Essay in Cultural Studies

The Participation of American and British Youth in Political Life of Their Countries.

Minsk 2008

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**Introduction**

Politics is an integral part of our life. And it really doesn’t matter whether you are a politician by profession or a plumber who is far from world of politics. Actually you may not be interested in politics but politics still will be interested in you. The fact is that every person above 18 years old both in our country and in Great Britain and the USA from the politician’s point of view is regarded as a voter, his potential supporter. That’s why the participation of all the people of the country is so essential and of great importance for politicians.

Unfortunately for them the latest public opinion polls showed political apathy among the young people. The sociologists say that the youth is simply not interested in political life of their country. The aim of my work was to find out the reasons for such apathetic attitude. Besides that I tried to compare the situation in Great Britain and the USA in order to find out whether this tendency is general for all modern young people.

While working on this topic I’ve analysed the results of several public opinion polls made in Britain and the USA, a lot of newspaper articles, news articles on the web-sites of BBC and CNN and the comments of the young people judging this problem.

I’ve found out that the situation is not so simple and not so definite as it seemed to me in the very beginning.

**Political apathy among the youth**

During the election campaign politicians mobilize all their forces and possibilities. They are really fighting for voters. According to the constitutions of the USA, according to the British law as well, all citizens of both sexes over 18 years of age have a right of voting. But in reality not all the people exercise this lawful right. The surveys show that the major part of those who don’t vote is the people from 18 to 25. That’s why it’s so important for politicians to provoke interest to politics among the youth.

The recent research confirms political apathy or a sense of political alienation among the young, it says that they are not interested in politics, don’t want to participate in political life and don't bother about any political problems of their country. To modern youths, politics and statesmanship are things best left to the generation ahead or behind, or to professional politicians and the newspapers.

Conventional media wisdom insists young people are simply not interested in politics. Popular images of youth — causing mayhem, lacking discipline, escaping responsibilities — suggest young people are far too busy to engage with politics.

One of the surveys analyzed the major interests and leisure activities of today’s American youth. [1] These are the results:

99%: Television

98% Music

89% Computers

4%: Politics

Taking into consideration these facts we can’t but agree that the youth don’t treat politics seriously. The lack of interest is rather obvious, but it’s not as simple as it seems to be. The "apathetic youth of today" headlines are a dominant media frame used to explain widespread political disengagement and declining levels of voting.

Tony Breslin, head of the Citizenship Foundation which promotes participation in British life, tried to comment on these results. He has a different point of view than the above mentioned. He said the survey dealt with one of the most frequent false assumptions about the young - that they don't care.

"We take this lack of interest in politics as a lack of interest in society," said Mr Breslin.

"But what we tend to find is that young people lack an interest in a group of political institutions because they can't see their relevance.

"Research shows there's a real deficit in knowledge among the young of the political system - but there's a real interest in single issues. This doesn't always work through to traditional political channels." [1]

Mr Breslin said government ambitions to reconnect youth to institutions needed far more than the lip service of the past - but the recent introduction of citizenship to the national curriculum was a good start.

You have to understand the system to be able to understand the news in the first place. A person can find out a fair amount from what his parents, but what about the people whose parents don't understand it, because their parents didn't either?

The Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme has published the results of its nationwide survey of youth opinion to help find out what our future adults do, say, think and want.

The results suggest there is a level of frustration among many of the young and a degree of fear for their own security in a world where all too often they are the ones blamed when things go wrong.

One of the major themes emerging from the research is frustration with political institutions and authorities.

More than half recognised the way the country runs affects the quality of their lives - but 68% believed the government does not listen to young people.

Three quarters said it was difficult to make their views known.

Only half of those in the survey said they understood how the country is run, the figure falling further among those from poorer backgrounds.

“You have to understand the system to be able to understand the news in the first place. Perhaps a regular article or a tutorial-like website with 'beginners politics' is what we need?” (Helen Hogg, 17, England) [1]

"What we see among young people is that if they get involved locally in an issue and if they are listened to and share in taking decisions, then that sense of involvement grows from the local to the national," said Steve Sharp.

