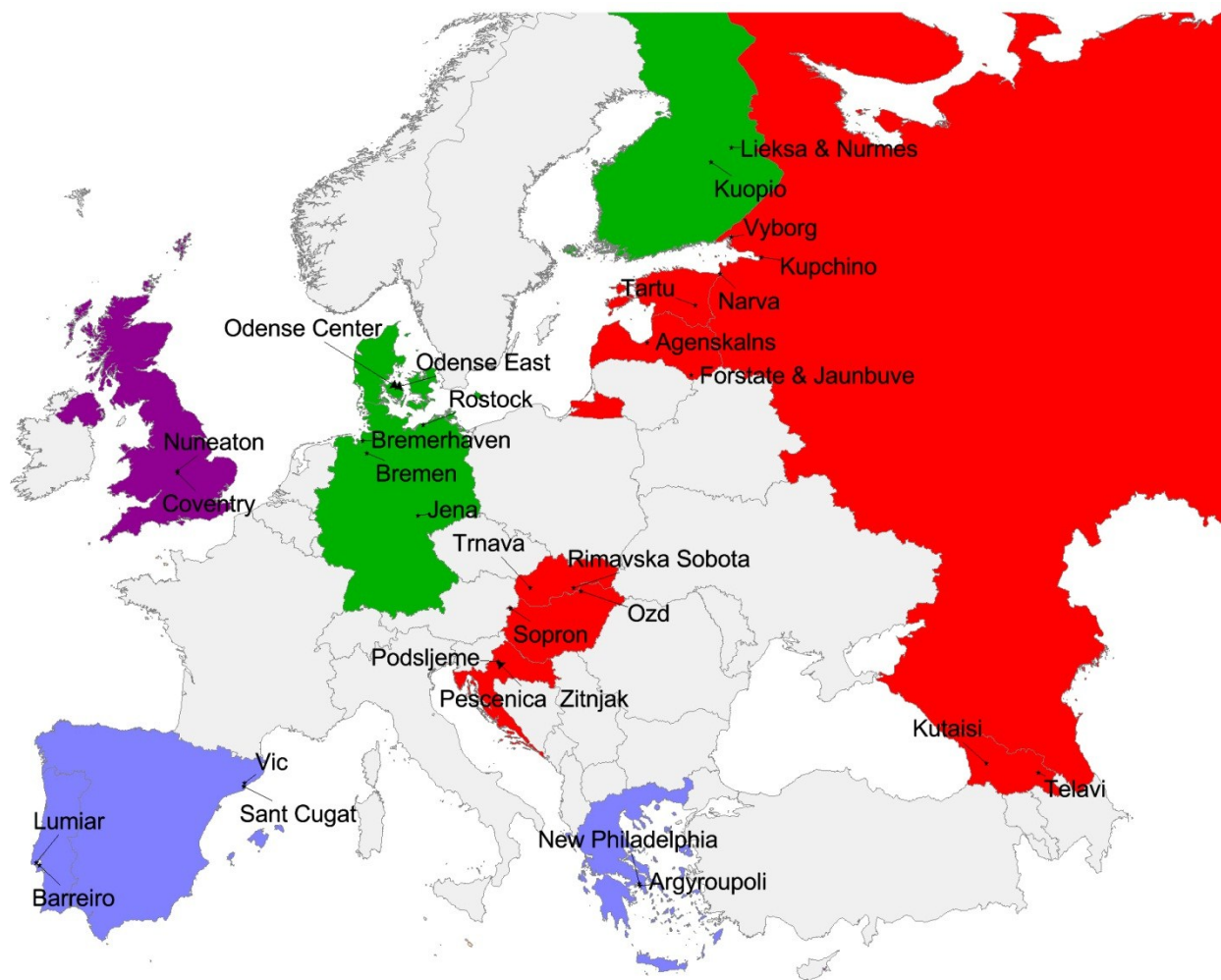




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# MYPLACE THEMATIC REPORT

## UK Election Special



© EuroGeographics for the administrative boundaries

# MYPLACE

Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement

Web: [www.fp7-myplace.eu](http://www.fp7-myplace.eu)

MANCHESTER  
1824

The University of Manchester



Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University

## MYPLACE: Aims and Objectives

The central research question addressed by the MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy & Civic Engagement) Project is:

**How is young people's social participation shaped by the shadows of totalitarianism and populism in Europe?**

Key themes addressed include:

- Understanding the legacy of totalitarianism and populism;
- Mapping youth participation and civic engagement;
- Exploring receptivity to new radical and populist political agendas.

## Case study approach

The MYPLACE project used a case study approach, using 30 carefully selected research locations (illustrated in Figure 1) which provided within country contrasts in terms of hypothesised receptivity to radical politics. MYPLACE work strands include:

- Questionnaire survey (N = 16,935, target = 600 per location) of young people aged 16-25;
- Follow up interviews (N = 901, target = 30 per location with a sub-sample of these young people);
- 44 ethnographic studies of youth activism, in 6 thematic clusters;
- Ethnographic observation at 18 sites of memory including expert interviews with staff (N = 73), focus groups with young people (N = 56) and inter-generational interviews (N = 180).

