

Generational Disparities in Political Trust, Fractured Faith Across Ages: Younger Generations Bear the Brunt of Disillusionment

I. Executive Summary

The United Kingdom is experiencing a significant and widening generational divide in political trust, with younger demographics exhibiting alarmingly low levels of confidence in government and elected officials. This report synthesises statistical evidence and public perceptions to illustrate how Millennials and Generation Z are disproportionately affected by a pervasive sense of disillusionment. While overall trust in UK political institutions has reached historic lows, this decline is particularly acute among younger cohorts, who perceive politicians as dishonest, self-interested, and fundamentally disconnected from their lived realities. This report details the quantifiable decline in trust across generations, highlights younger generations' perceptions of neglect and lack of understanding from political leaders, and examines their limited political knowledge and engagement. Furthermore, it explores how socio-economic factors, such as economic insecurity and dissatisfaction with public services, disproportionately impact younger people's trust. Finally, the report analyses how the demographic underrepresentation in Parliament exacerbates this generational trust deficit, fostering a belief that the political system is not designed to serve their interests. The findings underscore a critical challenge to democratic legitimacy, demanding targeted reforms to re-engage and empower younger citizens.

II. Introduction

The health of a democratic system is deeply intertwined with the trust its citizens place in their political institutions and elected representatives. In the United Kingdom, this foundational trust has been in decline for several decades, but a particularly concerning trend is the emergence of significant generational disparities in political trust. Younger generations, including Millennials and Generation Z, appear to bear the brunt of this disillusionment, exhibiting consistently lower levels of confidence compared to older cohorts.

This report provides a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of these generational disparities. It will quantify the decline in trust across different age groups, delve into

younger generations' perceptions of disconnect and lack of care from politicians, examine their political knowledge and engagement (or lack thereof), and explore the influence of socio-economic factors on their trust levels. Finally, it will analyse how the demographic composition of Parliament contributes to this fractured faith. By focusing exclusively on generational differences, this report aims to inform the narrative for "Subsubsection 1.1.3: Generational Disparities in Political Trust, Fractured Faith Across Ages: Younger Generations Bear the Brunt of Disillusionment" within "The Civic Mandate" thesis, providing robust evidential backing for the argument that a crisis of legitimacy is ongoing, particularly among the future electorate.

III. Overall Trust Decline Across Generations

Public trust in UK government and politicians has experienced a consistent decline over the past three and a half decades, with a clear generational divide emerging in recent years. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey in 2023 reported "record lows" in public trust and confidence in political institutions, with 45% of respondents stating they "almost never" trust governments to prioritise the nation's needs over party interests.[1] This overall decline is not uniformly distributed across age groups.

A. Quantifying the Decline Across Generations

- **General Trend:** From 1999 to 2009, all adult generations in Britain exhibited virtually the same level of confidence in Parliament. However, by 2022, a clear generational divide had opened up.[2, 3]
- **Millennial Confidence:** Confidence in the government among Millennials in Britain has halved since 2005, falling to its lowest level on record in 2022 (20%).[2, 3] This decline is, to some extent, likely a reflection of normal party preferences among younger people, given the change from a Labour to Conservative government in 2010.[2, 3] Millennials have also lost a lot of trust in Parliament.[2, 3]
- **Generation Z's Low Confidence:** Generation Z (Gen Z) consistently exhibits very low levels of confidence across a wide range of institutions.[2, 3] In 2022, only 18% of Gen Z had confidence in Parliament, the lowest among all generations.[2, 3] Gen Z are "coming into adulthood with dire levels of trust in the police, the courts and the press".[2, 3] Only 5% of Gen Z expressed confidence in the press in 2022, compared to 25% of the Pre-War generation.[2]
- **Older Generations' Confidence:** In 2022, the Pre-War generation (34%) and Baby Boomers (28%) were most likely to have confidence in Parliament.[2, 3] While older generations have shown increases in social trust since 2023, Gen Z's score remains unchanged.

