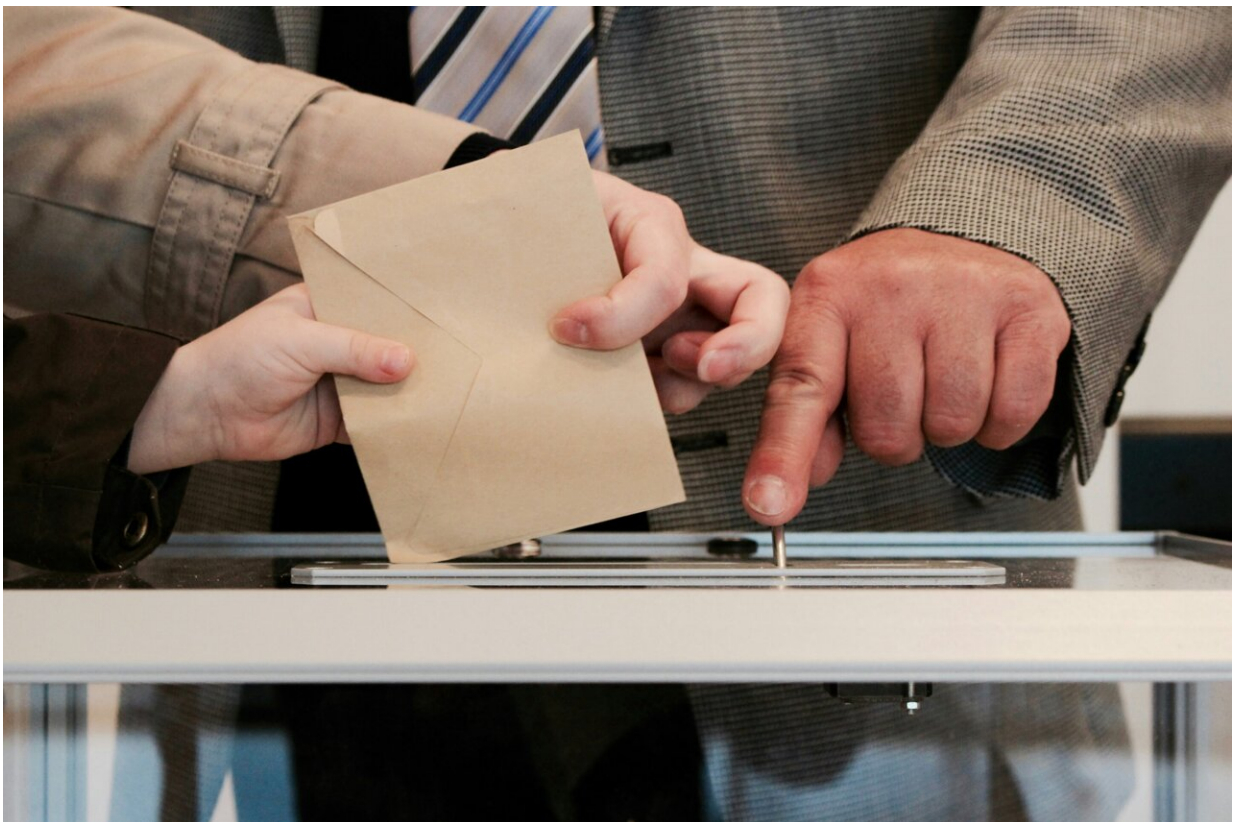


# If we listen to how Gen Z really feel about democracy they might stop telling us they prefer authoritarianism

January 30 2025, by Melissa Butcher

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New research from broadcaster Channel 4 reveals a troubling trend towards support for authoritarianism among young people in the UK.

The report "[Gen Z: Trends, Truth and Trust](#)" found that 52% of the 2,000 13–27 year olds surveyed would agree that "the UK would be better with a strong leader in charge who does not have to bother with Parliament and elections."

This correlates with [a 2023 study](#) from pro-[democracy](#) organization Open Society Foundations, which found 42% of young people in its global sample felt military rule was a good way of running a country. [Other research](#) has found a disillusionment with democracy among young people.

These are trends to be worried about. But Gen Z are not somehow inherently anti-democratic. Understanding why these trends are happening is vital if young people are to participate in democracy.

At Cumberland Lodge, an [education charity](#) that uses dialogue to address social division and conflict, I'm working with colleagues and young people on a nationwide youth and democracy network to re-think what politics in the UK could look like.

## Hearing Gen Z

Our team has conducted 12 [discussion groups](#) with [101 young people around the country](#), looking at what stops them getting involved with democratic practices and institutions. Using this research as a starting point, we are now working with a core group of young people to develop their capacities to engage with, and re-imagine democracy.

What we are learning is that young people's disengagement is not necessarily a sign of apathy or anti-democratic tendencies. The young people we are working with want to engage with politics, but they feel a vast sense of distrust. They see politicians as prioritizing their own and corporate interests over public good, and willing to break promises on

issues that affect young people's lives.

Feeling unsupported by their [political system](#) makes young people feel vulnerable—especially in the face of a multitude of global crises. In their lifetime, the world has lurched from a global financial crisis to a worldwide pandemic and to war in Europe. They have to navigate housing shortages, a lack of mental health support, the climate emergency, [artificial intelligence](#) and changing identity and social roles.

A perception of an "elite" system that is supposed to work for everyone, but excludes or even actively works against the sectors of society most affected by these crises, harms young people's trust in democracy.

But a shift towards support for authoritarianism is by no means inevitable. The [Open Society Foundations study](#) found that 86% of young people surveyed still wanted to live in a democracy.

In [Channel 4's research](#), too, 73% of Gen Z think democracy is a "very" or "fairly good" way of governing the UK. And young people [want to learn](#) about democracy and the democratic process.

Our youth and democracy network shows young people [are not apathetic](#). Many want to get involved. They want a better, fairer world. They see the shortcomings of the current system and imagine something better.

## Getting young people involved

To enable this to happen, political and media literacy is crucial for providing young people with necessary knowledge and confidence. Investment in education on democracy is necessary, as many young people in our network wanted to engage but felt overwhelmed and uncertain about where to start. Liam in Sunderland said, "Most people our age aren't educated on [democracy and politics]. It's restricted

knowledge. We're given the impression that we can't do anything about it anyway, so just don't worry."

"Young people want representatives who understand and engage with the day-to-day realities of their lives, rather than seeing Gen Z as a photo opportunity, as Chloe from Liverpool argued.

"They'll come here and they'll speak to us, but they're not coming there to listen; they're coming here so they can go back to wherever they came from and be like 'oh I spoke to a young person.'"

Many of the young people in our youth network are calling for reform of the political system in order to facilitate these changes: a new voting system, or an exploration of forms of direct democracy.

But importantly, what we have seen in this research over the last year, is that young people can shift how they view power. We think of democracy as more than just systems of governance, but it's also how we organize, how we communicate with each other, how we mobilize around social issues, and how we build consensus.

In this sense democracy is not solely something external and out of reach but something that can emerge when young people come together.

By working to improve democratic education and to put a system in place that listens to and engages with young people, politicians can help Gen Z re-imagine a democracy that gives them a future. At that point, they might stop telling researchers that they prefer authoritarianism.

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