## Thematic Reports

The aim of this series of thematic reports is to present a general Europe wide thematic analysis of young people's views, attitudes and behaviour towards a range of social and political issues.

This report focuses on voting in elections and democratic performance and profiles data for the UK. The report will cover the following areas:

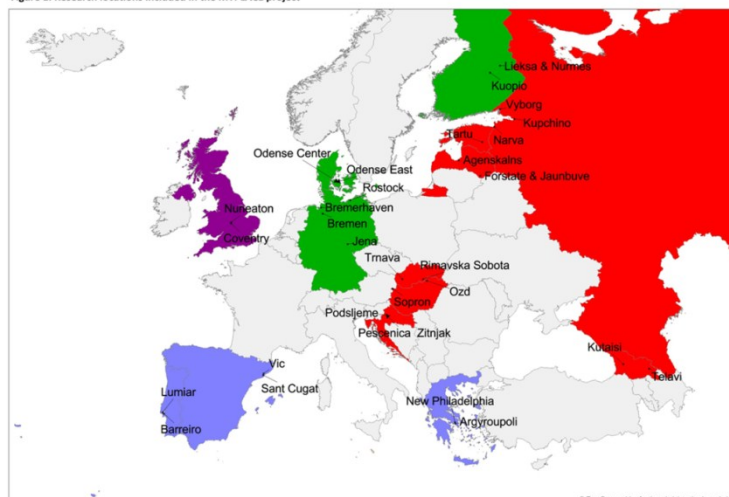
- Voting: the UK in the wider European context;
- Why don't young people vote?
- Closeness to Political Parties;
- Trust in Political Institutions;
- Cynicism: Attitudes towards politicians and politics;
- Participation: Traditional Forms

## Format

Each page presents a specific theme and contains descriptive narrative, quotes from interviews and two graphs presenting questionnaire survey data. One graph presents the theme by the 30 research locations. The second graph illustrates a demographic breakdown as an average for the two UK research locations (Coventry and Nuneaton). Quotes cited as 'Interviewee' emanate from follow up interviews with a subset of the survey sample of young people while those cited as 'Activist' are from young people interviewed as part of the ethnographic case studies.

Statistical techniques have been used to construct derived variables (Factor Analysis) and test reliability (Cronbach Alpha or Correlations).

Figure 1: Research locations included in the MYPLACE project



## Voting: the UK in the wider European context

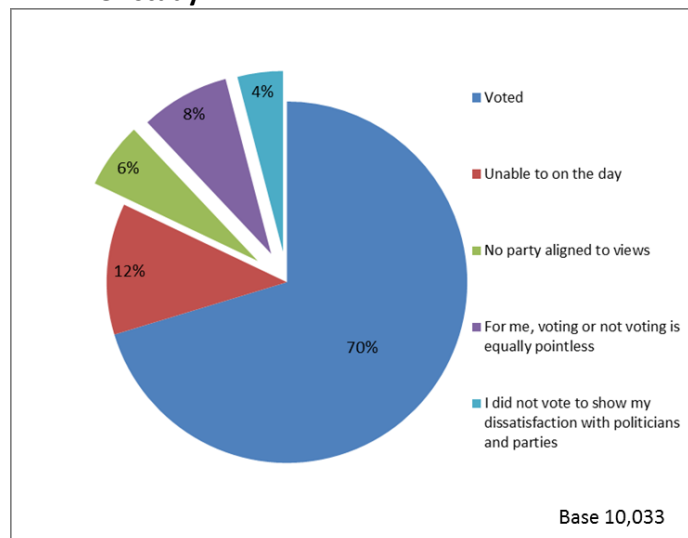
The UK elections take place on the 7<sup>th</sup> May.

How can we expect young people to engage with the electoral process as it unfolds? Are politicians succeeding in reaching out to young people? Ultimately, will young people take the opportunity to cast their vote?

Data from the MYPLACE project provides some insight into how young people in the UK may respond to this key period for democracy in their country and how this compares to other locations across Europe.