- **Overall Trust in Politicians:** The Ipsos Veracity Index 2023 recorded the lowest level of trust in politicians on record, with just 9% of the population trusting politicians as a group, [20]. This figure rose slightly to 11% in 2024, but remains perilously low. Trust is even lower among some subgroups, with just 2% of those aged 25-34 considering politicians to be truthful in 2023.[4]
- **Trust in Government (General):** In 2023, 14% of respondents trusted politicians, a slight increase from 10% in 2024. However, 45% of respondents in 2023 said they "almost never" trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above their own political party's interests.
- **Trust in Scottish Government (Youth vs. Older):** In 2023, younger people (16-24) were more likely to trust the Scottish Government to act in Scotland's best interest (70%) than older people (38% of those aged 65 and over). This highlights that while trust in the UK government is low across the board, there can be variations in trust towards devolved administrations.

B. Nuance in "Dictatorship" Support Among Youth

Recent polling has generated headlines suggesting a high proportion of young people favour dictatorship. A controversial Channel 4 study found that 52% of 13-27 year olds believed the UK would be "a better place" with "a strong leader... who does not have to bother with parliament and elections".[5, 6, 7] Alarmingly, 33% of Gen Z suggested it would be better if "the army was in charge".[5, 6]

However, a more in-depth study by the Policy Institute at King's College London counters these claims, suggesting they are not a true reflection of Gen Z opinion.[7, 8] This study found that only 6% of Gen Z actually agree that the UK would be a better place if a dictator was in charge, that this dictator should face no checks or control from MPs in Parliament, and should avoid holding national elections.[8] When the statement was rephrased to explicitly include "dictator" or emphasise the autocratic elements, agreement dropped significantly to 22% and 28% respectively.[8] This suggests that while young people may express a desire for "strong leadership" in a general sense, they do not necessarily equate this with a rejection of democratic principles or a preference for authoritarian rule.

IV. Younger Generations' Perceptions of Disconnect and Lack of Care

A significant factor contributing to the generational trust deficit is the pervasive feeling among younger demographics that politicians are disconnected from their lives and do not genuinely care about their concerns.

A. Perceptions of Politicians' Understanding and Care

- **"Don't Care What People Like Them Think":** An analysis of the British Election Study panel in 2024 found that over 70% of those aged 18-60 agreed that "politicians don't care what people like me think," with the figure rising to 76% for respondents aged 30-44. Overall, over half of respondents in 2025 felt that elected representatives did not care about people like them, with only one in five feeling they did. A 2021 survey found that 84% of respondents believed politicians "don't care what people like them think".[9] This sentiment is particularly strong among younger demographics, with over 70% of 18-60 year olds agreeing with this statement in 2024.
- **Children's Perceptions:** Only 16% of children believe politicians fully or mostly understand the issues that affect children and young people.[10] A striking 62% of children disagreed with this statement.[10] Furthermore, only 22% of children feel their concerns are being listened to by politicians, with just 10% feeling their views are important to those running the country.[11] Only one in ten children aged 8-17 believe politicians always or often focus on the needs of young people when making decisions.[12, 13] Similarly, only 9% of 8-17 year olds feel politicians care about the needs of all people equally, with working-age adults being seen as the priority demographic.[12]
- **Youth Disempowerment:** 66% of children do not feel they have a say when it comes to decisions politicians make about things important to them.[10] In 2019, 47% of people felt they had "no influence at all over national decision-making". More recently, in March 2024, 63% of adults had little or no confidence that they have a say in what the Government does.[14] Younger respondents (16-34) consistently feel more empowered regarding local influence (19% agreement in 2024) compared to older respondents (14% agreement for those 35+). However, overall perceived influence at both national and local levels remains "worryingly low".

B. "Discommunion of Interests" from a Generational Perspective

The concept of a "discommunion of interests" describes how citizens perceive politicians as being less affected by common social and economic conditions and less reliant on public services than they are. This perception is particularly relevant from a generational perspective. Younger citizens, facing unique economic and social challenges, may feel that politicians, often from older and more privileged backgrounds, do not understand or share their everyday experiences. This perceived lack of shared reality exacerbates the feeling that politicians are "distant from their

lives and preoccupied by other interests".

V. Youth Political Knowledge and Engagement (or lack thereof)

Despite the significant impact of political decisions on their future, younger generations in the UK often exhibit lower levels of political knowledge and engagement in traditional political processes.

