

Radical or Compliant? Young Party Members in Britain

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Introduction

Past studies of young people and politics suggest that parties have been reluctant to offer young members a meaningful voice within party organisations. These studies often portray youth sections as fiercely independent of their parent parties and young members more generally as proponents of radical policy ideas and strategies. This paper explores these assumptions by analysing available data-sets on party members (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP). The data allow us to examine reasons young party members join the respective parties, the ways in which young members contribute to party organisations, and their views on policies, strategies and leaders. Does the evidence support the radical youth thesis? The findings inform an analysis of the role of young members in Britain's parties, exploring the implications for party recruitment and the place of youth wings within party structures.

This paper is a first attempt to explore the relationship between age and participation in Britain's political parties, examining existing membership data and recent political developments in the parties. A widely held view is that young people are no longer active through traditional political parties. However, these dynamics have not been extensively researched. In this paper we examine how young people interact with political parties. We begin by examining available evidence on the extent to which young people in Britain join parties. The paper then attempts an analysis of those young people who *do* become formal members of Britain's political parties. Available data-sets on party members in Britain, derived from two decades of studies, are analysed in order to explore the ways in which young people become involved in the respective parties, and whether they hold distinctive views. Finally, we examine how parties manage and organise their youth sections, including efforts made to attract young people to parties and the influence of young members within party organisations.

Young people and politics

It has been widely reported that young people are becoming increasingly disconnected from traditional forms of politics, including the very act of voting. A recent study of voter registration revealed that only 56% of 19-24 year olds were registered to vote, compared with more than nine in every ten (94%) of those aged 65+ (Electoral Commission 2011). While much of the available evidence points to disengagement of young people from politics, it is sometimes undermined by a weak conceptual understanding of politics i.e. politics tends to be narrowly defined, potentially underestimating other activities we might regard as political engagement (O'Toole et al. 2003). This leaves open the possibility that young people become involved through other avenues of participation, such as single-issue groups and social media campaigns (Whiteley 2007).

Past research on party membership reveals two apparent trends: declining numbers and a possible change in the composition of membership. The decline in party membership across established democracies has been extensively documented (Katz and Mair 1992; Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; Van Haute 2011; Whiteley 2009, 2011, 2012). We can be fairly confident that party membership is becoming more of a minority sport. What is less clear is the extent to which the social characteristics of members are changing. As Cross and Young (2004) found in their comparative study of party members in Canada those who join political parties tend not to be representative of the electorate (in social terms they are better educated and tellingly much older as a whole), but to what extent is this problem intensifying? Scarrow and Gezgor (2010) examine the 'shrinking' of parties in Europe, and explore whether party members are becoming more or less representative of voters. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this research suggests that party members are becoming more like the general public, both in ideological perspective and in key social characteristics like income and union membership. However, in one important respect – age – parties are becoming increasingly distant from voters, leading Scarrow and Gezgor (2010-11: 839) to argue:

Parties' diminished ability to recruit has led to a striking shift in the age profiles of their memberships: the average age of party members has continued to increase, a highly visible difference that may make it harder for parties to project an image of being closely in touch with the people whose votes they are seeking"

The evidence on membership of British parties is striking. Scarrow and Gezgor (2010: 830) report that in the 1990s, 29% of party members in Britain were aged 60 or over, compared with 24% of voters; by the 2000s, these figures had risen to 56% and 27% respectively. Moreover the general ageing of party members and the gap between party members and population is most apparent in Britain, as compared with eleven other European countries. There is also some indication that party members in Britain are becoming increasingly male (Scarrow and Gezgor 2010: 831).

Many other studies have demonstrated that hostility to party politics is widespread in modern society but endemic among young people. If we accept the premise that members are valuable to party organisations,, parties have a pressing need to recruit, and be seen to recruit, young members for their rejuvenation and continued authority and vitality. Unfortunately for the parties, as Hooghe et al. (2004) show, the youth wings suffer a more rapid turnover than any other section of the parties as recruits are particularly prone not to renew or to drift away from active membership. As the Conservatives noted in 1997 the effect of a declining youth wing can sharply demonstrate the failure of a party to replenish:

As our membership has declined in size its average age has risen, reflecting our failure to recruit enough new younger members. Our youth groups too have seen a decline in membership. In 1979 there were approximately 20,000 members of the Young Conservatives and 14,000

members in the students' organisation. Today the Young Conservatives and students have fewer than 10,000 voters between them. (Conservative and Unionist Party, 1997. p. 2.)

Overall, the evidence points to a spiral of decline in both membership and activism in modern parties and this is compounded by ageing memberships (Whiteley and Seyd 1998; Whiteley 2009, 2011, 2012). Membership turnover is not functioning in the way we would traditionally expect. Exiting members are not being replaced by new blood/young members. In other words, the parties' inability to attract young people lies at the heart of the mobilisation problem.

Young people and party membership in Britain: Methods and research questions

It is clear that party membership is a very conventional form of political participation. Given that such a small minority of people formally join parties we must bear in mind that we are looking at a breed apart from other young people. This is a rather peculiar sub-set of the population. Perhaps we should even regard this type of political involvement as out-dated and irrelevant, given that young people in particular potentially engage in different ways. One expert on party membership goes so far as to describe members as 'irrelevant weirdos' (Rudig 2011). However, the purpose of this analysis is to make best use of available data on those curious types who do join political parties and to examine whether young party members are at all distinctive in their motivations, behaviour or views. Our approach is to examine existing data deriving from party membership surveys in Britain. The data is imperfect because the surveys span a period of two decades (see Appendix). Nevertheless, the data allow a comparison of age groups i.e. young members and older counterparts. Other studies of young party members have been unable to do this. Bruter and Harrison (2009a, 2009b), for example, surveyed young members (aged 18-25) in 15 parties in six European countries. (N=2,919). While these authors identify different motivations and opinions amongst the young party members surveyed, they are unable to examine the distinctiveness of young members vis-à-vis older groups of party members. Internet-based surveys of the electorate represent another methodological approach. In this way, Whiteley (2011) was able to select party members and former party members from the general population. However, the questions asked of these party members are inevitably rather limited in scope.

Our focus here, then, is the young party member in Britain, and we explore the distinctiveness of this type of member through surveys of the individual parties conducted over the previous two decades. The research questions guiding us through our analysis are as follows:

1. To what extent do young people contribute in terms of raw membership numbers i.e. what proportions of party memberships are made up of young people? Crucially, is there any evidence of change over time? Based on what we know already, we expect young people to make up a small proportion of party members, but does this apply to all parties and consistently over time?

2. Are young people as party members more or less likely to be active? Past studies of political participation suggest that activism involves a degree of socialisation i.e. it takes time to be drawn into a party and to learn the ways of activism. We might, therefore, expect younger members to be less active in party organisations. On the other hand, young people are less likely to have work or family responsibilities and are the very people who can commit to activities like time-consuming election campaigning.
3. Are younger members more or less radical in their political views? Traditional political science perspectives would lead us to expect that young people in parties will be strongly committed to party ideologies or policies, and be less willing to compromise. This is the image of 'young radicals'. On the other hand, should we expect younger generations to be more pragmatic in their political views, reflecting shifting values in society?
4. Are younger members more or less critical of party leaders? If young members are more strongly committed to a political vision, we might expect them to be rather critical of modern party leaders who appear highly pragmatic and professionalised. Then again, if the younger members themselves are less attached to political principles, they may be extremely supportive of the vote-seeking strategies of modern party leaders.
5. How do parties attempt to recruit and accommodate young members (the demand side of youth party membership)? To what extent do parties offer incentives for membership, and what is the place of youth sections within the parties' organisations? If parties are not content to see the demise of young members, we would expect to see active attempts to attract this type of member, and to allow youth sections to wield genuine influence.