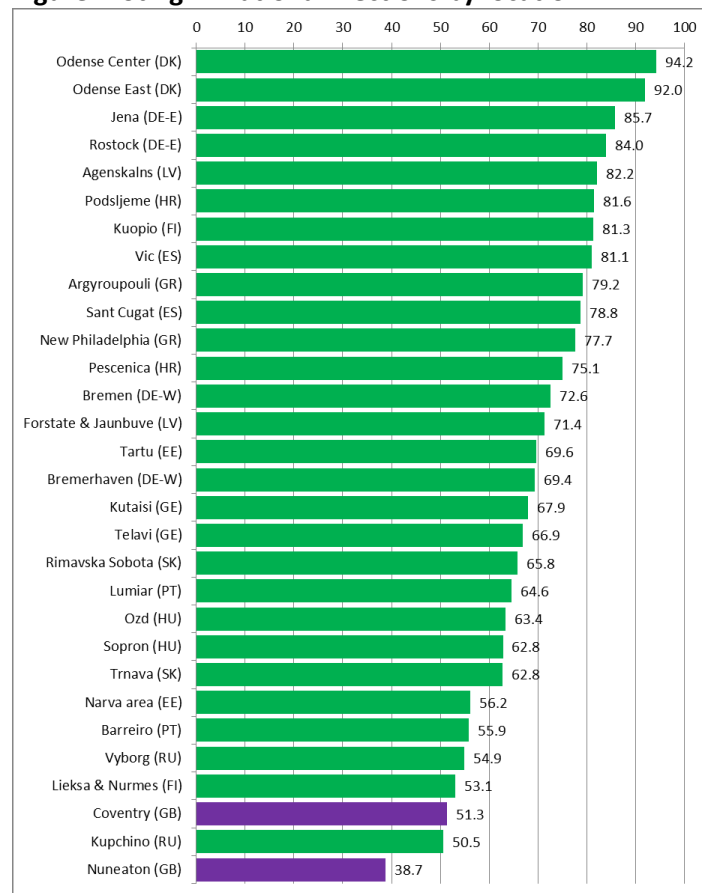
The UK in the European context.

**Figure: Electoral Participation of young people in the MYPLACE study**



The proportion of eligible young people voting across the 30 study locations was 70.3%. This is higher than results published by Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey (ESS).

**Figure: Voting in National Elections by location**

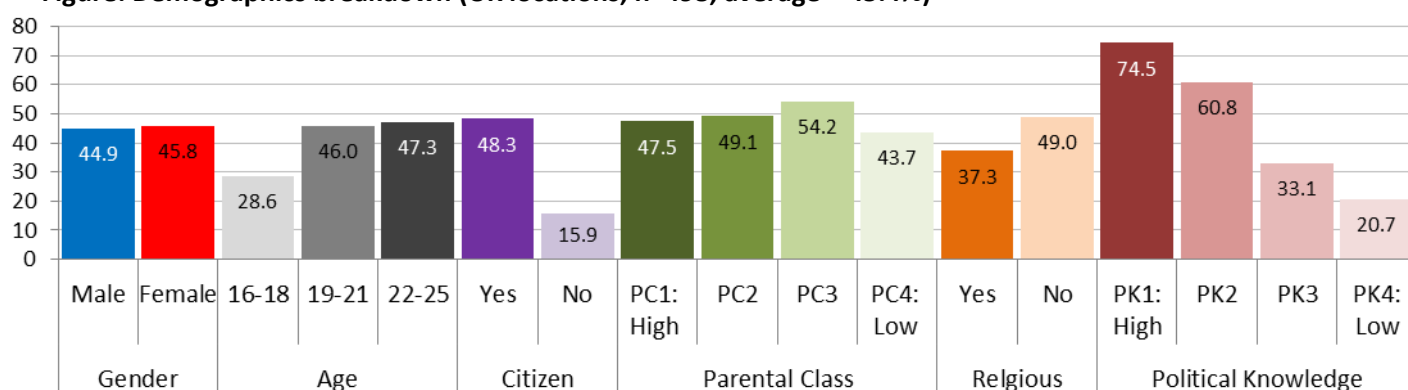


The proportions eligible to vote who voted in Coventry (51.3%) and Nuneaton (38.7%) are significantly lower than the MYPLACE study average.

*“But I'm torn, because most of my friends, most of the people my age won't vote any more, like, erm, they won't even spoil ballot papers, which I think is preferable, to me, like I would rather someone walked to the polling station, ruin a ballot paper as protest, than just not vote.”*

[Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

**Figure: Demographics breakdown (UK locations; n=498, average = 45.4%)**



## Why don't young people vote?

Whilst young people in the UK do not appear to exercise their right to vote as much as many of their European counterparts, paradoxically, young people still state that voting is the most important and effective form of participation.

The MYPLACE survey asked young people if they voted in the last national election. A number of young people were not eligible (due to age or citizenship) and have been removed from these analyses. Figures represent the proportion of eligible young people voting in the last national election.

The overall average for all locations is 70.8% (n=10,186, sd = 45.5), demonstrating fairly high participation rates across Europe. The two UK locations varied slightly, with Nuneaton at 38.7% and Coventry at 51.3%. Most notably, Nuneaton had the lowest percentage of participation rates across all the European locations.