"But we have to remember that the government can't tell people to be more interested in politics, it doesn't work that way." [1]

**Participation in presidential and parliamentary elections**

If we want to find out the rate of activity of people in political life of a country we can look at the number of voters who take part in parliamentary and presidential elections. It will be the right indicator of activity.

According to the British Election Survey, only 52% of the under 24s voted at the 2001 General Election - some 2.2m people. [1] That came a year after research warned the televising of Parliament was turning off an entire generation of new voters.

In 2006 in the USA, 650 people aged 18-30 were surveyed. 80 percent said they were registered to vote, but the pollsters think some of them were lying. Mr. Goeas, a consultant with the Republican Tarrance Group predicted that only 35 percent of those surveyed would actually vote. Almost a quarter of the respondents have little to no interest in the election, and a gender gap is evident, with men generally expressing greater interest than women. [6]

Well, the figures speak by themselves.

Another indicator of political activity is the attitude of a person to political parties, whether he attaches himself to any party or not and why.

There was a public opinion poll made in the Manchester and London area the aim of which was to find out how the young people felt about party politics. These are some of the comments:

“To be honest I’m not too bothered. I don’t keep up with developments at Westminster [the site of UK government]. These days my job, my cash flow and socialising are more important!”(Tom, 28, from Manchester)

“I can’t relate to any of the politicians. They all seem fairly similar and rarely listen to young people.” (Fiona, 25, from London) [6]

Of course these two comments can’t represent the opinion of all the youth, but unfortunately they represent the opinion of the majority of both British and American youth.

“Young people today aren’t interested in politics because we think it doesn’t affect us. In my opinion politicians don't ask our views on issues or consider our futures.” (Kate, 17, UK) [2]

“Young people lack an interest in a group of political institutions because they can't see their relevance” (Joseph, 20, UK) [1]

Of course it's true that many young people take no notice of the government or the countrys' leaders, but I'd say that some find it thought provoking and genuinely fascinating.

Well, in my opinion the above situation envisages us the problem of lack of information. The majority of the young people have no idea how they can make their suggestion and problems be heard. Though there is a solution and some of the young people participate actively in resolving some very topical for youth questions. For example, in the Midlands there are loads of things that can help involve young people in politics and help them voice their concerns. The Young People's Parliament, based at Millennium Point aims to get young people involved in politics. It provides a meeting place where young people can discuss issues, which affect the youth of Birmingham.

The YPP also works to bring more people into politics through projects such as the Spirit of Birmingham II. This is a project aimed to give school children the chance to debate ethical issues.

The YPP organises national and international events to allow young people the chance to get involved in politics. Also new technology has enabled the YPP to join a ‘global voice’ for young people from all over the world. This means that young people here in the Midlands can campaign along side people from all over the world.

This scheme has meant the young peoples concerns over homelessness, drugs, bullying, transport and leisure can be discussed with politicians or other decision makers. There is also the United Kingdoms Youth Parliament (UKYP), which involves young people in politics.

The UKYP’s elections have just taken place to choose five Members of the Youth Parliament (MYPs) to represent Birmingham. The MYP’s will now meet with young people to find out their concerns before discussing with campaigns they will be working on.

Once they have decided on this they have to produce a manifesto, which will be presented to the regional MYP’s. After this a national manifesto is produced which is presented to the Houses of Parliament.

This really involves young people in politics and it does mean that politicians take our views seriously and listen to us. Last year's national manifesto received a 32 page response from parliament.

Unfortunately these programmes are not openly advertised which does prevent some people getting involved. Politicians aim everything at the older generation; even things that matter to young people are not discussed with them. [2]

There is also the British Youth Council (BYC) which is led by young people for young people, aged 26 and under, across the UK. This year BYC is celebrating 60 years of empowering young people to have a say and be heard.

The majority of studies suggest that the young people are just not interested in politics but a closer study is more revealing. If we look more attentively we’ll notice that the youth is not as disinterested as the media says.

The point is that for many young people politics is not about Westminster. Issues like the US-UK led Iraq war have sparked debate and action in recent years. In 2003 over a million people marched through London, many of them young and passionate.

