

# Democracy is dead!

## Long live democracies

**“We are student-led” is often how students’ unions describe what is valuable and distinct about their organisations. The primary means via which students lead their students’ union is democracy. A democratic deficit in students’ unions therefore creates an absence of student leadership, and in turn – as inevitably that leadership and control is commanded from elsewhere – an absence of legitimacy. Without legitimacy, the idea that students’ unions are “the voice of students” (another common maxim) is undermined, rendering students’ unions unable to fulfil their primary function and de facto redundant. All this considered (and indeed for a multitude of other reasons), it is important that students’ unions are democratic.**

One of the things about democracy is that most people in the UK believe in it, but few people have a particularly clear idea of what it actually is. Democracy as a social ideal has many practical manifestations; there are many ways of *doing* democracy or *being* democratic. It has become common to automatically associate, or in some instances confuse the presence of these mechanisms, with the presence of democracy. Take voting for example: voting is not democracy, but a means of achieving democracy. As the playwright Sir Tom Stoppard helpfully qualified, "It's not voting that's democracy, it's the counting." However, arguably, it's not the counting either, but acting on the result of that count that is democracy.

This lack of clarity around what democracy is creates a challenge, how do we know if something is democratic? How do we know when we see it or feel it? More specifically in this context, how do we evaluate democracy in students' unions? In order to meet this challenge, the Quality Students' Unions model, developed by NUS, adapted an analytical framework from the work of professor Graeme Smith, head of the centre for the study of democracy at Westminster University. Smith identified what he called a number of "democratic goods" that can be used to make a comparative assessment and evaluation of different democratic innovations; namely inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. Smith also recognises two additional institutional goods to complement the four democratic goods: efficiency and transferability. Here is a brief explanation of each good...

## Inclusiveness

This is the way in which political equality is realised through two aspects of participation: "presence" and "voice". Presence is often assured through representation: literally the re-presentation of absent students when decisions are being made. So, for example, Student X could attend a meeting on behalf of Student Y to make both students (X and Y) present at the meeting. Whereas presence is concerned with who is there when decisions are being made, Voice is concerned with who speaks. For example, if a meeting included an equal number of men and women, but the men dominated the conversation, we could recognise an equality of Presence at the meeting but not an equality of Voice. So ultimately, an evaluation of inclusiveness is concerned with the question: do students have an equal opportunity (in presence and voice) to affect decisions?

## Popular Control

This good is grounded in the literal translation of democracy, or Demokratia, as *demos* "people" *kratos* "power", or "the people hold power". In other words, the will of students as expressed through their participation in decision-making must be acted upon; otherwise their participation (however inclusive) is meaningless. Students must control not only the outcome of the decision, but also how the decision is made. Smith identifies four steps in the decision-making process where students can exert power: problem definition, option analysis, option selection and implementation. Translating each of these stages into traditional students' union decision-making terms: problem definition could be done through writing a motion, option analysis through a debate, option selection through a vote and implementation lead by elected officers. However, it is rare that all students have a say in how this process is designed, or necessarily understand how to participate in each stage.

## Considered Judgement

Held dear within a democracy by the likes of Fishkin and other deliberative democrats is the need to not only inform citizens of the technical aspect of the issues, but also to “enlarge their thinking” through deliberation and the consideration of other students’ perspectives beyond their own subjective, private conditions. This therefore requires the technical information that citizens receive to make decisions to go beyond the partisan rhetoric that typifies political dialect.

## Transparency

This democratic good has two dimensions, internal transparency and external transparency. Internally the main issue is to ensure that participants are aware of the conditions under which they are participating. This includes the long-term and short-term impact of their participation, for example if a student votes in a referendum do they know a) how the issue was selected, b) when the result will be announced c) when the decision will be implemented and d) what its implications are for their students’ union. External transparency relates to the extent to which citizens can understand why decisions were made and how. This dimension of transparency has clear links to accountability, as it creates a focus on the extent to which publicity enables citizens to scrutinise the actions of their institution and/or representative(s). For example, students can’t hold officers to account for implementing policy or manifesto pledges, unless officers publicise their progress and provide opportunities for students to challenge them.

## Efficiency

The financial cost of the democratic process is a clear consideration when evaluating a system’s efficiency. However, just as important is the demands that it places on participant’s time and energy. Indeed, it is very difficult to maintain large levels of sustained engagement from people who have other demands on their time. Bureaucracy, alongside time and finance, is another “input”. But the true cost in holistic terms can only really be assessed when you consider the outcome, i.e. the cost of creating irrelevant policy using a cheap process is arguably higher than creating ground-breaking policy through an expensive process. It is therefore important to also consider the cost (political, financial and social) of not enabling participation in an effective process.

## Transferability

For better or (normally) for worse, students’ unions tend to replicate ideas they see elsewhere and apply them within their organisation. We must therefore be mindful that whatever one students’ union does, may be reproduced within other organisations. It is vital that both the democratic systems and the language that is used within them are simple, effective and transferable or scalable to other students’ unions

# The Democracy Commission

Smith's framework for evaluating and understanding democracy underpinned an exciting one-year pilot project led by the VP of Union Development, Raechel Matthey, which aimed to help students' unions design innovative, democratic decision-making processes based on the preferences and values of their members. To inform the commission, 2,839 students responded to an online quantitative questionnaire sent out by participating students' unions, alongside a series of workshop with key stakeholders, to define functions of democracy in their organisation. Despite including a diverse range of students' unions in the research, the responses varied surprisingly little from one institution to the next and revealed a number of consistent trends across participating students' unions:

## **Most students don't engage, don't feel represented, or that they can hold officers to account.**

Many students' unions have thousands of members. It is not always practical in large democracies such as these to have all students in the room (or present) when decisions are being made. As outlined above, representation is therefore used to practically give large numbers of students a voice and presence in the same decision. However, measuring this representation is also fraught with difficulty. Students' unions will often work hard to design representative structures, elect and train representatives to operate within them. However, democratic values would dictate that students are only represented if they feel they are. In other words, only students have the right to identify if they are represented or not. The first question students were asked in the survey was therefore, "Overall, how well represented do you feel your views are when decisions are made in your students' union, your place of study, the area that you live in and the country that you live in?" The results are displayed in Figure 1.