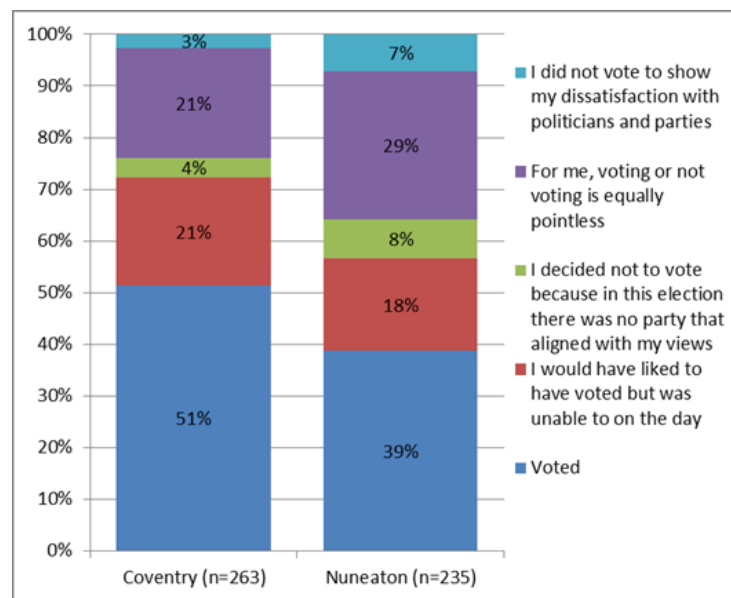
*"I don't know, I think the language of politics, much like the language of anything, it can be, erm, it can be damaging, I think it stops some people from getting involved, if they don't understand the terminology, I think it can make it quite difficult, for some people, to interact with it."*

[Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

*"No. I don't, I won't vote. I know what they say, like oh yeah, they fought to get women's rights to vote and stuff like that - don't bother me, does not interest me in the slightest. I don't, I really don't find that even if I do vote my vote's gonna make a difference to who gets what or who does what and stuff like that and what they're gonna do with it, with that power [...] I don't think it influences it."*

[Interviewee, Nuneaton, UK]

Figure: Voting behaviour of young people in the UK (Coventry and Nuneaton)



Most Young people who did not vote (28.5% in Nuneaton and 21.3% in Coventry of all eligible people) stated that 'For me, voting or not voting is equally pointless'

*"There's no point in, in a party vote, there's no point voting on anything [...] I genuinely believe there is no point and even if you feel so strongly about something to write, to write to an MP. I don't think your point will be put across or even considered, I think literally your letter would be looked at and thrown in the bin, that's it, there's no point."* [Interviewee, Nuneaton, UK]

## Closeness to Political Parties

Young people often do not feel a strong affinity to political parties, reflecting a sense that old ideological divides are less relevant to youth today.

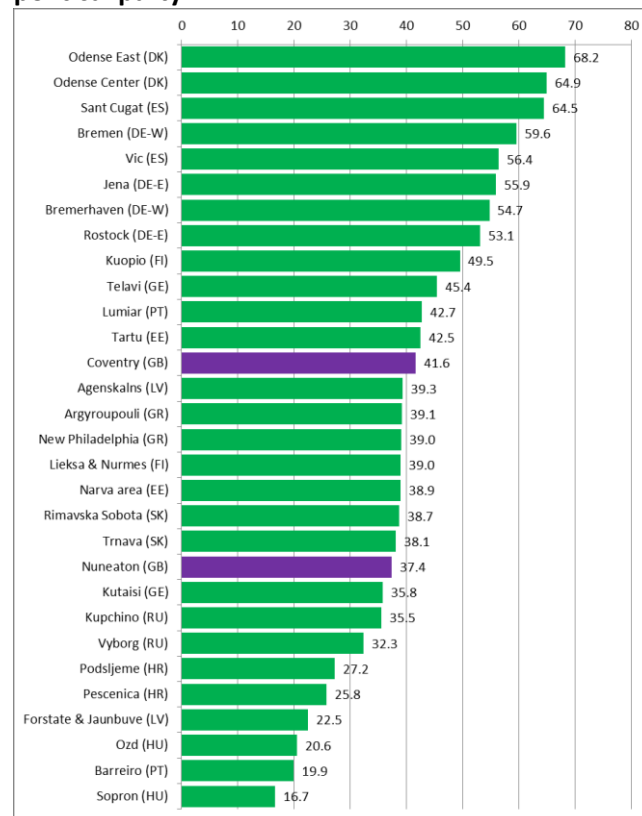
The MYPLACE survey asked the question 'Is there a particular political party that you feel closer to than other parties?' This was understood to mean the party one most identifies or sympathises with or is most attached to, regardless of how one votes. The figures represent the percentage of young people who said 'yes'.

The proportion of young people who felt closer to a particular political party for all locations is 40.9% (n= 15,957, sd = 49.2%). Coventry is slightly above the average at 41.6%, but Nuneaton is below average at 37.4%.

*"But we've got, I think we've got to a situation with politics where apart from party members you haven't really got people who are left wing or right wing [...] I think everyone, from the people who run the country I think, everyone wants a bit of everything. [...] That this policy from the left wing might be correct but so is this policy from the right wing so I don't think there's any need or any place for left wing and right wing anymore."* [Interviewee, Nuneaton, UK]

Ambivalence towards political parties may lead young people to vote according to family tradition or, those who are active, to seek alternative (radical) politics and participation.