The extent of the problem

We begin by examining the age profile of party members as revealed in membership studies conducted over the last two decades (Table 1). Where it is possible to compare data over time, the youngest age categories are in marked decline, except in the Conservative party. The apparent increase in young Conservatives is likely to reflect the increased mobilisation of members generally under Cameron's leadership, but it may also be partly due to the methodology used in the 2009 study. Of all the studies reported in the table, this was the only one to use an internet-based survey (conducted by YouGov) and we would expect younger age groups to be over-represented. We are unable to look at trends over time for the SNP, but this most recent mail survey of party members in Britain reveals a very small proportion of younger members, and these findings are contrary to the image of youthful exuberance often associated with the party (Mitchell et al. 2012).

Table 1: Age of party members

	Con		Scot Green		Lab		Lib Dem		SNP
	1992	2009	1990	2002	1990	1997	1993	1999	2008
up to 25	1	9	15	4	5	4	4	2	3
26-35	4	9	30	18	17	13	8	5	6
36-45	11	9	31	28	26	20	16	11	12
46-55	17	13	13	26	17	24	21	23	17
56-65	23	28	5	13	16	16	19	22	26
66+	45	33	6	12	19	23	33	36	36
Mean	62	55	39	47	50	51	56	59	59
N	2423	1690	498	258	5007	5642	1634	2794	6740

The data suggest a parallel process of ageing and 'defeminisation'. We can compare the sex breakdown of each age category and this points to an increasing male dominance. Although the evidence on 'defeminisation' is by no means conclusive, there does appear to be a general trend of declining female participation in parties (Table 2), and women are particularly scarce amongst the youngest age cohorts in some parties, most notably the SNP (Table 3). It appears that party memberships are both ageing and becoming increasingly dominated by men.

Table 2: Sex of party members

	Con		Green		Lab		Lib Dem		SNP
	1992	2009	1990	2002	1990	1997	1993	1999	2008
Female	52.1	39.8	44.7	36.8	38.9	39.3	46.5	45.5	31.8
Male	47.9	60.2	55.3	63.2	61.1	60.7	53.5	54.5	68.2
N	2404	1690	506	258	5033	5757	1652	2807	6885

Table 3: Age by women

	Con		Green		Lab		Lib Dem		SNP
	1992	2009	1990	2002	1990	1997	1993	1999	2008
up to 25	35	39	40	30	37	37	32	34	22
26-35	39	40	41	33	42	39	34	33	27
36-45	50	30	46	32	43	42	48	40	26
46-55	48	50	48	35	39	38	45	46	30
56-65	55	45	52	53	34	41	49	43	34
66+	54	35	59	43	37	38	51	50	35
Total	52	40	45	37	39	39	47	45	32
N	2364	1690	498	258	5007	5639	1631	2757	6737

Young members as party activistsⁱ

The membership surveys contain many indicators of activism in each of the parties, from self-perceived activism to the number of hours spent on party activities and more specific tasks such as canvassing. Young Conservatives CLAIM to be more active than older cohorts in the party. Self-reported activism suggests that those aged 26-35 are the least likely to be completely inactive and the very youngest group

are most likely to describe themselves as very active (14.3%). A closer look at time devoted to the party in the average month confirms this picture. It is the very youngest members who are the least likely to say they are completely inactive – a majority (six in every ten) claim to have devoted some time to party activity in the previous month. For all other age groups, the completely passive members constitute a majority. However, it is worth noting that the middle-aged members appear to be those who demonstrate the most intense activity e.g. 17% of 36-45 year olds devote more than 10 hours a week to party activities. Overall, however, the younger members look no *less* active than the more mature members, suggesting that the young Conservatives at this time did not require persuasion or socialising to become active. This leaves open the possibility that younger members may participate in different ways e.g. they may be more likely to deliver leaflets than attend party meetings. Unfortunately the 2009 study did not ask respondents about these activities.

Table 4: Activism in the Conservative Party 2009

How active do you consider yourself to be in the Conservative Party?					
	Very active	Fairly active	Not very	Not at all	N
Up to 25	14.3	27.1	32.9	25.7	140
26-35	10.3	27.4	39.7	22.6	146
36-45	13.3	20.3	31.0	35.4	158
46-55	16.3	14.9	35.1	33.7	208
56-65	7.3	20.9	41.6	30.2	464
66+	8.2	22.5	44.7	24.6	552
Tot	10.1	21.7	39.9	28.2	1668
How much time do you think you devote to party activity in the average month?					
	None	Up to 5	6-10	11+	N
Up to 25	40.3	38.1	7.5	14.1	134
26-35	52.1	23.2	9.9	14.8	142
36-45	54.7	20.7	8.0	16.7	150
46-55	54.9	22.1	7.2	15.8	195
56-65	59.7	27.0	5.7	7.6	437
66+	57.6	29.3	6.3	6.9	509
Tot	55.6	27.1	6.8	10.5	1567

The SNP study allows us to examine types of activities in closer detail. Again, the youngest members consider themselves the most active, with fully 45% describing themselves as very or fairly active, and they are also the least likely to report spending no time on the party. The 'up to 25' group is the most likely to attend local meetings, with 46% saying they attend at least every few months (Table 5). More specific activities reported (Table 6) confirm that the youngest group looks really quite vibrant, with a notable difference between the youngest and next youngest groups in activities such as delivering leaflets.

Table 5: Activism in the SNP 2008

How active do you consider yourself to be in the SNP right now?

	Very active	Fairly active	Not very	Not at all	N
Up to 25	13.7	30.9	33.1	22.3	175
26-35	12.5	14.3	41.6	31.6	392
36-45	9.6	16.9	43.8	29.8	816
46-55	13.3	18.3	39.7	28.7	1128
56-65	13.4	22.7	39.3	24.5	1763
66+	9.6	23.5	39.6	27.3	2422
Tot	11.5	21.3	40.0	27.2	6696

Hours devoted to SNP in average month

	None	Up to 5	5-10	10+	N
Up to 25	44.0	40.5	8.0	7.4	175
26-35	61.5	27.1	3.8	7.4	390
36-45	61.9	26.9	4.8	6.3	814
46-55	57.8	29.0	5.1	8.0	1118
56-65	54.0	31.4	7.2	7.4	1728
66+	56.3	34.2	4.9	4.6	2353
Tot	56.6	31.5	5.6	6.4	6578

Attendance at party meetings

	At least every few months	Less often	Never	N
Up to 25	46.0	22.0	32.0	177
26-35	30.9	20.4	48.7	388
36-45	29.1	30.3	40.2	815
46-55	34.2	27.1	38.8	1122
56-65	36.2	30.3	33.5	1754
66+	34.3	31.5	34.2	2401
Tot	34.3	29.4	36.3	6657

Some forms of activity are less popular with the very young members – standing for office and telephone canvassing – but much of this can be explained by length of membership e.g. it takes time to volunteer and be selected for party positions. The youngest members are really quite active in other ways, such as displaying posters, delivering leaflets and canvassing door-to-door (up to 25 group is the most likely to do this), and they are also quite likely to attend national conferences. Notably, activism appears to drop off amongst the 26-35 year olds, which is likely the result of competing family and work responsibilities. The main finding here is that the very

youngest members are not inactive; quite the reverse. They provide key grassroots support and organisational zeal.

Table 6: Forms of activity in SNP (very/fairly often).