A. Political Knowledge and Understanding

- **Lack of MP Knowledge:** Research from June 2024 revealed that 70% of young people (8-17 year olds) do not know the name of their local MP. Over half are unable to say which political party their MP belongs to, and 79% do not know the name of the Prime Minister.[12]
- **Understanding of Politics:** Two in five (39%) young people say they do not understand what politicians do.[12]
- **Interest in Politics:** Most young people are not very interested in UK politics, particularly local politics, often feeling that politics does not affect their daily lives.[15] However, encouragingly, about two-thirds of young people think it is important to learn more about UK politics.[15]

B. Engagement in Political Decisions

- **Limited Say:** As noted, 66% of children do not feel they have a say when it comes to decisions politicians make about things important to them.[10] Only 10% of children feel their views are important to those running the country.[11]
- **Voter Turnout:** Voter turnout for young people has been consistently lower than for older age groups. In the 2019 general election, turnout for 18-24 year olds was 47%, compared to over 70% for over-65s.[5] Turnout for 18-24 year olds in the July 2024 general election was 37%, down from 47% in 2019 [[20]. This creates "ageing democracies" as the politically active section of the electorate gets older.[14]
- **Voter Registration:** Registration among people who will turn 18 before an upcoming general election dropped from 51% in 2014 to 16% in 2022.[14]
- **Civic Consultation:** Adults aged 16-24 (14%) and 25-34 (16%) were less likely to have engaged in civic consultation in the last 12 months compared to older age groups (20-22% for 35-74 year olds).[16]
- **Desire for Political Education:** Nearly three-quarters (72%) of young people aged 11-25 want to be taught more about politics in school.[17, 15, 18, 19] They consider schools and colleges to be more trusted environments for learning about politics, yet only a third of 11-17 year olds had heard about politics at

school in the last year.[17, 18]

VI. Influence of Socio-Economic Factors on Generational Trust

Economic hardship and dissatisfaction with public services are strongly correlated with lower trust levels, and these factors disproportionately affect younger generations, exacerbating their political disillusionment.

A. Economic Insecurity and Trust

- **Financial Struggle and Distrust:** Trust in politicians is "much lower among groups who are struggling financially".[20] The 2024 British Social Attitudes data shows that 72% of those struggling financially "almost never" trust politicians, compared to 49% of those living comfortably.[20]
- **Mid-Life Economic Insecurity:** Worries about personal and family finances are substantially greater during mid-life (35-59 years), with 41% feeling insecure, compared to 28% aged 18-34 and 31% aged over 60.[21] This mid-life group represents a pivotal swing voter demographic, and their economic insecurity makes them more electorally volatile.[21]
- **Younger Generations' Precarious Finances:** The cost-of-living crisis has left many members of Gen Z in a precarious financial position, facing immense budgeting challenges with rising costs for essentials like rent and utilities.[22] In 2022, 70% of low-income households with someone aged 18-24 were behind on at least one household bill, and over 80% of low-income households with someone aged 18-34 were going without essentials.[22] Young people are paying a heavy price for growing up, with their financial situation becoming more precarious as they move into adulthood, often with less access to safety nets and support networks.[23] Policies actively restrict the safety net available to young people, including lower minimum wage guarantees and less Universal Credit.[23]
- **Declining Living Standards:** Declining living standards and public services "erode trust in the overall capabilities of our political systems and decision makers".[20] UK families are expected to face declining living standards by 2030, with lower-income households experiencing twice the decline compared to middle and high-income earners.

B. Dissatisfaction with Public Services

- **NHS Dissatisfaction:** Dissatisfaction with the NHS is a key factor in low trust.[20] In 2024, only 21% of British adults were satisfied with the NHS, the lowest level since 1983, with dissatisfaction rising to 59%.[24] There is a clear generational divide, with satisfaction lower and falling in younger age groups. While

satisfaction rose slightly for those aged 65 and over (from 25% to 27%), among those under 65 it fell significantly (from 24% to 19%).[24]

- **Impact on Trust:** 86% of those dissatisfied with the NHS believe the system of governing Britain needs considerable improvement, compared to 65% of the satisfied.[20]

C. Generational "Discommunion of Interests"

The "discommunion of interests" is particularly pronounced from a generational perspective. Younger citizens, facing unique challenges such as economic insecurity, rising housing costs, and concerns about the future of public services, may perceive politicians as being less affected by these conditions. This perceived gap in shared experiences and priorities contributes to the feeling that politicians "don't care what people like them think"0, [20]1, [20]2, [20]4, [20]5, [20].