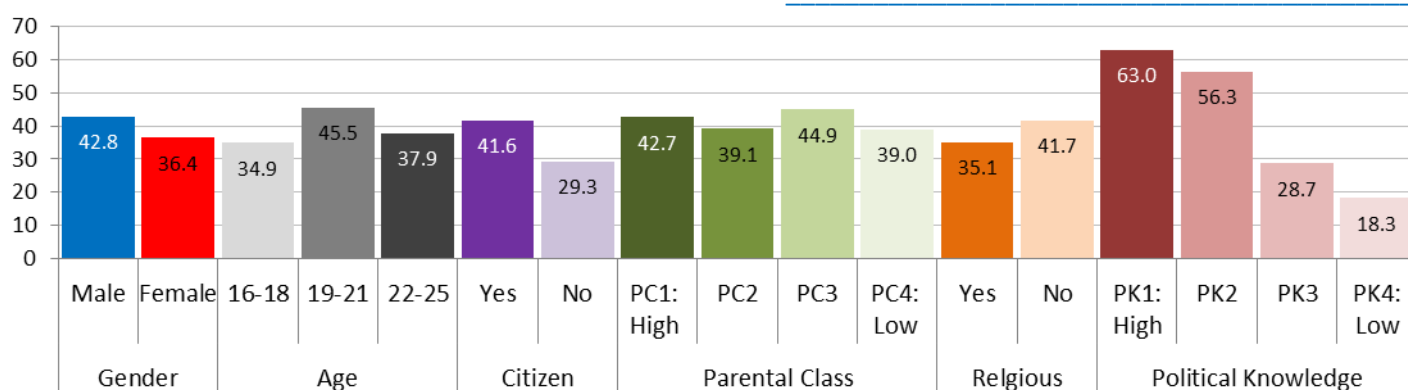
Figure: Percentage who feel close to a particular political party



*"Cos my Dad, my dad, like, obviously supports Labour, and obviously I'm just gonna go with whatever my dad does, cos I'm, I'm no good with all that stuff. But I know they treat, they treat working class and rich people equally..."* [Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

*"Yeah, I guess so, again, like, this is an issue with young people but I'm also a victim of this is that politically, we're not very engaged in like politics [...] in party politics definitely [...] I don't know anything about current, you know, manifestos, and things like that and, and I've been asked by a friend so like, you know, will you join the Labour, like the Labour society at Cambridge and I was like 'no', I think, I just feel like party politics is just not, it's just never really radical enough for me"* [Activist, UK]

Figure: Demographics breakdown (UK locations; n=1,064, average = 37.5%)





## Trust in political institutions

Much of the recent literature on youth political participation demonstrates declining rates of youth participation and its association with decreased levels of trust. MYPLACE findings demonstrate that young people in the UK exhibit even lower levels of trust than youth in other established democratic countries.

The MYPLACE survey asked questions regarding levels of trust towards 'core national political institutions', 'the head of government/PM', 'parliament' and 'political parties'. These have been combined to create a 'Trust' variable and standardised on a 0 to 100 scale, with 100 representing the greatest level of trust.

The overall average for all locations is 41.8 (n=16,128, sd = 22.9), demonstrating low levels of trust towards political institutions. Whilst Coventry and Nuneaton were both above average at 49.2 and 42.4 respectively, in absolute terms this reflects low levels of trust.

*"Interviewer: So what about formal politics [...] what's your experience of participating in formal politics?"*