Of course technology played a huge role in organising this protest on a global scale. It has become a factor in providing many young people across the world with a chance to interact and discuss without the traditional middle-man of the politician or news media.

The British Council’s Café Society project allows young people from countries across the world to meet in a relaxed, informal setting and share opinions through video conferencing.

Besides that recently the launch of UK Politics YouTube channel was made, and Gordon Brown had made a statement that politics and new media should mix. A lot of young people support the idea that the politicians would use new ways of communicating. The idea YouTube to promote awareness and opinion on politics seems pretty good.

The concept is actually very encouraging. It's supporting free speech and pushes people to mould their own views and develop a standard of how they want their country to be run. It is getting rid of the "not now, I'll do it later, I can't be bothered" stigma that is attached to a lot of things that need to be fulfilled in life (washing dishes, cleaning bedrooms, election voting…) and getting young people to take an active interest in wider issues than just Facebook notifications.

There is no doubt that the main political event in every country is the presidential elections. Here I should say that the resent surveys concerning the presidential elections in the USA show great interest of American youth towards this event.

Young Americans are paying attention to the 2008 presidential race, and many young people are even ready to help their preferred candidate achieve victory, a poll by Harvard University’s Institute of Politics (IOP) shows. [3]

Like the national average, voter turnout among young Americans has been on the rise. From 2000 to 2004, turnout among 18- to 29-year-olds increased 9 percent, more than double the overall turnout increase. In the 2006 midterm elections, turnout in this age group was 3 percent higher than in 2002, nearly double the national turnout increase. The 2006 election was the first increase in young voter turnout in a nonpresidential election in 24 years.

Today polls indicate that youth turnout in 2008 could once again increase. Polls show that young Americans are paying close attention to both American politics and national and international affairs. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in March showed that 85 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds say they are interested in keeping up with national affairs.

Young Americans share many of the concerns of those in other generations.

Young Americans are ready to help out in presidential elections campaigns – more than a third said that if asked, they would volunteer for a campaign. Even more are willing to if encouraged by a friend. Sixty percent said they would spread the word about a candidate they like by talking with friends and family.

In the Republican and Democratic parties of the USA, much of a candidate's volunteer base is made up of students "who have the time and also the energy to do neighborhood walks and knock on doors and make phone calls," said Jordan Sekulow, who was 22 when he served as national youth director for the 2004 Bush-Cheney campaign. [4]

Working for a presidential campaign requires lots of time and energy, something America's young people have in abundance.

Campaign workers learn new skills on the job. Josh Alcorn, a regional field director for Democratic candidate Joe Biden's campaign said he learned much about time management and organizing. "People are going to caucus for a candidate because they like the organizer. Being able to sell them on yourself before you sell them on a candidate is crucial," he said. [4]

Working on a campaign is also an opportunity to build strong friendships and meet new people across the country, Alcorn said. He said he built a network of relationships that "are going to last a lifetime."

More than half of the respondents said they would join a candidate’s online group, such as a Facebook group. Candidates have been focusing much of their efforts online, but as Harvard University junior Marina Fisher said, students also like the more traditional methods of promoting a candidate with lawn signs, bumper stickers and rallies. “These seem like the oldest ways of engagement we can think of,” Fisher said.

“It is clear that while new media are emerging, the old ones are here to stay,” she said. [3]

By the way I’ve found quite a fascinating fact – some of the young people complain of lack of agitation information! This is true especially for under-18th.

“We start voting at 18. And before that, do we not need to build a political opinion on party views and on leaders? And whilst this is happening, do we not need motivation to go out and physically vote for who runs our country? And what are the leaders of Britain doing to engage this potentially captive audience? Nothing to me, that's for sure…”

“I turned 18 this summer (i.e., I am now legal to vote in elections) and did I receive any information on voting or party propaganda? Not one little leaflet. Instead, I have to rely on the ever-unbiased news and material posted through my door, addressed to my Tory councillor father—so any information I DO read is Conservative based. Are the politicians reaching out to the kids? Well, I would say they are getting better. Some consciously and some are naturals at reaching out.”