	Up to 25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66+	Tot
Displaying an election poster	57.9	46.9	60.3	60.6	60.6	58.9	59.0
Stood for office	6.3	8.6	10.8	15.5	15.7	13.8	13.6
Attended national conf	22.2	18.6	16.8	18.6	20.3	23.6	21.1
Delivered election leaflets	48.9	38.1	42.8	45.6	49.3	46.4	46.1
Delivered between elections	30.6	22.0	25.5	27.7	31.1	29.2	28.6
Helped at party function	25.5	23.1	23.6	29.3	35.8	34.0	31.4
Canvassed door to door	28.9	18.9	21.4	22.7	25.0	20.8	22.4
Canvassed by phone	8.0	9.0	11.9	10.5	11.0	9.5	10.3

We would expect younger generations to interact more enthusiastically with the internet and social media, but this has not been examined to any great extent in membership studies. The SNP survey was the first (and only) to examine use of the party website; the results are displayed in Table 7. Here we see confirmation of expected generational differences, with a very small minority of young members not accessing the party's website. Moreover, areas of the website restricted to members only are visited by less than a third of members, but by a significant majority of the young members.

Table 7: Member engagement with SNP website

How often accessed party website in last year?

	At least once a week	Around once a month	Not as often	Never/ no access	N
Up to 25	21.3	37.9	32.0	8.9	169
26-35	12.9	39.4	39.1	8.7	381
36-45	12.9	31.7	41.3	14.0	791
46-55	8.3	23.9	43.4	24.3	1091
56-65	6.9	19.3	36.4	37.4	1693
66+	3.2	9.3	24.6	62.9	2266
Tot	7.3	19.8	34.1	38.8	6391

Accessed 'members only' section?

	No access	Yes	No	N
Up to 25	6.2	61.8	32.0	178
26-35	8.9	51.6	39.5	395
36-45	10.5	45.3	44.2	819
46-55	16.3	37.0	46.7	1133
56-65	21.6	31.7	46.6	1774
66+	33.2	14.7	52.1	2441
Tot	22.4	30.0	47.5	6740

Overall, younger SNP members appear to be quite energetic and self-motivated, rather than passive and in need of persuasion to become more involved. They contribute significantly to the kinds of grassroots activities we know can energise local campaigns.

The Lib Dem study of 1999 confirms that young members are by no means inactive. Again, the very youngest group is the least likely to report that they are not at all active - this is a consistent finding across the parties. According to some measures, the 26-35 year olds are perhaps more intensely active. Overall, the youngest groups, again, are pretty active types. In a separate question, the two youngest groups report the highest levels of contact with their local party: 42% of both age categories report frequent contact, more than the other age groups. As for types of activities performed, a picture is beginning to emerge of the very youngest members being the least likely to indicate (admit?) that they are not at all active - this applies to signing petitions, helping with fund-raising, and delivering election leaflets. Sometimes,, the youngest members are most likely to report *some* activity but this is less regular or intense. Nevertheless, when it comes to activities like signing petitions and election leafleting this does reflect regularity of activity, with the very oldest members being consistently less active e.g. only 28% of the youngest members delivered election leaflets 'not at all', compared with 50% of those over 65 and 37% of the party as a whole, and for most this was a relatively regular event. Door to door canvassing, however, is most likely to be conducted by the 26-35 year olds, not the very

youngest. The younger members are generally less active when it comes to standing for office, either in the party organisation, or elected office, and they are less likely to donate money (more than 70% of the very youngest members do not donate at all, compared to 35% of all party members) but these findings meet with expectation. The overall picture to emerge is that young members are NOT inactive, but active in slightly different ways. They contribute to fundraising events, sign petitions and are involved in electioneering. These tendencies appear to apply across all parties.

Table 8: Activism in the Lib Dems

How active do you consider yourself to be in the Lib Dems right now?

	Very active	Fairly active	Not very	Not at all	N
Up to 25	16.4	20.9	43.3	19.4	67
26-35	21.1	23.1	28.6	27.2	147
36-45	11.4	18.9	39.4	30.3	307
46-55	12.7	19.9	44.1	23.3	632
56-65	11.0	20.3	41.5	27.1	590
66+	5.3	19.4	42.2	33.1	967
Tot	10.1	19.9	41.5	28.5	2710

Hours devoted to Lib Dems in average month:

	None	Up to 5	5-10	10+	N
Up to 25	41.8	37.3	7.5	13.5	67
26-35	47.3	22.6	12.3	17.8	146
36-45	51.0	30.7	7.5	10.9	306
46-55	46.9	32.5	6.6	13.9	622
56-65	52.6	28.2	7.9	11.2	585
66+	61.7	27.3	5.9	5.2	950
Tot	53.8	29.1	7.1	10.0	2676

Attendance at party meetings

	Not at all	rarely 1 or 2 times	occasionally 3-5 times	frequently 5+ times	N
Up to 25	46.3	20.9	11.9	20.9	67
26-35	50.3	12.8	7.4	29.5	149
36-45	55.2	17.4	10.0	17.4	310
46-55	49.1	16.9	12.0	22.0	635
56-65	50.9	16.2	9.9	22.9	593
66+	56.1	17.7	10.8	15.3	987
Tot	52.7	17.0	10.7	19.7	2741

To complete the overview of activism in the parties, we turn now to Labour in 1997. Here, we see something different perhaps – activism is possibly less widespread (on average, Labour members are more likely to report complete inactivity) and age patterns are less clear. While the very youngest group is far from inactive, it is the

middle aged members – 46-65 – who are most likely to describe themselves as very or fairly active. In terms of hours devoted to the party, the youngest group *and* the 46-65 year olds look most committed. Finally, the older members (again 46-65s) are most likely to attend meetings.

Table 9: Activism in the Labour Party 1997

How active do you consider yourself to be in the Labour Party?

	Very active	Fairly active	Not very	Not at all	N
Up to 25	9.1	15.7	47.4	27.8	230
26-35	6.8	15.1	44.2	33.9	703
36-45	7.4	15.2	44.5	32.9	1109
46-55	9.2	20.8	42.9	27.1	1283
56-65	10.1	21.7	37.7	30.5	879
66+	7.0	18.9	40.4	33.7	1213
Tot	8.2	18.4	42.2	31.2	5417

Hours devoted to Labour in average month:

	None	Up to 5	5-10	10+	N
Up to 25	59.8	25.8	6.1	8.3	229
26-35	67.1	22.0	5.2	5.7	705
36-45	66.1	22.5	5.1	6.3	1109
46-55	57.4	27.5	8.0	7.2	1272
56-65	58.0	26.4	7.8	7.7	870
66+	65.6	24.7	5.4	4.2	1179
Tot	62.5	24.9	6.4	6.2	5364

Attendance at party meetings

	Not at all	rarely 1 or 2 times	occasionally 3-5 times	frequently 5+ times	N
Up to 25	58.1	19.4	10.1	12.3	227
26-35	62.8	16.6	8.8	11.8	712
36-45	61.1	15.8	6.9	16.3	1138
46-55	50.0	15.9	11.7	22.4	1308
56-65	48.1	16.0	11.4	24.6	896
66+	51.5	17.3	11.9	19.3	1223
Tot	54.3	16.4	10.3	19.0	5504

A further question on level of contact with the party (in the last year) suggests that those above the age of 45 were much more likely to be in regular contact e.g. while 25% of both youngest age groups were frequently in contact, this rises to 40% for 56-65 year olds. So, of all the parties examined, the Labour party activism in 1997 was most dominated by older generations. Finally, when specific activities are examined,

Labour's middle-aged members continue to look most active (Table 10). We can identify quite high levels of some activities (e.g. election delivery) but the middle aged members are most likely to perform these tasks.