VII. Impact of Underrepresentation on Younger Generations' Trust

The demographic composition of Parliament, which often does not reflect the diversity of the UK population, contributes significantly to the perceived disconnect and erosion of trust, particularly among younger, often more diverse, generations.

A. Overrepresentation of Elites

- **Privately Educated Politicians:** New research indicates that a majority representation of privately educated politicians actively decreases public trust in the government and politics more broadly.[2, 25, 26] Privately educated politicians are perceived negatively, seen as "less warm, more toxic, less trustworthy, and more forceful" compared to state-educated politicians.[2, 25, 26] If a politician's educational background is not disclosed, public trust and perceived representation are higher than when private education is explicitly mentioned.[2, 25]
- **Parliamentary Demographics:** In the Parliament elected in 2024, 23% of MPs were privately educated, a decrease from 54% in 2019, but still significantly higher than the 7% of pupils attending private schools in the UK. Furthermore, 90% of current MPs attended university, compared to under 20% of the UK's working-age population.

B. Underrepresentation of Diverse Backgrounds

- **Age:** Youth are vastly underrepresented among parliamentarians globally, with only 1.9% of parliamentarians under the age of 30.[27] In the UK Parliament elected in July 2024, there were no MPs aged 18-20, and only 3.8% were 30 years

of age or younger.[28, 29] The average age of MPs has remained around 50 years since 1979, with the most populated age bracket shifting to 50-59 since 1997.[30]

- **Gender:** While the proportion of women in the House of Commons reached a record 40% after the July 2024 snap election, global progress in women's parliamentary representation has slowed. Women remain underrepresented in key ministerial positions that shape economic strategy, defence, and infrastructure. Only 15% of UK girls believe politicians act in their best interest, with almost half (47%) having lost trust in them over the last three years.[19] Seeing women in Parliament can give young women and girls confidence and belief that they too can work in government.[19]
- **Ethnic Minorities:** The UK Parliament elected in 2024 is the most ethnically diverse in the country's history, with Black, Asian, and ethnic minorities comprising around 13% of the House of Commons. However, this is still below the 18% of the general population from a minority ethnic background [[20]. If Parliament reflected the UK's ethnic make-up, there would be about 104 MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds [[20].
- **Socio-Economic Class:** There is a significant gap in representation for those with lower socio-economic status. Only around 5% of legislators in national parliaments across OECD countries had primarily worked in working-class occupations, compared to 60% of the workforce they govern. This declining representation is a recent phenomenon in the UK, particularly notable in the Labour Party.

C. Contribution to Trust Erosion

The British Psychological Society emphasises that politicians should come from the widest variety of backgrounds possible to improve public trust, understanding, and engagement.[2, 25, 26] Seeing people in government who reflect one's own identity—whether based on race, gender, or class—fosters feelings of belonging and trust.[2, 25, 26] Conversely, the underrepresentation of diverse political views weakens democratic pluralism and contributes to a sense that the system is "too focused on party elites rather than everyday voters"³, [33]. This overrepresentation of career politicians rather than community leaders can lead to policy disconnection from public concerns³, [33]. If young people perceive politicians and political institutions as hostile to them or not believing in their worthiness of political equality, this can further depress their engagement.[31]

VIII. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this report unequivocally demonstrates a profound and

escalating trust deficit in elected officials within the UK political system, with younger generations disproportionately affected. This crisis is characterised by record-low levels of public trust, pervasive perceptions of dishonesty and self-interest among politicians, and a deep sense of disconnect from the lived realities of ordinary citizens. The demographic composition of Parliament, which often fails to reflect the diversity of the UK population, particularly in terms of age, socio-economic background, and to a lesser extent, gender and ethnicity, exacerbates this disillusionment.

The cumulative impact of these factors is a deepening cynicism and disengagement among younger cohorts, who feel unheard, unrepresented, and increasingly pessimistic about the political system's capacity to address their concerns. This erosion of trust is not merely an abstract political problem; it carries significant economic and social costs, hindering effective governance and potentially leading to a more fractured society. Addressing this generational trust deficit is paramount for the long-term health and legitimacy of UK democracy. It necessitates comprehensive reforms that prioritise genuine representation, foster meaningful engagement, and ensure that elected officials are perceived as trustworthy, relatable, and truly committed to serving the diverse interests of all generations.

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