

# Is Voting For Young People: With A Postscript On Citizen Engagement

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## Engagement, passivity and detachment: 16-year-old students' conceptions of politics and the relationship between people and politics

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While there is a wealth of literature on young people and politics, most studies have examined their interest, trust and participation in politics as well as their attitudes toward and knowledge about formal politics. Little is known, however, about young people and the concept of politics. This article investigates 16-year-old students' perceptions of the concept of politics and their conceptions of the relationship between people and politics. This knowledge is valuable for citizenship and social studies education, as an increasingly polarised political climate poses challenges to democratic politics and, consequently, to young people's political engagement and participation. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students at five Norwegian upper secondary schools. The students varied in their interest and involvement in politics. A main finding is that the students perceived politics as processes related to shaping society, as decisions and activities related to ruling a country, and as the activities of discussion and debate. Three conceptions of the relationship between people and politics are presented: engagement, passivity, and detachment. In addition, while the 16-year-olds participated in political discussions privately and at school, they stated that they did not participate in political discussions in social media. Implications for citizenship and social studies education include the need to strengthen the bottom-up perspective on politics and focus on in-depth understanding of political processes and tools and methods of social-scientific enquiry, as well as providing students with opportunities for and practice with handling opposition in political discussions online.

**Keywords:** politics; citizenship education; social studies; conceptions

### Introduction

The political climates in many European countries and the USA have become increasingly polarised (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The global community faces tremendous challenges and threats to key democratic values and rights, such as tolerance and freedom of speech, resulting in severe societal and political tension. This tension is also a challenge to democratic politics. Young people, here defined as those aged 14–24 (White *et al.*, 2000; O'Toole, 2003; Sloam, 2007), are living in rapidly changing contexts that affect their development, socialisation and participation in society.

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