Table 10: Forms of Activity Labour (Frequently or occasionally)

	> 25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66 +	Total
Displayed poster in last year	77.6	75.5	79.2	80.5	77.4	77.4	78.3
Signed petition last year	61.9	63.8	65.0	65.9	64.8	64.5	64.8
Donated money last year	31.9	61.3	66.7	73.7	79.6	76.9	70.3
Helped fundraise last year	22.7	25.6	31.1	40.3	41.2	38.5	35.1
Helped street stall last year	12.6	8.7	11.2	12.1	13.8	11.1	11.5
Delivered election leaflets	53.4	54.9	57.1	65.6	60.9	55.5	59.0
Door to door canvassing	27.3	28.6	30.6	35.9	36.4	25.7	31.5
Telephone canvassing	12.8	8.4	10.0	10.0	12.1	8.4	9.9
Standing for internal office	10.5	10.7	15.1	17.5	16.6	10.1	14.1

So, activism looks more middle-aged for Labour, with this age group dominating tasks like delivering leaflets and canvassing. In only two areas are the youngest members disproportionately active, and only by a little – helping on a street stall and telephone canvassing. However, Seyd and Whiteley constructed additional questions to explore activism in the Labour party at the time of a general election, and these suggest that young members can be mobilised during election campaigns. While younger members were considerably less likely to drive voters to the polls, take numbers or attend a count, they were markedly more involved in some other activities, including door to door canvassing, attending a party rally and especially inclined to 'knock up' voters: 53% of the youngest members had done so, considerably more than any other age group (45% of entire party). They were also the most likely to have 'helped with mailings' (27%). Overall, there is perhaps less evidence of youthful energy, which is possibly surprising given that Labour was at an electoral high-point.

Nevertheless, the evidence from all the parties taken together suggests that young people in the parties can be relied upon to provide valuable grassroots support. The youngest members appear to hit the ground running in that they are no less active than the average member, and often more so. A common feature of British political parties' campaigns is the use of young members as active campaigners in both the traditional and modern styles (see Fisher and Denver, 2009 for the development of this notation of campaign styles in the British context). The data presented here reinforce such an image.

The views of young party members: Youthful radicalism?

The first point to note is that young members are no more likely to indicate uncertainly or middle of road positions e.g. don't know or neither approve nor disapprove. On some issues, namely economic questions like the role of government, the relationship between business and workers, and equality, young

members often look more opinionated. Meanwhile, older members tend to be least equivocal on some liberal-authoritarian type indicators, such as censorship, stiffer sentences and the death penalty. This also applies to questions on young people's 'lack of respect' and whether schools should teach children to obey authority. This is a reflection of less liberal opinions on the part of older generations in the parties. However, each party has different internal debates and so we examine each in turn.

Young Conservatives 2009

The younger members are more likely to describe themselves as right-wing. It is only in the youngest age category that the majority describe itself as either fairly or very right wing. However, this looks to be largely determined by views on the economy. The youngest members are most vigorously opposed to 'redistribution of income from the better-off to those who are less well off' - 40% of the youngest members strongly disagree, compared with 32% of the membership as a whole. They are also most strongly opposed to the suggestion that 'big business benefits owners at the expense of workers', to the idea that ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth' and to the claim that 'There is one law for the rich and one for the poor'.

In other ways, however, younger members look more 'One Nation'. They are definitely more liberal on most measures e.g. on the position of young people in society. They are less likely than older generations to agree that schools should 'teach children to obey' or that young people don't have enough respect for traditional values, although it's worth noting that even the younger groups quite wholeheartedly support these suggestions (roughly 70% agree, compared with 90% of the over-55s). Similarly, older groups tend to be more supportive of longer sentences, the death penalty and always obeying the law 'even if a particular law is wrong'. The biggest generational divide is on censorship: only 37% of the youngest agree that 'censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold standards', as compared with 67% of those over 65. Generally, we see a pretty clear linear relationship between age and views on these liberal-authoritarian indicators. On Europe and immigration, the younger members are less rabidly anti-EU. On a scale of 1-11, with 1 being 'unite fully with the EU' and 11 being 'Independence from EU', fully 44% of the party opts for the most extreme protectionist position, but only 26% of the youngest members. The youngest are markedly more ore in favour of immigration (table 11), and they are also more inclined to consider the environment.

Table 11: Views on Immigration: Which should the government do?

	> 25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66 +	Total
Let anyone come who wants to	4	7	4	1	0	0	1
Let people come as long as they have jobs	54	53	41	39	36	41	41
Prohibit people from countries other than EU	13	12	12	11	14	17	14
Prohibit people coming generally	30	30	43	50	50	43	43

On special measures to promote women in the party, there is no clear pattern. A majority across the party is against 'equality' according to some measures. Only 14% agree that 'Women should be equal in running business, industry and government, with 17% of the youngest supportive of this statement. The party is on balance supportive of a 'Priority List', but it is those over the age of 55 who are most in favour. The party as a whole is pretty much against stronger measures of ensuring more women candidates i.e. there are few discernible age differences. To some extent, this suggests that the very people who would benefit from Cameron's reforms are somewhat indifferent to them.

Young Nationalists 2008

Again we see confirmation of the general move to more liberal values in society. The young nationalists are clearly more liberal/progressive than older generations in the party, revealed in attitudes to censorship, the death penalty, obeying the law, immigration (sharing traditions) and in particular homosexuality (more than 50% of two youngest groups disagreed strongly that 'homosexual relations are always wrong', only 13% of those over 65). And older members are less concerned about the environment.

There are very few differences amongst generations on traditional left-right issues. In some ways, the youngest group looks less redistributive e.g. they are most likely to agree that 'working people get fair share of wealth' (36-65 year olds are more radical/left here), and the youngest members are least likely to agree that 'there is one law for the rich and one for the poor' -those over 35 are much more supportive of such a suggestion (53% of young members agree, compared with 69% of 56-65 year olds). The youngest are also least likely to agree that government should redistribute wealth and considerably less likely to support raising taxes in order to pay for pensions. However, age differences don't always go in the same direction i.e. findings are mixed, with the youngest group least likely to agree that private enterprise is the best way to solve economic problems and a little less likely to agree that high income tax is a disincentive to effort. The overall impression is that there are very few generational differences when it comes to public spending V tax.

On constitutional preferences, younger members are more supportive of the party's official policy of independence in Europe than the party as a whole, with older members more likely to opt for Independence outside of the EU. In a separate question on Europe younger members are a bit less critical of the EU generally. Overall, the younger members appear most committed to independence, the party's flagship policy (Table 12). The table summarises responses to a question asking members to rank constitutional options, including Independence in and outside of the EU and the possibility of more powers for the Scottish Parliament rather than outright independence. These findings could be interpreted as young members being more radical and uncompromising *or* as most in-line with official party policy.

Table 12: Constitutional preferences of SNP members

	Independence either way	Independence one way then more powers	Independence not first	N
up to 25	64.6	28.7	6.7	164
26-35	63.0	29.7	7.3	354
36-45	59.4	31.9	8.7	743
46-55	58.0	31.2	10.8	997
56-65	52.4	35.0	12.6	1558
66+	44.2	38.5	17.3	2064
Total	52.3	34.7	13.0	5880

The youngest also tend to display the strongest national identity. Or, to be more specific, the oldest age groups are most likely to view themselves as a combination of Scottish and British, as opposed to exclusively Scottish e.g. 82% of youngest see themselves as Scottish only, compared with 73% of oldest.

There is some indication that the younger SNP members are the most pragmatic (and least fundamentalist) in terms of strategy (see Mitchell et al. 2012: 137). They are significantly less likely to agree that 'the primary goal is independence; all else is secondary' (Table 13). The younger members are also more likely to disagree with the idea that devolution makes independence more difficult to achieve. Finally, the younger members appear to have a more pragmatic approach to the importance of party image, being less likely to agree that the party should 'care less about image and concentrate more on programme and policies'. Yet, they are less inclined to consider pacts with other parties.