In summary, 49.3% felt "very well represented" or "well represented" in their students' union, 51.2% in their place of study, 35.3% in the area that they live in and 38.3% in the country that they live in. There were some variations in these responses, for example students over the age of 25 felt more represented than younger students in local and national decision-making, but broadly the responses were consistent.

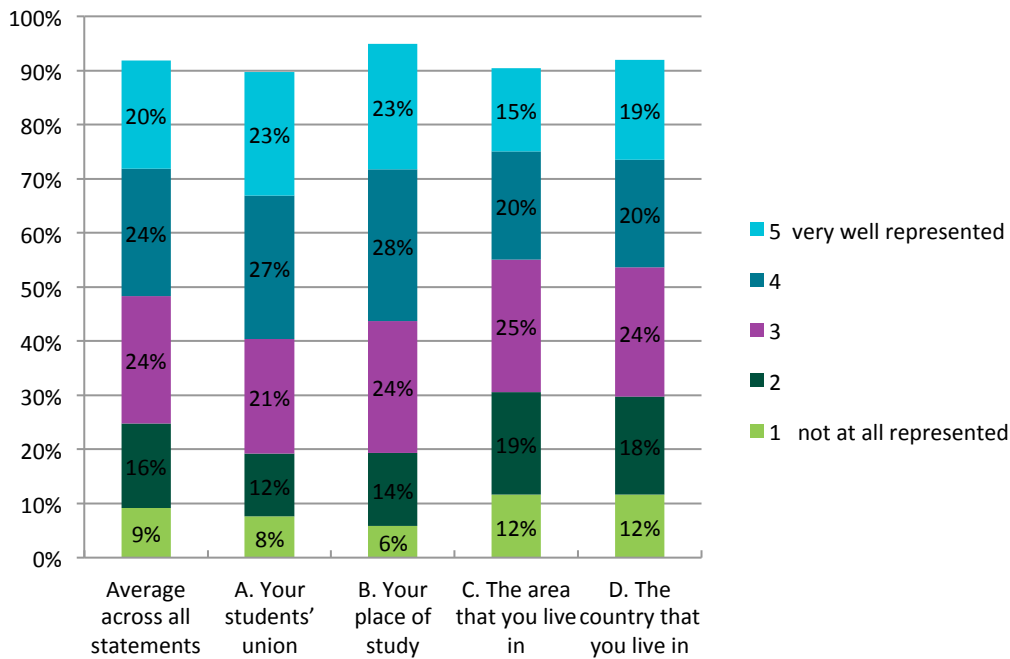
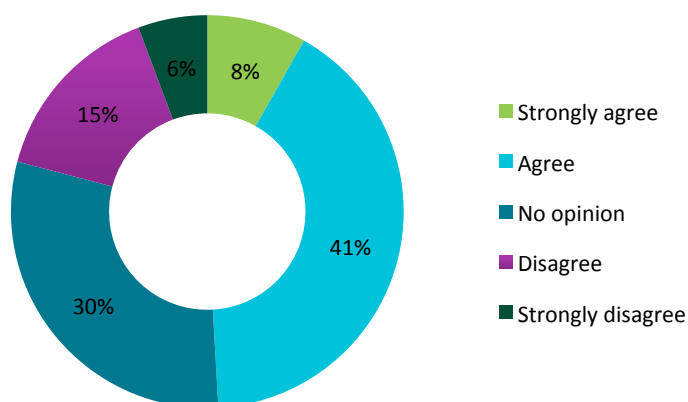


Fig 1.

As most students' unions currently employ a form of *representative* democracy in one form or another, the extent to which they feel represented is likely to be affected by their relationship with their elected representatives – and particularly the extent to which they can hold them to account. Accountability is one of the main mechanisms via which popular control is exercised in a representative democracy. When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, "I feel I can hold elected students at my students' union to account", again less than half of students responded positively. The chart below displays the breakdown of responses. A more optimistic reading of the results is that, of those students who have an opinion, the majority feels they can hold their representatives to account, suggesting the problem is more one of transparency than it is of popular control. This may also be explained by a lack of student engagement; only 47.5% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Students are actively involved in the students' union"

Fig 2.



## Most students don't want elected representatives to make decisions or act on their behalf without consulting them first. Nor do they feel comfortable running in an election to make decisions themselves (especially women)

Most forms of representation involve some level of consultation with those being represented. In simple terms, this consultation can occur *before* or *after* the representative acts on behalf of the students they represent. Writers commonly make a basic division between these types of representation:

Type 1. Enactive representation is where the representatives are told what to do/say by the people they represent. This would mean consulting students *before* a meeting and speaking on their behalf, literally re-presenting the views of students who are absent when a decision is being made.

Type 2. Interpretive representation is where the representatives decide what to do/say on behalf of the people they represent. This is the type of representation most commonly associated with political representation – a student gains their authority from an election to act on behalf of the students who elected them. Students are then consulted *after* the elected student has acted on their behalf and can object to what has been done in their name.