*Respondent: Whichever way you're going to get screwed, is my personal opinion.*

*Interviewer: You mean whoever you vote for you're going to get screwed?*

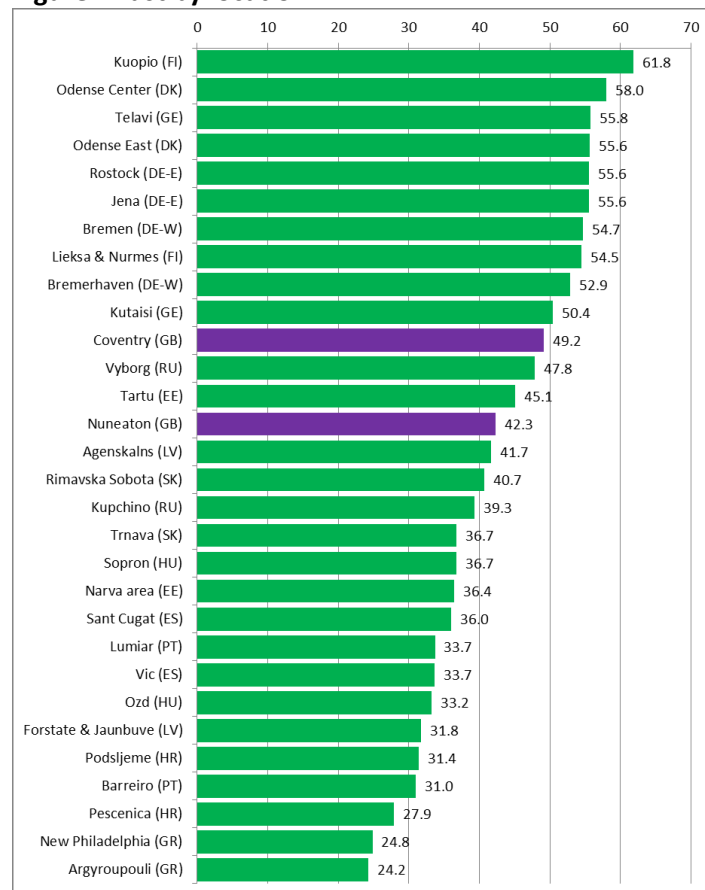
*Respondent: Yeah*

*Interviewer: So do you vote?*

*Respondent: I, of course, I vote [...] several people say if you don't vote you don't get to complain."*

[Interviewee, UK]

Figure: Trust by location

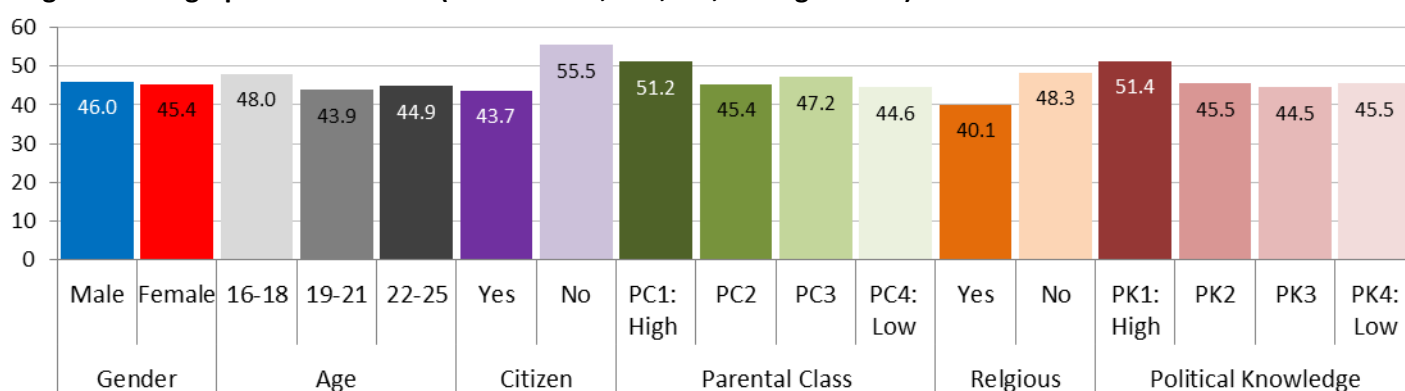


However, an important finding is that scepticism about political institutions does not necessarily mean a withdrawal from participation.

*"[...] talk to people, to raise awareness, to write letters, to ask questions. You've got to nag and nag the, you know, the government bodies and the local authorities, because they, too easily and too often they just ignore you. Erm, so I, I will never give up asking questions, you know, I'll only be satisfied, er, if they answer my questions properly"*

[Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

Figure: Demographics breakdown (UK locations; n=1,053, average = 45.7)



## Cynicism: Attitudes towards politicians and politics

One explanation for declining participation is increasing cynicism about politics and politicians.

The MYPLACE survey asked two questions; 'Politicians are corrupt' and 'The rich have too much influence over politics' which have been combined to create a 'Cynicism' variable and have been standardised on a 0 to 100 scale, with 100 representing most cynical.

The overall average for all locations is 69.2 (n=16,018, sd = 21.5), demonstrating high levels of cynicism towards politicians and politics. Coventry is slightly above the average at 69.7, whereas Nuneaton is below the average at 66.1.

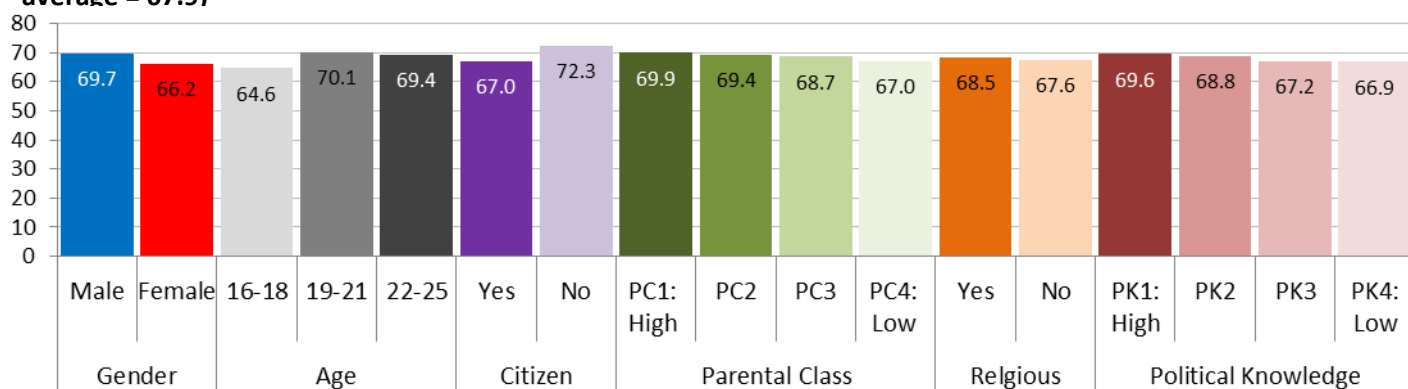
Alongside common clichés associating politicians with elitism, deceit and hypocrisy, young people frequently perceive of politics and politicians as achieving nothing.