Table 13: Primary goal independence; all else is secondary

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N
up to 25	26.6	35.6	11.3	24.3	2.3	177
26-35	20.8	35.9	15.4	25.9	2.1	390
36-45	29.4	33.2	12.8	22.1	2.5	805
46-55	33.3	33.6	11.7	19.3	2.2	1114
56-65	39.3	34.1	9.9	15.2	1.5	1729
66+	46.7	30.5	10.1	11.9	0.7	2326
Total	38.3	32.8	11.0	16.5	1.5	6541

Other attitudinal questions reveal that the youngest are definitely more radically opposed to the monarchy, with three quarters (74%) agreeing that 'there is no place for the monarchy in a modern society', compared to 50% of the 66 plus group and 57% of members as a whole. However, younger members are only a little more 'environmental' e.g. only a little more likely to agree that car users should pay higher taxes. Overall, the age differences in the SNP are not substantial and the radical youth thesis is hard to substantiate. Indeed, other research on the party

(Mitchell et al. 2012: 129, 137) suggests that attitudes are shaped more by time of joining than age *per se*, a cohort analysis revealing that those who joined in the 1980s are the most left-wing and those who joined before this period the most fundamentalist.

Liberal Democrats and Labour

Amongst the Liberal Democrats, the youngest groups look more principled in some respects e.g. 25% of the youngest group were against the idea that party should emphasise image over principles (compared to 14% of party as a whole). The youngest (and oldest) were most likely to agree that the party should stick to its principles even if this meant losing elections. Lib Dem youngsters also tend to take more intense positions – strongly agreeing/disagreeing etc. Nevertheless, the young Lib Dems reveal quite strong support for the leadership’s strategy at the time. When asked whether Lib Dems should have maintained equidistance, the youngest group was least likely to agree i.e. 59% of 18-25s disagreed, as compared with 44% of party as a whole. Does this suggest pragmatism? It certainly suggests support for party strategy of the day.

The party’s youth was marginally to the right in L-R self-placement and this revealed itself in some attitudes. The younger members were proportionately less in favour of high income tax; and the youngest group was quite considerably less likely to agree that ‘there is one law for the rich and one for the poor’ (49% V 65% of entire party). However, views on traditional left-right issues are not too clear cut. On some issues, Lib Dem youngsters look to be to the left e.g. considerably more likely to agree that prescriptions should be free even if this means higher taxes and less supportive of reducing government spending generally. Again, the youngest members were the most liberal. A strong linear/generational relationship is evident on one-parent families, censorship, homosexuality and abortion; and the youngest were most vociferously against the suggestion that young people don’t have enough respect for traditional British values. They were also notably less supportive of monarchy and considerably more in favour of legalising cannabis.

As we are also coming to expect, the younger generations of Lib Dems were considerably more in favour of EU integration – and with more intense positions evident. More than half of the youngest members (51%) strongly disagreed that Lib Dems should resist further integration, compared with 28% of the entire party. And a similar pattern is clear on an EU currency – 47% of the youngest strongly agreed with it, compared with 21% of the 66+ group (and 28% of party). Similarly, the younger members were markedly more supportive of immigration (32% of 18-25s agreed that immigration restrictions should be eased, compared with 21% of entire party).

Measures to improve the representation of women have been controversial amongst Liberal Democrats. In 1999, the youngest members were significantly more likely to disagree with the suggestion that ‘LD should reduce priority on women’s rights’ (on

this issue, the two youngest groups were most likely to express any opinion). However, the party as a whole was against measures to increase female candidates, and the youngest were most vehemently opposed; more than one in five (22%) strongly disagreed (11% of party).

As for Labour, changes in the party, British politics and society reveal themselves in less radical positions of younger members. For example, class divisions are less relevant to younger members, as we would expect at the time of New Labour coming to power: 28% of the youngest members agreed that 'the class struggle is central to politics, compared with 50% of the oldest members. The youngest group is the least likely to support tax and spend (79% V 90% of 46-55 year olds, or 87% of party as a whole). The youngest group is least likely to vehemently oppose the growth of private medicine, and least likely to support increasing taxes to improve pensions (52% of youngest agree, compared with 74% of 66+). The young members are more likely by some degree to agree that government should discourage one parent families (43% agree, compared with 15% of over 65s and 29% of party as a whole).

However, this is not the whole story. On some questions the younger members appeared more principled or 'radical' e.g. they were less likely to agree that the party should 'adjust policies to middle ground' - the older the member, the more they are likely to support this (35% of up to 25 group agreed, compared with 58% of over 65s). The youngest were also most strongly against the suggestion that 'it is the individual's responsibility to provide for themselves', and the youngest members at the time most strongly agreed that 'income and wealth should be redistributed to ordinary working people'. They were also more likely to agree that the party 'emphasises image over principle', although really it is the older members who stand out as being less likely to agree with the statement. The older members are also significantly less likely to view the party as having moved from its traditional values. However, on some other issues, the middle-aged categories (36-55) stand out - it is they who are most critical of the free market, and most likely to support bigger taxes for the purposes of increasing public spending.

As with the Lib Dems, the young look more in favour of 'women's rights' but they are not any more supportive of changing the law to allow all women shortlists (25% of youngest agree, and 25% of party as a whole) - the oldest members are actually marginally least critical of the idea. The youngest members are more supportive of environmental measures, such as car users paying higher taxes. However, the youngest and oldest are more likely to favour nuclear power (20% V 11% of party as a whole) and youngsters are least supportive of cutting industrial pollution if this also means job cuts. The oldest members (56+) are least anti-monarchy.

We see the same link between youth and liberal viewpoints on issues like immigration, homosexuality, censorship e.g. a majority - 52% - of the youngest members disagreed that the sale of pornographic magazines should be illegal, compared with only 12% of those over 65'. However, it is the middle-aged who look

more liberal on the question of life-sentences. Finally, the party as a whole was pretty much pro-Europe at the time, and there is generational unity on the issue, with older members only marginally less in favour of European cooperation (e.g. 71% of youngest members and 67% of oldest members disagreed that 'Labour should resist further moves into the EU'). On a common currency, those below 46 are actually the least likely to agree e.g. while 58% of the oldest members agree that the UK 'should agree to a common currency, only 52% of the youngest members agree.

Views on party organisation

Are party members, and specifically young members, satisfied with the internal organisation of their parties? The answer is, broadly, yes. Conservative members in 2009 were asked for their views on various internal organisational aspects of the party, from the selection of candidates to the procedures for determining party policy. There are very few signs here that younger members are unhappy with the democratic opportunities available to them in the party. The youngest members are more likely to view procedures for determining party policy as democratic, efficient, fair and transparent e.g. table 14 reports the findings on whether members view policy-making as fair. It is also worth noting that the youngest members tend to have stronger opinions i.e. be more strongly supportive.

Table 14: Procedures for determining party policy are fair in Conservative Party

	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither	Tend to disagree	Strongly disagree	N
up to 25	25	47	17	10	2	121
26-35	15	47	27	9	2	129
36-45	15	48	31	4	2	141
46-55	13	41	35	8	3	191
56-65	13	44	32	8	3	424
66+	12	43	32	10	2	505
Total	14	44	31	9	3	1511

This picture of general contentment extends to the way in which the Conservative leader is elected; 48% of the youngest members strongly agree the process is democratic, compared with 35% of the entire membership. And a similar pattern is evident on candidate selection with nearly a third of the youngest members (31%) strongly agreeing that procedures are democratic (c.f. 18% of party as a whole). Another question on whether the party leadership has too much say in candidate selection points to general satisfaction among young members (Table 15).