The type of representation has implications for the broader democratic structure that these representatives operate within and how popular control is exerted. For example, interpretive representation relies on an effective means of students holding their elected representatives to account and recalling<sup>1</sup> them if necessary. Enactive representation presents a different challenge; the decision-making process will need be more deliberative as representatives will need to work hard to understand, then re-present, the multiplicity of views within the students' body – voting in this context becomes deeply problematic, as voting is a binary expression of preference, unsuitable for re-presenting a plurality of views.

In the survey, when students were asked, "Which of the following types of representation would you prefer?" they were overwhelmingly in favour of enactive representation as Figure 3 shows.

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<sup>1</sup> Recall is a form of direct democracy through which students can remove an elected representative from power, either through a referendum, petition or forcing an election.

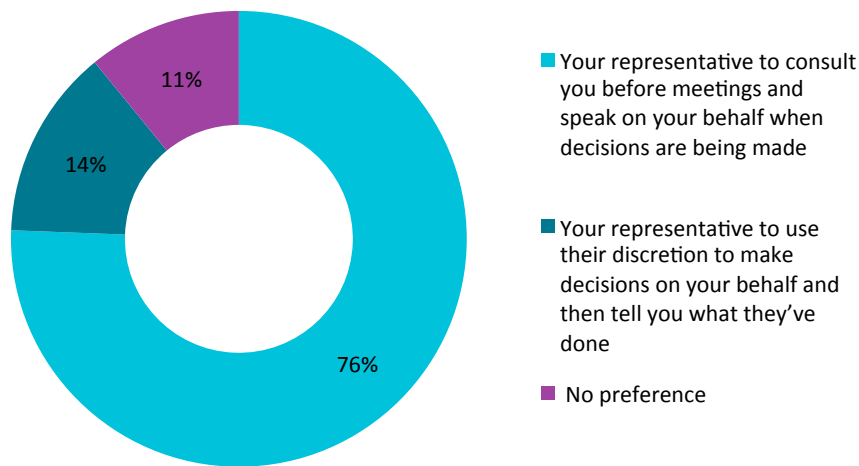


Fig 3.

This preference for more direct control over what decisions are made was expressed through multiple other responses in the survey. For example, question 6A asked, "Which of the following, would you MOST like to see used to make decisions within your students' union? *Please select one option*". Figure 4 shows only 12% of respondents preferred elected representatives to make the decisions. The split between debate and voting varied slightly with some demographics, for example 47% of Lesbian/Gay students preferred debate and only 40% most want to vote, but allowing elected representatives was only marginally more popular amongst Chinese students (28%) and International students (20%).

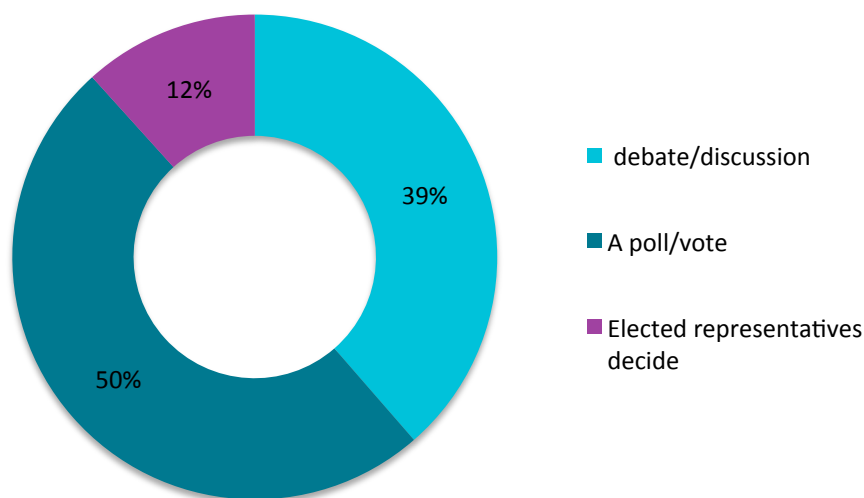


Fig 4.

Even when given more options and asked, "Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within your union? *Tick as many as apply*", 63% of respondents did not include, "Elect representatives to decide on your behalf," despite being given the option to choose as many methods as they liked.

The suitability of representative democracy as the prevailing model for decision-making in students' unions is even further challenged by how uncomfortable a majority of students are in participating in its appointment process – the election. Elections are arguably the fairest way to appoint decision makers, as theoretically all students have the right to stand. However, it is important to consider the extent to which rules, norms and expectations can deter, exclude or undermine participation from certain students. So, although elections notionally allow any student to stand, in reality only a minority of students feel comfortable running in an election. Figure 5 shows the results to the question, "How comfortable would you feel taking part in the following processes in order to become an appointed decision maker?"

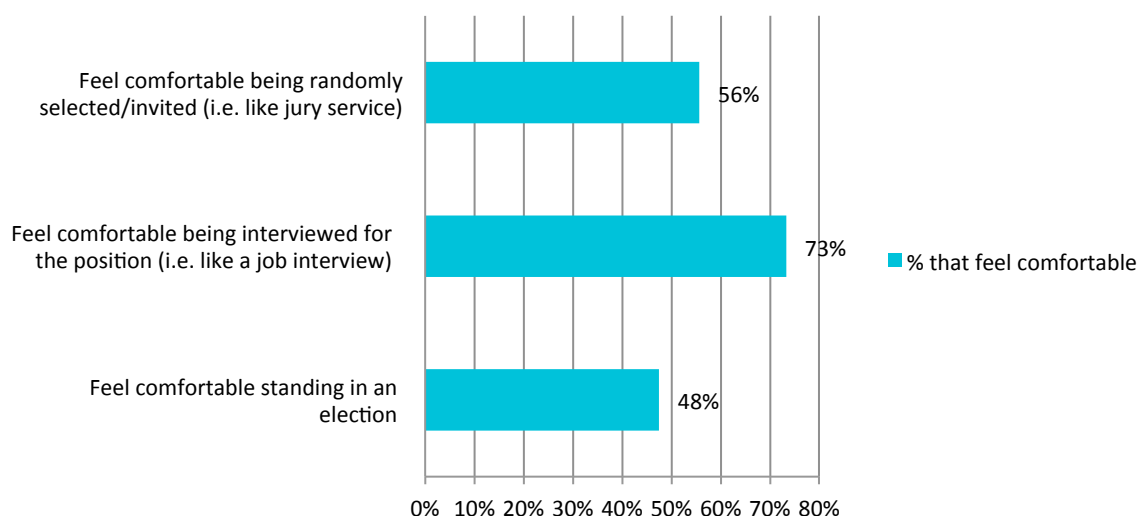


Fig 5.