The idea of 'shielded' lives and the distance of politicians from 'real life experience' are also striking in the data.

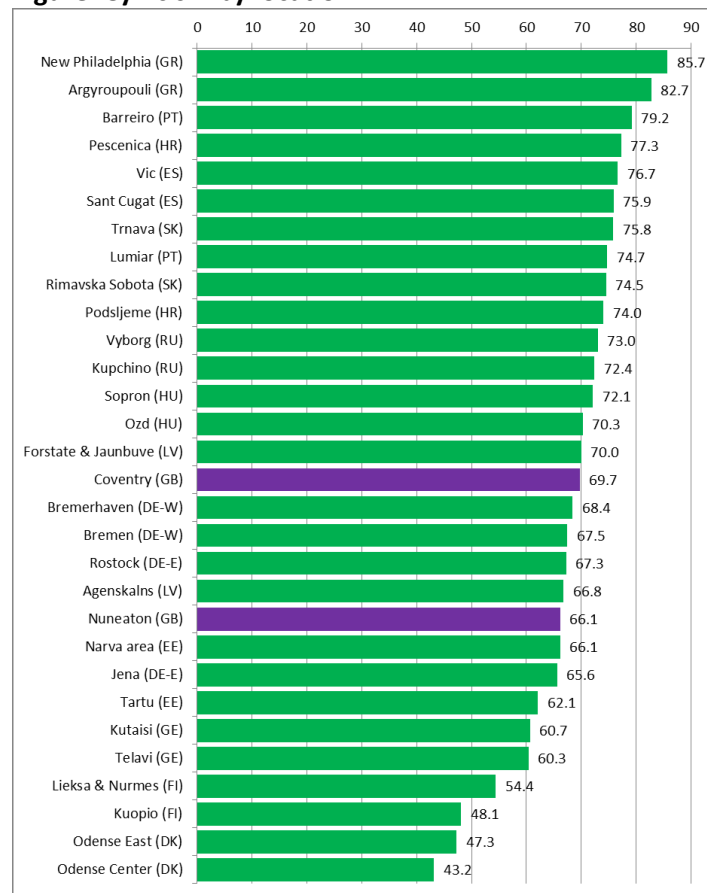
*"[...] the image that comes into my head if you say politics, I just think of a, er, a bunch of idiots sat in the House of Commons, just shouting and heckling at each other. They argue about everything, they can never make their minds up."* [Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

*"I don't think you ever get a fully honest politician now, it's, a lot, everyone says it's corrupt."* [Interviewee, Nuneaton, UK]

**Figure: Demographics breakdown (UK locations; n=1,069, average = 67.9)**



**Figure: Cynicism by location**



*"I don't think they really understand it because they wouldn't, they live in a completely separate world to what we live in. I think, you know, obviously they know about immigration and things like that 'cause they know people are coming into the country and they see it as a number though, they don't see [...] the tension between people I suppose [...] they've got like a shielded life..."* [Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

*"I just think people need to see someone that's got real life experience [...] It's like a rich man who's been, you know, never had to work, you know, he's never really had to live this life. David Cameron, for instance, right? Why would a person like me wanna let him tell me what's best for me when he's never lived my life?"* [Activist, UK]

## Participation: Traditional Forms

In addition to voting, young people frequently talk about effecting change to improve society through engagement with the political sphere, including participation in formal politics or forms of collective action.

The MYPLACE survey asked if respondents had: 'Volunteered in an election campaign', 'Contacted a politician or local councillor', 'Collected signatures', 'Given a political speech', or 'Distributed leaflets with a political content'. These questions have been used to create a participation rate on a 0 to 100 scale, with 100 representing most active.