Table 15: Do you think that the leadership has too much, not enough or about the right amount of influence in the candidate selection process? (Conservatives)

	Too much influence	About right	Not enough influence	N
up to 25	24	75	1	119
26-35	28	63	9	131
36-45	30	64	6	138
46-55	23	69	8	180
56-65	33	62	5	401
66+	22	74	4	504
Total	26	69	5	1437

When asked about the influence of different groups on candidate selection, the younger members are more inclined to say women and minority groups (ethnic minority groups, gay rights groups) should have more power. Nevertheless, there is no significant evidence here of discontentment over candidate selection. Furthermore, when asked to rank their party leaders, the youngest groups are not markedly more or less supportive of the elite of the party. The party as a whole, unsurprisingly, ranks Cameron most highly, but he is closely followed by Hague (with others, including Osborne and Fox, some way behind). The youngest members are very similar, but in this case the mean scores place Fox ahead of Osborne.

The SNP study asked a large number of questions on the role and influence of party members. The first obvious theme to emerge is that members generally, and young members in particular, have a strong sense of personal efficacy. It is the youngest members who are most likely to agree that 'people like me can have a real influence on politics'; 90% of the youngest members agree, the figure very gradually declining with age to 73% of those over 65. This youthful confidence is also revealed by young members' belief that 'a person like me could do a good job as a local SNP councillor' - more than 70% of the two youngest groups agree, compared with only 30% of the oldest members. The youngest members also reveal a more social side by being the most likely to agree that 'activism is a good way to meet interesting people'. So much for their levels of self-confidence, but how confident are they that their views can influence the party? There is very strong support across generations for the idea that SNP politicians 'try to represent views of ordinary members'. However, younger members are less sanguine on whether ordinary members have enough say on policy (Table 16). Notably, it is the youngest members who are most likely to grumble that members don't have enough influence, although on balance they do not look discontent as such.

Table 16 'Ordinary members don't have enough say in policy' (SNP)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N
up to 25	5.2	23.3	38.4	29.1	4.1	172
26-35	2.8	17.9	36.1	36.6	6.6	391
36-45	2.7	13.1	37.6	42.1	4.5	801
46-55	3.3	13.9	35.3	41.4	6.1	1110
56-65	2.4	14.4	35.8	41.9	5.5	1733
66+	2.4	14.7	36.5	42.5	3.9	2331
Total	2.7	14.7	36.2	41.4	5.0	6538

A similar pattern appears in responses to a question on whether the party does enough to keep members informed. More than three quarters of all members are satisfied the party does do enough, but the youngest groups are a little less enamoured. However, the data in no way paints a picture of disharmony between young members and leaders. On the important question of candidate selection in the party, for example, there is very little indication of members being unhappy with leadership interference (table 18).

Table 17: 'Party does enough to keep members informed?' (SNP)

	Party does enough	Party does not do enough	N
up to 25	76.1	23.9	67
26-35	76.0	24.0	146
36-45	77.7	22.3	305
46-55	83.8	16.2	629
56-65	88.8	11.2	589
66+	91.9	8.1	972
Total	86.5	13.5	2708

Table 18: 'Leadership has too much influence over local candidate selection' (SNP)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N
up to 25	2.4	8.2	41.2	42.9	5.3	170
26-35	2.1	4.9	46.4	34.5	12.1	388
36-45	2.1	3.5	46.3	40.9	7.3	80
46-55	2.4	4.9	42.3	42.7	7.8	1109
56-65	1.0	5.8	41.4	42.5	9.4	1731
66+	1.9	6.9	42.2	42.3	6.7	2315
Total	1.8	5.8	42.7	41.8	7.9	6513

The Liberal Democrat and Labour studies perhaps contain more evidence of generational divides on internal party concerns. In the Lib Dems, young members were notably less likely to see the role of the member as supporting the party leader, and the 26-35 group stands out as being more critical of the leadership (19% thought the leader had too much power, and 35% thought leaders didn't pay attention to members, significantly more than the other age groups). In the Labour study, there is

some suggestion that those over 55 were most impressed by Blair – the younger groups were less likely to see him as ‘likeable’, ‘decisive’ ‘principled’ and generally rated him less highly. Again, the younger members (this time the very youngest) are markedly less likely to see members’ role as one of support for leadership and more likely to see the leader as too powerful (26% of youngest members of this view c.f. 16% of oldest).

There is some evidence here that young members can be disproportionately critical of their party leaderships. However, across all the parties, the young members look to be fully integrated into party structures and largely happy with the way the parties are organised. The overall impression from all the studies is that young members are enthusiastic, confident and energetic. There is no sense that they don’t have the skills or confidence to make a useful contribution. They are not totally mesmerised by party leaders, but, crucially, they don’t look unhappy with internal procedures. Perhaps they are not yet jaded. Overall, the membership studies suggest that young members prove to be valuable members. They provide organizational zeal by being active in important ways; and they are supportive of the leadership but not in unlimited way. Given the valuable nature of these members, we turn now to the efforts made by parties to attract and involve young members.

Parties and young people (the demand side)

The symbolic importance of youth in British politics is clear. All the political parties are keen to demonstrate their symbolic youthfulness. This might be seen in the leadership elite of the political parties of Britain. The coalition cabinet is younger than most of its predecessors and the party leaders now seem to compete for youthfulness. In fact at the age of 43 (and just a few months younger than Tony Blair was in 1997) David Cameron became Britain’s youngest prime minister since Lord Liverpool in 1812. Labour leader Ed Miliband used the opportunity to appoint rather than have a Shadow Cabinet elected as a method of signalling the youthfulness of his party in the summer of 2011. Indeed with the appointment of Chuka Umunna as Shadow Secretary of State at BIS and Rachel Reeves as Shadow Chief Treasury Secretary, the average age of the Shadow Cabinet fell to 48. As a historical contrast, Attlee’s first cabinet in 1945 had a mean age of 60. In Westminster politics it is now true that being young might be seen as an advantage; at the time of writing, eight frontbenchers were born after the 1970 election of Ted Heath.ⁱⁱ

Moreover the concept of politics as a second occupation has been in relative decline for a number of years now. As the official report House of Commons Research Paper 10/36 (p.45) has it:

One in seven (14%) was previously a politician or political organiser. The proportion of MPs from this occupation has been rising at each election since 1983, when only 3% of MPs elected had such a background.

Thus the pathway from youth activist to parliamentarian is now a recognised career trajectory in British politics, and there is a widespread belief that more are taking this route and that representative politics is become a younger person's pursuit.

There is also much evidence to suggest that parties make good use of young members. A cursory glance at the efforts of the main parties at by-elections in recent times clearly demonstrates the extensive use of youth members in the day-to-day running of these campaigns. Labour in particular has made extensive use of its Youth and Students groups in the by-elections since the 2010 general election. Doubtless this has been facilitated by the relative ease and speed with which students can be moved around the country without disrupting their work commitments too much.

It is ironic, then, that parties who promote a youthful image at the elite level and are aware of young members' campaigning potential, are failing to attract young people at the grassroots. Internationally, Hooghe et al. (2004) note that party membership at an early age appears to be a distinct advantage for those hoping to build a political career but the problems facing the youth wings of political parties seem emblematic of a more general membership decline in that the decline there was sharper and potentially more damaging for prospects of democratic renewal.

There are two central problems facing parties in relation to their youth wings. How to recruit new members and how to assimilate new members into the party structure and activist base. Recruitment and retention of members are important issues facing all parties but there is considerable evidence that the failure to recruit significantly from the youngest sections of society is an ongoing problem in contemporary politics both in Britain and abroad.