There was a particularly pronounced difference in the answers from men and women to this question. Thirty per cent women responded to say they were "not comfortable at all" standing in an election compared to only 17% of men. Conversely 20% of men claimed to be "very comfortable" standing in an election compared to only 10% of women. However, it would be wrong to simply conclude that women are less comfortable being a decision maker. For example, 59% of women were comfortable being randomly selected compared to 51% of men, suggesting the variation is with the appointment process (the election), rather than the end result (being a leader).

As a majority of students don't want elected representatives to make decisions on their behalf, don't feel they can hold them to account, don't want them to act without consulting them first and don't feel comfortable running in an election to do it themselves, this research calls into question the use of traditional, electoral, representative democracy in students' unions and urges us to consider democratic innovations beyond the ballot box.



**If students are to be represented, most want to be grouped according to common perspectives and interests, such as what they study. However, there is an affinity between students who are likely to experience forms of oppression. Eg, Lesbian/Gay students share each other's views, as do those of a similar socioeconomic class.**

The idea of the assembly is a long-standing facet of the democratic tradition. In order to either represent students or bring them together to debate and decide on the issue themselves, it is often necessary to group students together around something relevant they think they have in common. The important question is, who gets to define what things are relevant and what are not? Clearly, democratic values dictate that students should define the way in which they are grouped together – allowing them to “formulate their problems themselves, and determine the particular conditions under which they can receive a more general solution” (Deleuze and Guattari). To begin to try and understand the preference for this, students were asked the following, “If a group is ‘a collective of individuals who are connected with each other in ways that are relevant to them’, how do you think students should be grouped to be represented when decisions are being made?” The responses to this question are summarised in Figure 6:

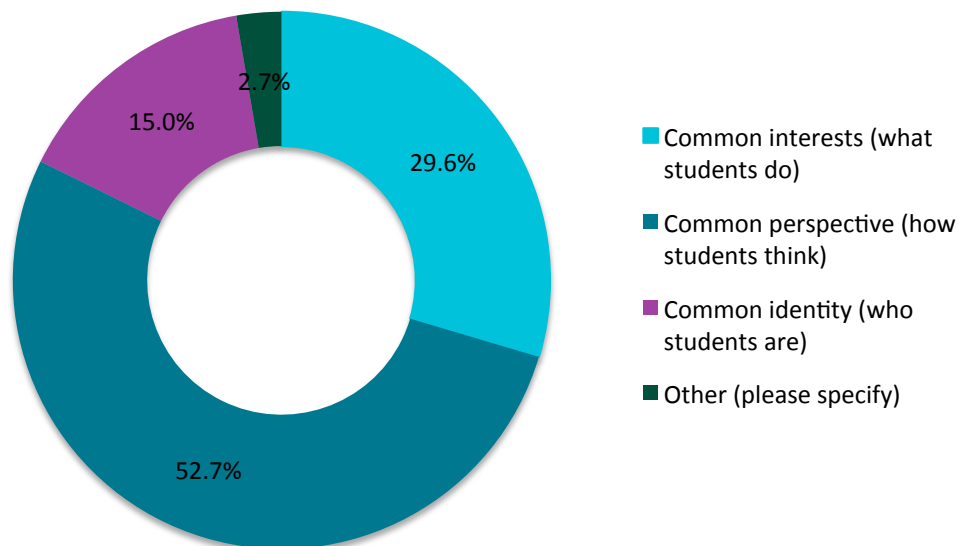


Fig. 6

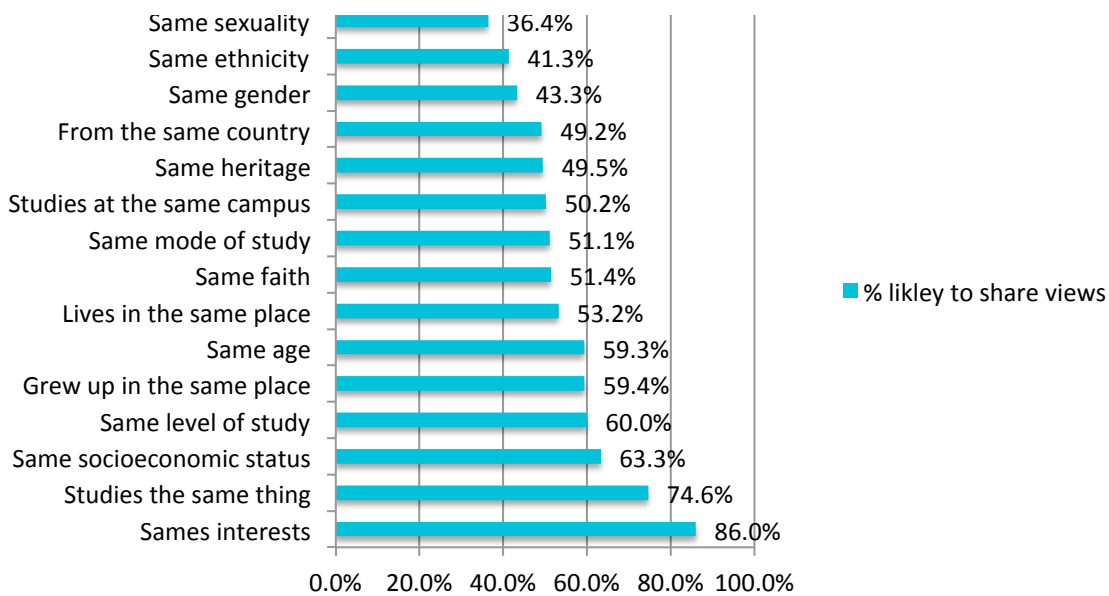


Fig. 7

Overwhelmingly, students prefer to be grouped according to common interest and perspective rather than common identity. However, lesbian/gay and disabled students had slightly higher desire to be grouped according to common identity (22% and 20% respectively). This is consistent with what Jane Mansbridge found in her research, that people who experience discrimination find it easier to forge bonds of trust with people who share their experience of systemic disadvantage. As were the answers to a further question when students were asked, "Please read the list of factors below. From your own experience, how likely, if at all, would you say you are to share the same views as someone who appears to share the following characteristics with you".

On first impressions, Figure 7 may not entirely support the idea of liberation campaigns and associated groupings, until you consider the following:

- 47% of women believe they are likely to share the views someone with the same gender, compared to 37% of men
- 75% of lesbian/gay and 49% of bisexual students believe they are likely to share the views of someone with the same sexuality, compared to 34% of heterosexual students
- 55% of Asian students and 62% of Black students believe they are likely to share the views of someone with the same ethnicity, compared to 36.4% of white students
- 68% of international students believe they are likely to share the views of someone from the same country compared to 46% of home students.

The reading of this table, which in fact strongly supports the need for liberation groupings, illustrates the danger of majority rule as minority interests can be ignored, or swamped in the wishes of the majority. The trend it reveals is illuminated by Brito-Vieira and Runciman (2008), who write that, "characteristics are often used to assign positions of worth in society in ways that affect the groups members' statues, and life chances with reference to the members of other groups; generating structural relations of power and inequalities that are clearly correlated with categories of identity, these power relations work themselves upon the life histories of the group members and

are likely to give rise to certain common experiences (sexual, racial, economic discrimination etc), as well as generating shared views of social reality". In this instance, perhaps it is reasonable to believe that Women, Lesbian/Gay, Bisexual, Asian, Black and other students who experience structural oppression will have a shared perspective or view of social reality, as Brito-Viera and Runciman call it. However, these writers also warn "that essentialist conceptions of identity (say Women-ness) as automatically determining the group members' entire, holistic experiences, views and behaviour in respect to all issues are dangerously misleading in that they result in a denial of the instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories and nature of discrimination". For example, as well as saying they are likely to share the views of someone with the same sexuality, lesbian/gay students also responded in the survey that they'd be likely to share the views of someone with the same socio-economic status as them. Intersectional understandings of discrimination are therefore key to challenging kyriarchy<sup>2</sup>, as although they would both be highly likely to experience homophobia, an upper-class lesbian may have a different holistic life experience to a working-class lesbian.

**Most students want to use voting and debate to identify problems and decide solutions. However, the obvious associated democratic methods such as referendum and open general meetings are adversarial in nature and based on majority rule. In contrast, most students believe democracy should be inclusive, mutually agreeable and aim to establish equality in the student body.**

As already illustrated, as they have little appetite to allow representatives to make decisions on their behalf, students are generally more in favour of direct and deliberative rather than representative democracy. Figure 8 is consistent with this observation, charting students' responses to the question, "Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within your union?"

Campus-wide ballots where everyone gets a vote is more than 10% more popular than the next cluster of preference, around big meetings open to all students and online forums, before the third cluster of methods, with circa 40% approval. Cross-campus ballots are a form of direct democracy, high on what Smith called "popular control" and relatively inclusive as everyone gets a vote. However, in the absence of debate, less considered judgment occurs and, due to an inconsistent understanding of the process, transparency can vary. Big open meetings allow for more considered judgement following debate (though most of it rhetorical) and are theoretically inclusive, though equality of voice and presence is likely to vary wildly with gender, class, age and experience of the process. As another form of direct democracy, big open meetings are high on popular control (even if only by certain parts of the populace) and transparent only if accessible language is used and the process is not too bureaucratic.

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<sup>2</sup> Kyriarchy, coined by Elisabeth Schussier Fiorenza, is a complex system of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination and subordination, of ruling and oppression.