“Sometimes politicians shouldn't try and be "in with the kids" — wouldn't this just ridicule their reputation amongst serious MP's and cabinet members? Perhaps there is a point where young people can be included (without being patronised) and politicians can be taken seriously amongst their peers. Getting a balance is difficult.” (Jessica, 18, UK) [3]

Some of those “complaining” young people even suggested to start voting at 16.

“We're not taught about politics and it’s only when we turn 18 that the politicians and society become interested in us, but is this right?”

“Most people argue that we shouldn’t be able to vote until we are 18 because we aren’t mature enough to make an uninfluenced decision until then. However, if we were taught about it and were involved in it we would have enough intelligence to make our own decision. After all, who’s to say that at 18 we can make a completely independent decision? We don’t suddenly turn 18 and understand politics, do we?”

“At 16 I can smoke, leave home, start work, join the armed forces, pay tax and get married with my parent’s permission. At 17 I will be able to learn to drive but it’s not until I’m 18 that I can vote for who I want to be the Prime Minister. Is this fair?” (Kate Sutton,17) [2]

Of course it’s not only the politicians’ fault that the youth don’t participate properly in politics (due to the lack of information, propaganda, absence of proper political studies at schools and colleges and whatever else). There are other factors which influence greatly on a person – a family and media.

The word politician envisages an old, tired and worn-out individual but, in general, we hardly think of youngsters as politicians. Many of us regard politics as "quicksand" where if one gets in, will never be able to come out. Due to this wrong notion, politics is definitely not one among the diverse career options chosen by the youngsters. Many of us portray youth as `cool, young and happening' but we fail to realise the potential and capacity of the young blood in reforming our age-old politics. That’s why all the political information given by different kinds of media is generally aimed at the adults.

“At the age of 39 I don't blame young people for being apathetic about politics. The only way to have any influence is to be selected as a member of a focus group which exist only to provide politicians with key words for their slogans. On the BBC's Newsnight during the Tories' last conference, people struggled to tell apart soundbites from Ian Duncan Smith and Tony Blair. I would be surprised if young people were NOT apathetic.” (Martin Berridge, UK) [1]

As such, a prudent reason for the youth not entering politics is the misrepresentation of the youth as `cool, young and happening' and entering into politics or even discussing it is considered as a waste of time. A very less number actually possess a voter identification card and even lesser number actually go to vote, all of which results in a degraded majority and a wrong party on power. And then, with a frown on their face, the same youngsters moan," Our country will never change". [5]

If we observe from the societal point of view, the reason for lack of interest in politics among the youngsters can be their parents and elders. They feel that politics is not their cup of tea and that they would rather want their sons and daughters to have a secure life. In other words, they want their children to choose a career that has more security and more potential, i.e. a good job with good money. Due to this, many ebullient youngsters who have the real potential to change the political scenario of the country sit in their air-conditioned offices, doing a more "secure" job and deriding and despising the politics of the country. Of course they disparage the politicians too.

**Conclusion**

Having analysed quite a lot of articles, comments of people of different ages and social status, statistical data I have come to the conclusion that the problem of youths’ participation in political life of a country is very ambiguous. One the one hand the percentage of non-voters in the USA and Great Britain is still high. I’ve singled out several major reasons for young people’s lack of interest. They are:

1. considering politics boring and waste of time;
2. lack of knowledge about the political system of the country’;
3. the assurance of no relevance of the participation;
4. excessive influence of parents on their child’s political identification.

On the other hand the rise of activity of the youth on the local level is seen recently and the interest to the nation-wide and global problems is fixated. These are good symptoms which indicate the recovery of the British and American society.

Of course some forms of political participation in Britain and the USA appear to be in crisis. Moreover, the way that the media and politicians have responded to the apparent crisis of youth participation has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A full review of young people's place in the political environment is needed. This requires the application of different criteria for evaluating youth interests, and the avoidance of some of the most routinely used phrases to describe young people's attitudes to politics

The mediated portrayal of youth, politics and citizenship is critical to the future of any democratic state. Frequently charged with being dangerously apathetic, news media could look towards changing common media representations of young citizens, and promote more active contributions.

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