Bruter and Harrison (2009) believe that youth activists join parties from three basic motivations (or drives as they call them), moral (they hypothesised these young people are likely to be the most radical of all members), social (those who join the party for the 'fun' are therefore likely to be the least ideological and the least committed to the party in the long run) and professional (the careerists likely to be more moderate than their peers). It is possible that one of the main changes in recent years is that parties have become worried about the need to recruit and socialise the next generation of party leaders, and have sought to encourage this type of youth member. Furthermore a membership drive that recruited a disproportional number of professionally-minded activists might lead to a more moderate national party (especially if such a drive coincides with structural changes to increase the influence of the youth section).

Evidence of such drives can be glimpsed in the *Refounding Labour to Win* literature. Labour's recent consultation exercise with its membership has been seen as an integral part of the party's attempt to reconnect with its core vote. The exercise has produced an exchange of views from members and the party elite designed to improve the responsiveness of the party and increase the sense of belonging that

supporters and members have in Labour in opposition. The consultation process produced a series of documents under the umbrella term *Refounding Labour*. This has coincided with Labour's recent drive for youth members which has concentrated on the literal costs of membership. By 2012 subscription fees for young people have been slashed – a minimum of £1 pa for those under 19, or £1 per month for those under £24 in an attempt to encourage – and crucially retain – young activists (the previous system of discounted fees for one year only apparently led to significant atrophy in young membership rates). With the costs of youth membership now so low it is clear that whatever it is that parties value about their young members they are not seen as an income stream.

The narrative of *Refounding Labour to Win* is that Young Labour has been given new powers in order to strengthen its voice in the party. In response to a well-established complaint from the section leaders, (and perhaps to encourage professionally-minded activists) the youth wing of Labour has been granted parallel rights of access to other party sections; a greater role at conference and in party policy formation and an advocate inside the Parliamentary party with Jonny Reynolds MP for Hyde and Stalybridge being given the position of Vice Chair (Youth) of the party (the position is actually appointed by the National Committee of YL).

Under the heading 'New Training and Mentoring Schemes' the link between youth activism and a fledgling political career is explicitly made in the *Refounding Labour* documentation.

Training the next generation of activists and leaders is essential for the future of our Party... We will be doing a lot more over the coming years... Working closely with the Training Academy and Future Candidates Programme, we will be looking at ways to help young members gain the necessary skills and experience to become the activists and leaders of the future.

As well as the consultation exercise, the *Refounding Labour to Win* programme has launched a set of youth-specific briefing documents. It states that Labour's attempt to re-engage with the electorate after the 2010 defeat is entwined with the struggle to attract and retain young people to the party. Labour it claims strives to be 'an accessible party for all young members'. To this end communication with 'the thousands of new young members that have joined (Labour) since the last General Election' will be improved. Tellingly perhaps, the mechanism for this appears to be new social media; communication strategies with young people typically revolve around websites, twitter, facebook and a new online platform 'which will 'act as a hub for activity where young people members can find out information, communicate with each other and access resources'.

This vision fits neatly into the narrative arc of some recent successes for Labour's youthful grassroots campaigners. In the run-up to the 2010 general election a bottom-up system of rounding up local activists in the north-west of England was developed by local activists using the hashtag #mobmonday (shorthand for

Mobilising Monday) on twitter. Anecdotally at least #mobmonday has routinely been given partial credit for Labour's relative success in the region despite considerable vulnerability to local Liberal Democrat campaigns in many seats (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y74jRHx9XPk&feature=relmfu> for an official Labour account of the use of #mobmonday in the run-up to the general election.)

It might be relevant that the party's vision for the accommodation of youth is quite distinct from the traditional reach for standard members, and a critic might question where the new mechanisms for integrating young people into the standard constituency parties lies. Although case studies of CLP welcome packs to integrate young members are included in the Young Labour toolkit this could be seen as a necessary but insufficient condition to overcome the rather exclusive and arcane atmosphere that often dominates local meetings in most political parties where familiarity with party regulations and recognition of individuals act as barriers to effective youth participation.

Perhaps in response to the re-selection of Ken Livingstone over younger candidates for Labour's London mayoral election in 2012 the campaign team for Labour was remarkably youthful. Less than three years after graduation, Michael Joslin, 23, was taken from Ed Miliband's office to become "Head of Digital, Volunteers and Member Mobilisation" for that unsuccessful campaign. In March 2012 he was claiming that:-

Over the last year the Ken campaign has done something unique. We've put supporters right at the heart of our campaign. We've created a volunteer site to hear and share opinions, allowed people to vote on what our campaign priorities should be, engaged week by week with briefings, socials and events, we even announced our fares policy by text message to people who had signed up. As a result we've had record numbers of people working on this campaign, with hundreds of people at event after event. (<http://labourlist.org/2012/03/better-off-with-ken/> accessed March 23 2012)

The subtext here is that the volunteers, like those at Labour's by-election campaigns since the 2010 election have been noticeable for their youth. This is a common theme in most parties' communications with young members. Parties stress the value of young activists for instrumental reasons but appeal moreover to young people as they are apparently suited to particular roles, and are especially adept at integrating technology into party campaigning.

The Official Young Labour Toolkit (<http://www.younglabour.org.uk/uploads/ce50a778-e3dd-4ad4-69dd-74324a272faf.pdf>) states that that young people are "often the most active members on the ground, but are much more than just foot soldiers" (Labour Party, 2012 p.8).

The 2012 *YL Toolkit* also offers an intriguing glimpse into the mindset of the organisation and perhaps the Labour leadership. Young people can recruit other

young people who might be put off by more established activists and older people. The youth vote is important according to the *YL Toolkit*, and Labour hopes firstly to cash in on youth-focused cuts being implemented by the coalition government, secondly to use its student body to identify, register and obtain the often reluctant and elusive student vote and thirdly (and most intriguingly of all) to present the approachable face of the Labour party to attainees using the party's electioneering software:-

Contact Creator will be able to identify those registered as first time voters and the date they became old enough to vote. You can organise phone banks for young Labour members to contact first time voters.

Thus it seems that parties might feel that technology-enabled recruitment and participation of young people in party organisations is the ideal method of recruiting and keeping young members. The danger with this technology-enabled approach is that as Farthing (2010) claims 'stale' political processes are unlikely to be rejuvenated by the mere introduction of interactive websites. Farthing seems to suggest that parties are set to fail in this regard as new styles of campaigning need to actually represent a new style of politics if they are to successfully capture the attention and engagement of the young. Instead he claims young people are more likely to be drawn to NGO and other group activities outside of the existing political realm. Whiteley (2007) too notes the relative appeal of group membership over party membership in recent times. Sloam (2007) points out that the alienation from politics of many young people may be self-perpetuating, especially if the cynicism of young people is deeply entrenched.

A key debate is the place of youth wings in party organisations (their influence) and whether enhancing their role will attract more young people to parties. Research into youth sectors have occasionally found that young party activists feel that they can directly affect the direction that their party takes on key issues (see for instance the account of the Liberal Democrat Youth and Students' role in that party's rejection of All Women Shortlists in Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005) but a more usual story is that of the energised youth activists gradually becoming disillusioned with their impact on the party to which they had been devoted (Russell, 2004, Kimberlee, 2002). One of the ways in which British political parties attempt to reach out to young members is to stress the impact that young people can have on the party's programme and activities. The Conservative Future website for instance describes the organisation as "the movement for under 30s, including all members of the Conservative Party of this age". It continues:-

Conservative Future is the largest youth political organisation in the UK. The organisation is all about involving young people in politics and addressing the issues that matter to them. With over 15,000 members across the country, Conservative Future runs a range of events and activities, from policy discussions to social gatherings. Members of Conservative Future also have the opportunity to get

involved in campaign activity – supporting and standing as Conservative candidates in elections at all levels, from student politics to Westminster.