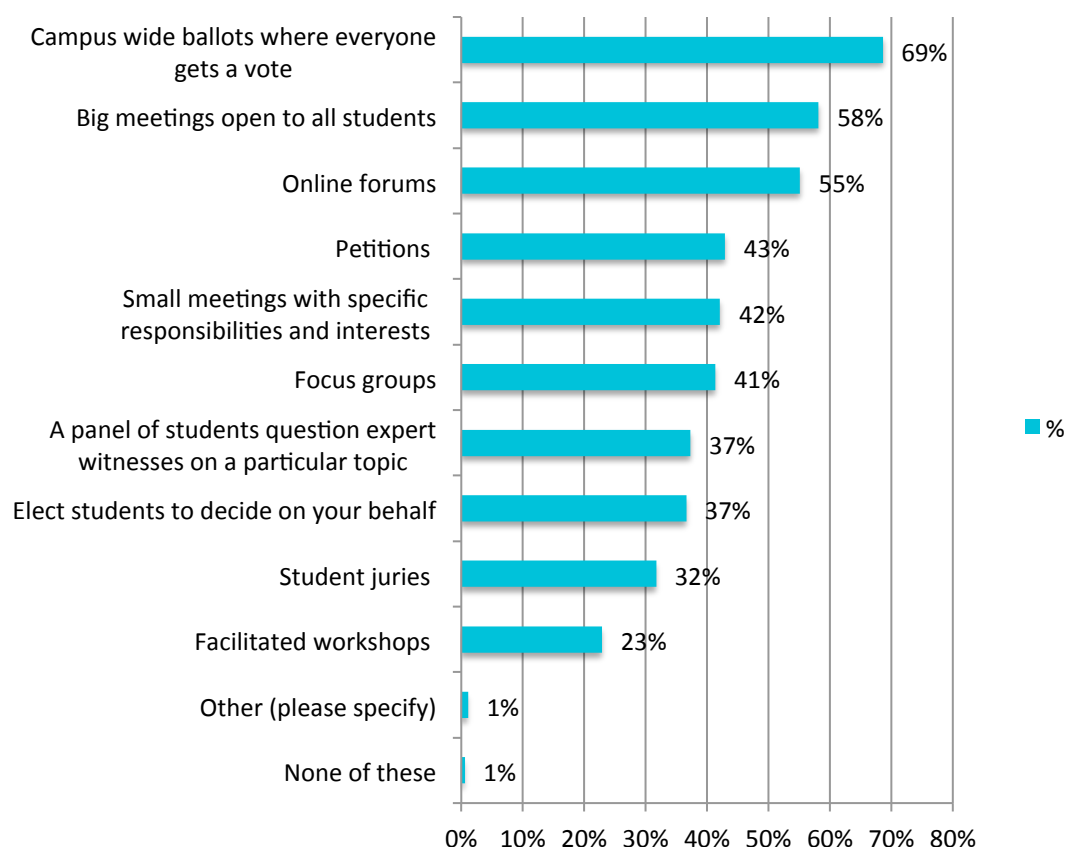


Fig. 8

Possibly the greatest challenge that this research raised is how to balance students' preferences for what could be described as *democratic method* with *democratic outcome*. In other words, how to marry students' preference for using direct democratic method which traditionally operates on a majority rule basis with the preferences outlined in Figures 9 and 10 for mutually agreeable decisions, based more on consensus where the union is controlled by all its members, not simply a majority of them.

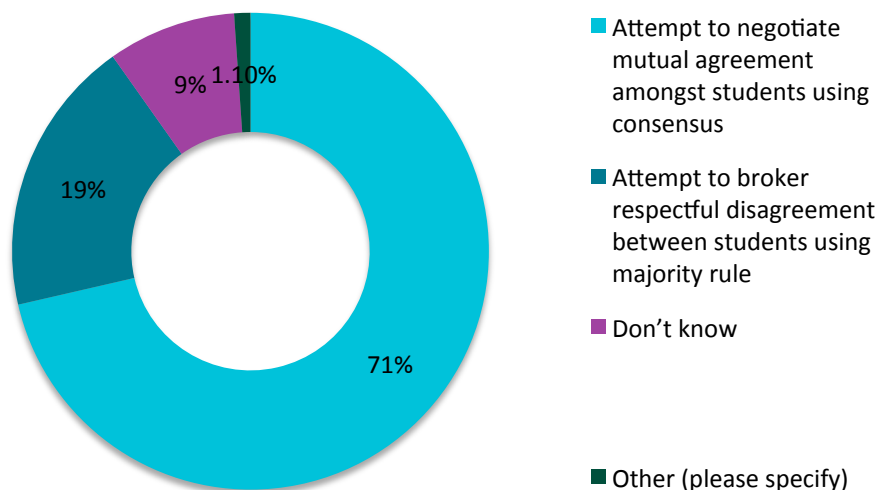


Fig 9.

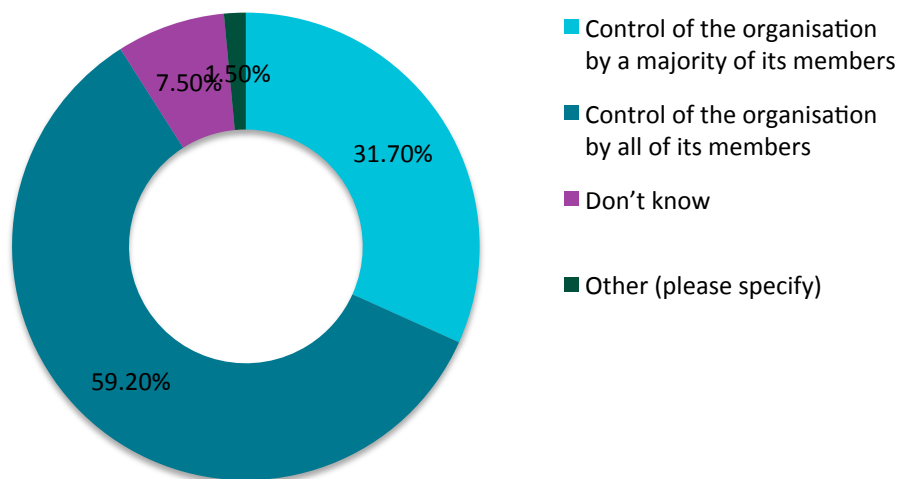


Fig 10.

Figures 9 and 10 show responses to two questions around what democracy should do and be in a students' union. These are deeply value-laden questions that varied slightly between men and women. For example, 76% of women were in favour of consensus, compared to 67% of men. Conversely, 37% of men believe that the union should be controlled by a majority of its members, compared to only 29% of women. Overall, women are likely to value inclusivity and unitary decision-making more than men. Nevertheless, regardless of gender, this combination of method and values furthers the need for us to experiment with the creation of new democratic innovations that do not allow a majority to consistently overrule minorities, while giving all students the opportunity to have a direct say when a decision is made.