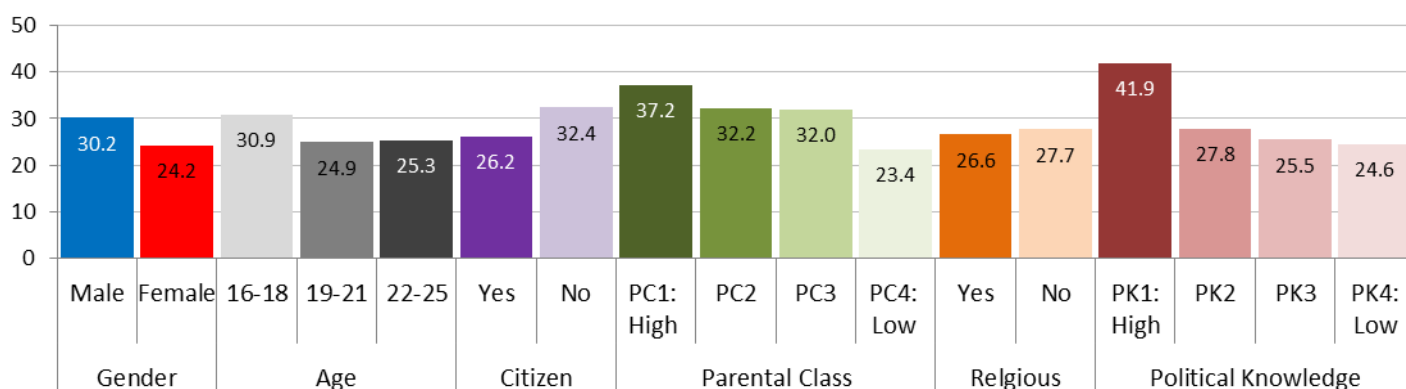
The overall average for all locations is 18.3 (n=16,727, sd = 38.7), demonstrating low levels of participation. Although both Coventry (29.0) and Nuneaton (25.5) are both higher than the average and are among the highest in Europe, although, participation is still low.

As well as traditional forms of political participation, many young people choose to take part in non-traditional forms in order to make themselves heard.

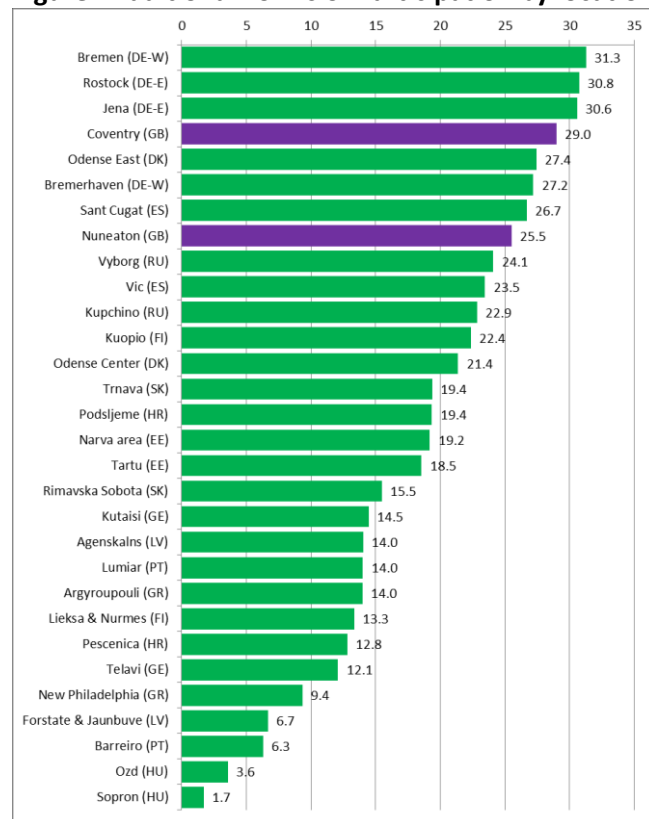
*"[...] if you're not being listened to and you feel disempowered ... sometimes you've got to take it right to the heart of where the decisions are made and make a, make a protest there [...]"* [Activist, UK]

However, despite cynicism, low voting turnout, and engagement in non-conventional forms of politics, MYPLACE data appear to confirm that young people continue to attach higher 'value' to traditional forms of participation.

**Figure: Demographics breakdown (UK locations; n=1,086, average = 27.2)**



**Figure: Traditional Forms of Participation by location**



*"No, because [pauses] I don't think the Internet is the best place to do something – even if it helps organising events. I think it's better to, to participate in real life."* [Interviewee, Coventry, UK]

This suggests that young people are not alienated from politics. If young people are to exercise their voice in the UK elections on 7th May, they need to be inspired to transform their passive belief in the importance of democratic participation into an active engagement.

*"[...] I think people should be more active and aware of what's happening around them and who's leading them and what are the parties in power and what are their political views and everything so people, people should know, because if you know then you know when it's time to act."* [Interviewee, Coventry, UK]



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## MYPLACE Information

Fieldwork was conducted in Coventry and Nuneaton between September 2012 and March 2013.

For further information, please view the project website at [www.fp7-myplace.eu](http://www.fp7-myplace.eu)



## MYPLACE Partners



### General Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the young people across Europe who participated in this study, all the fieldworkers and the various public, private and voluntary organisations who supported the fieldwork. We hope to have done justice to the collective efforts of so many people in our analyses. Without funding under the EU's Framework 7 programme none of this work would have been possible.