<< <http://www.conservativefuture.com/about-us> >>

Conservative Party youth wings have alternated between parodies of the glorified matchmaking society of the 1960s Young Conservatives (“the ‘unhappy truth is that we can still be effectively satirized as an effete social club catering only for political lightweights” as one insider claimed in the 1960sⁱⁱⁱ) and the fiercely neoliberal Federation of Conservative Students in the 1980s. In fact Black (2008) asserts that the decision to move towards the overtly political and away from the social was partly responsible for the decline of the party’s youth wing. The current iteration of the youth section – *Conservative Future* - tries to strike a happy medium but does seem to have stressed the serious side of youth politics and policy development rather than opportunities for networking since the return of the party to power within the coalition in 2010. Even so many branches continue to stress the social side of political activism; several have begun to host monthly “Port and Policy” events for instance.

Traditionally, youth sections of British parties have been keen to emphasise independence from rather than dependence upon the party to which the youth wing is affiliated. As Kimberlee (2002) noted there is a strong tradition of conflict between youth wings and party leaderships over the years. In 1986 the Federation of Conservative Students (under the leadership of the current speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow) was disbanded after continued controversy over the group’s seemingly wilfully controversial activities and campaigns.

The official Scottish National Party Youth wing – *Young Scots for Independence* (“We campaign for social justice, a Scotland free of nuclear weapons and - above all - independence for our nation”) - rather celebrates its autonomy from the mainstream party. The website proudly proclaims:

The YSI, although affiliated to the SNP, is autonomous and therefore shapes its own policies which sometimes differ from those of the SNP - such as our opposition to the British monarchy. Our job is not to pander to the party or the government, but to be a strong voice for young people in Scotland and to be the conscience of the Scottish National Party. << <http://www.snpyouth.org/> >>

Plaid Cymru’s youth section, *CymruX*, makes a similar but rather more dilute point:- We are the Plaid Cymru youth wing and as a result obviously share many of the wider party’s goals. However we aim as a youth wing to abide by the beliefs that our young members have. And we will always stand by the principles of CymruX and our young membership. << <http://www.english.plaidcymru.org/what-we-believe-1/> >>

Liberal Youth (formerly the Liberal Democrat Youth and Students) and Young Labour both enjoy privileged positions in their respective parties. Liberal Youth are officially identified as a Specialist Associate Organisation of the Liberal Democrats which grants them representation within the federal structure of the party and

access to the main policy making body of the party – the Federal Executive. Young Labour which includes all members of the party aged under 27 now has representation on the party's National Policy Forum and an explicit link to the parliamentary party through its nomination of the Party's 'Vice Chair: Youth'.

The Labour party's youth section comprises two interlinked institutions, Labour Youth and the overlapping but distinct Labour Students. All Labour members are automatically enrolled into Labour Youth but it remains surprisingly common for some Labour students not to be officially members of the Labour party. Nevertheless the cross-over between Labour Youth and Labour Students is extensive and it is hard to dispute the contention of Berry (2008) that Young Labour are effectively dominated by Labour Students despite the continued attempts to keep the organisations distinct.

It is tempting to see that Labour are currently engaged in a programme of the *substantive representation of and for youth* in the party. The documentation in *Refounding Labour to Win* (Labour Party 2012) is replete with the language of accommodation and assimilation. The primary stated aim of the programme is "Building a more open and welcoming party" and the section on "Equality" explicitly makes the case for constructing a new architecture of the Labour party with young people and the youth wing fully accommodated so that Labour could become "A party for young members".

A number of submissions referenced the crucial role that young members play at every level of our party, and there was a strong feeling that investment should take place in our youth structures – in terms of representation, events, communication, training and policy development - to ensure that our party is always able to rely on an active and motivated youth membership. Many submissions asked for greater clarity as to the role and remit of Young Labour, and there was a clear sense that it should be given rights and responsibilities that other sections and affiliates enjoy. The desire for an annual youth conference was expressed; where the event should be not just about elections but also give young members the chance to come together and debate policy, agree policy motions and Young Labour campaigns. We agree that the Young Labour National Committee should play a key role in the planning and the execution of the event. It is accepted that the Chair of Young Labour and the NEC Youth Rep should chair Youth Conference, with the help of other members of the committee.

Mycock and Tonge (2012: 144) claim that 'political parties have become increasingly reluctant to give young members too great a voice in party affairs, concerned that potentially radical policy proposals could alienate older voters' (Mycock and Tonge 2012, 144). The analysis in this paper leads to different conclusions. Young members are not especially radical, and parties go to great efforts to grant young members a vocal role in the internal and external running of the party organisations. This contemporary desire to encourage the voice of young people in political parties

is perhaps a direct attempt to reconnect with young people, although whether this will prove to be successful is a very moot point.

Conclusion

It has been fashionable at times to suggest that parties don't need members - that is, that members are no longer in demand. The electoral professional model suggests that parties can rely on other source of finance and win elections without mass memberships. According to this scenario, parties may be quite content to see the demise of membership or at the very least be accepting of the fact that people (especially young people) are no longer prepared to join political organisations.

However, a great deal of evidence has emerged in recent years to challenge the wisdom of such assumptions, members being viewed as important carriers of ideas, fund-raisers and voluntary workers. This analysis of young people in the parties leads us to similar conclusions i.e. young people are valuable members, providing energetic grassroots support, and parties must find ways to include young people in their organisations. At the moment, they look to be failing in this task, and this has significant implications for the future of political parties. Much of the recent literature on European parties emphasises parties' inability to perform traditional functions. In particular, representation relies on parties' ability to aggregate interests. If the parties are unable to attract young people into their organisations this crucial function is threatened.

Given that young members are to some extent distinctive - in that they are active in important ways, have 'sensible' policy positions and appear to be supportive of party structures and leaders - the parties ignore the problem of under-recruitment of young people at their peril. It is in the interests of parties to find more successful ways to attract young people. Exactly how this might be done is another research question.

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Appendix: The Surveys

Party	Year	N	Conducted by
Conservatives	1992	2466	Whitelely et al.
Conservatives	2009	1690	Childs and Webb
Greens (Britain)	1990	4357	Rüdig et al.
Greens (Scot)	1990	504	Rüdig et al.
Greens (Britain)	2002	1297	Rüdig
Greens (Scot)	2002	260	Bennie
Labour	1989/90	5071	Seyd and Whiteley
Labour	1997	5761	Seyd and Whiteley
Liberal Democrats	1993	1675	Rüdig et al.
Liberal Democrats	1998/99	4442	Whitelely et al.
Scottish National Party	2007/08	7112	Mitchell et al.

ⁱ From this point on we examine the most recent surveys available (Conservatives 2009; SNP 2008; Lib Dems 1999 and Labour 1997).

ⁱⁱ They are for the government, Danny Alexander (LibDem, Chief Secretary to the Treasury), George Osborne (Con, Chancellor), Sayeeda Warsi (Con, Minister without Portfolio), and for Labour, Sadiq Khan (Shadow Justice Secretary and Lord Chancellor), Liam Byrne (Shadow Work and Pensions), Michael Dugher (Shadow Defence), Chukka Ummana (Shadow Business), Rachel Reeves (Shadow Chief Secretary to Treasury).

ⁱⁱⁱ Milicent Stephenson, 'Now hear this' *Impact* (Spring 1964), pp. 24–5 – cited in Black (2008) p. 992