As Figure 11 shows, students also expressed an encouraging appetite to participate in different stages of the decision-making. With this information it becomes easier to begin to consider which method you might employ at each stage of the decision-making process. For example, identifying issues to be addressed could be done on online forums, different solutions to these problems could be debated at an open meeting and the decision around which solution to implement via cross campus ballot. This would leave elected representatives to work with the minority of students interested to implement the decision.

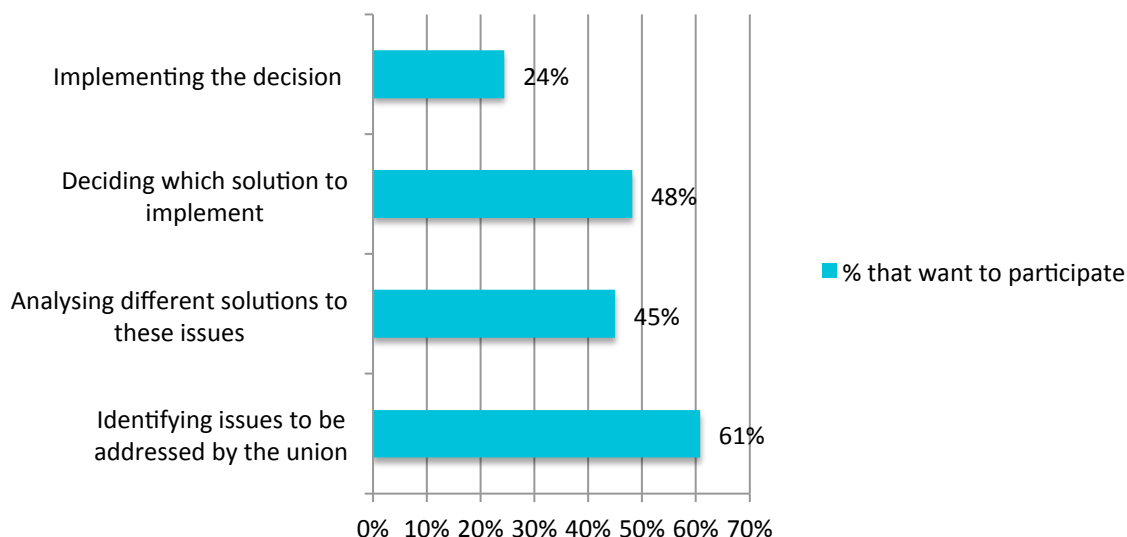


Fig 11.

**For most students, it's important that the students' union influence the institution. However, most students also have a greater appetite than perhaps most students' unions currently provide to influence the way their union spends money and affect national government policy. Students also showed a consistent concern for the environment.**

The vast majority of this research has concentrated on how decisions are made rather than what the decisions are about. The final question in the survey provided students with a list of issues and asked them to what extent they agreed with the statement, the results are displayed in Figure 12. Students' unions might consider the extent to which they provide their members with the space and opportunity to debate and influence issues raised as consistently important. For example, very few students' unions allow their students to exert direct control over financial decisions, nor other important decisions such as the recruitment of senior staff. Such decisions are currently reserved for elected officers. The table also indicates an appetite to influence national government and in particular education policy, a job normally reserved primarily for NUS.

