Slade M., ‘Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect?’ (Cambridge: Centre for the Future of Democracy, 2020).

² Cammaerts, B., Bruter, M., Banaji, S., Harrison, S. and Anstead, N., *Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion*, (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

- Workshops at Cumberland Lodge with young change makers and emerging leaders, providing skills development in areas such as a political, digital and media literacy, and communication skills. We will provide opportunities for critical thinking underpinned by principles of ethical leadership.³
- Using a digital engagement platform with interactive fora and resources, to form an online learning centre. Recent research highlights that young people believe education about democracy is a prerequisite for greater and deeper participation in democratic life.⁴
- Stakeholder briefings bringing together emerging and existing political leaders, creating space for young people to voice their concerns on the issues that affect them.
- A youth assembly hosted at Cumberland Lodge to re-imagine politics and political systems for the 21st Century.

Through this work, we aim to empower young people with the skills to lead challenging conversations around the issues that are important to them, and to engage effectively through democratic processes and institutions in their communities. Taking an evidenced-based approach informed by the latest research, the project will be driven by the concerns and views of young people, including those from marginalised backgrounds, to ensure they are heard using the convening power and networks of Cumberland Lodge.

Impacts will be sustained through continuing to involve young people in the ongoing work of Cumberland Lodge, such as our *Strengthening the Rule of Law* project, building an intergenerational movement that shares our commitment to a more peaceful, just and inclusive society.

Cumberland Lodge is well placed to carry out this work with over 75 years' experience of convening and facilitating 'difficult conversations' that have tackled the causes and impacts of social conflict. We draw on extensive networks within politics, civil society, academia, and the Commonwealth. As an educational foundation, we were established in 1947 out of a concern for what happens when democratic society collapses and the subsequent impact on young people. We believe that the freedoms and protections associated with democracy cannot be taken for granted, and that young people have a crucial role to play in safeguarding its future.

³ E.g. our planned workshop for autumn 2024 will focus on 'Depolarising Political Debate'.

⁴ Cammaerts, B., Bruter, M., Banaji, S., Harrison, S. and Anstead, N. (2016). *Youth Participation in Democratic Life: Stories of Hope and Disillusion*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.