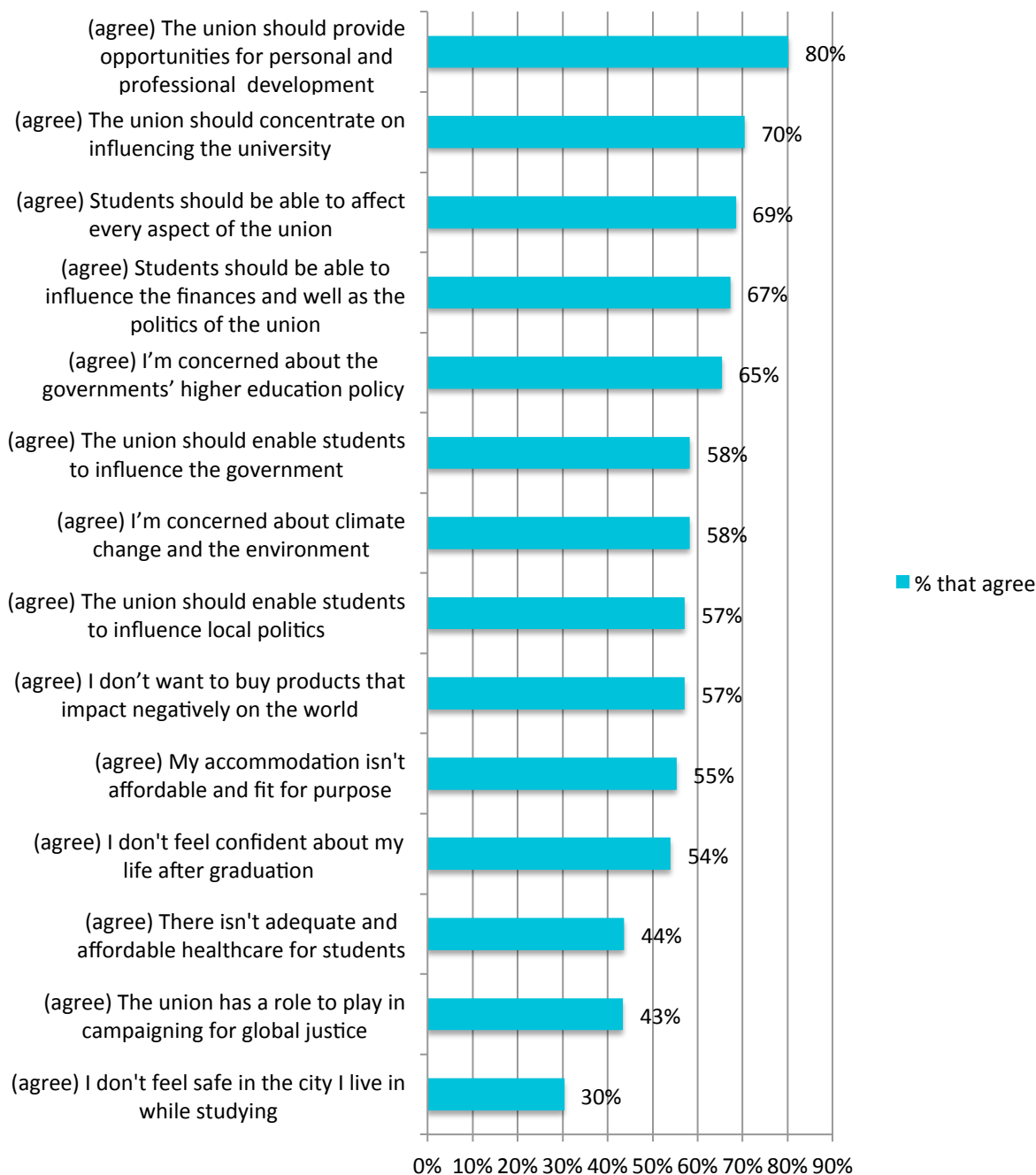


Fig. 12

# Democratic Innovation in Students' Unions

The research removes our attention from focusing on the importance of officers and refocuses our consideration on the power of student communities. The following innovations are being considered by students' unions in order to respond to the findings of the research.

**Preferendum:** also known as multi-choice ballot, Preferendum combines the process of numbering options from the STV electoral process with a referendum. So rather than simply presenting students with a single solution to a problem they've identified, preferendum offers a number of different solutions, which students can number in order of preference, as they do with candidates in a STV election. A preferendum therefore generates the most preferred option among those who vote (which can include "no to all the solutions offered"). Preferendum goes some way to combine students' desire to make decisions using cross-campus ballot with their desire to make more mutually agreeable decisions. This makes the ballot more inclusive than a simple referendum, whilst still strong on popular control; it also increases the potential for considered judgement, as it is not a simple yes or no question.

**Direct initiatives with quorum:** also potentially applicable to elections, this method allows students to submit ideas online to be decided upon via cross-campus ballot. However, as the tendency to vote varies with various factors such as class, age and gender<sup>3</sup> this process could be made more inclusive by introducing quotas for underrepresented groups and/or increasing the majority required to pass an idea. So for example, just as students' unions often insist on a minimum number of students for a vote or meeting to be valid, it is possible to introduce a quorum for the percentage of, say women, working class and/or black students. Another option is to increase the percentage of students who vote yes or no from 50% to say 70%, meaning more students have to agree one way or another for the decision to be made. Introducing more quorums is another way of making voting more inclusive, as it structurally assures minimum participation from different students. Popular control is maintained as with preferendum, though the potential for deliberation and considered judgement is less. NUS have received assurance that introducing a quorum for underrepresented groups in cross campus ballots is legal (see appendix 1).

**Online forum and petition:** electronic democracy is often considered more accessible as students can participate remotely. Where there are a large number of students willing to participate, like in the identification of problems, the use of online forums becomes a highly valuable method. Students can post problems and sign petitions to force a debate and/or ballot on an issue (8% is a common requirement of support elsewhere). Petition could also be used to hold officers to account, by removing them or forcing a ballot on their office (commonly 25% of citizens who voted in the election)

Online forums are inclusive, as not all students have to participate at the same time and space although they don't guarantee the diversity of quorums. As more information can be placed online, the potential to help students understand the conditions of their participation is also high. Petitions, like referendum and open meetings, are a form of direct democracy that enables popular control – however this process would only be used to spark debate/a vote rather than make final decisions. By reading other students opinions and technical information provided by the union on the issue, the potential for considered judgment is also high.

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix 1 on voter turn out, class, gender and ethnicity



**Citizen Assembly by sortition:** possibly the most exciting innovation to be considered by a students' union, this method institutionalises direct democracy. Rather than running in election to become decision makers, every student has an equal chance of being one of (eg 100) students selected to be part of what is essentially a demographically representative student House of Lords. Good if student engagement is low: once students have raised issues they are concerned about (say via online petition), officers could propose solutions that are then debated by this student assembly who can either consensually approve the proposal or send it back to the officers for further considerations with their concerns. The membership of the assembly could rotate annually or termly.

This innovation is highly inclusive as the membership of the assembly is designed to reflect the characteristics of the student body. However, the public control is limited to the 100 students who are selected. Having fewer students involved allows the quality of the deliberation and related decision making to increase. Participants can be trained, well-facilitated (again, increasing inclusivity) and enabled to consider both technical information and the views of others. This form of innovation is therefore very high in terms of transparency and considered judgement.

**Participatory budgeting:** participatory budgeting (PB) has been used all over the world, from Porta Alegre in Brazil to Durham in northern England, to enable people to make decisions about how money is spent where they live and work. This method would enable students to mutually agree investment priorities (e.g. for the union and/or university/college) at open meetings within their localities (e.g. school or type of club/society) and select a representative to sit on broader decision-making bodies who then negotiates with other representatives and presents a student budget to the officers/trustee board/university/college council.

PB enables popular control over decisions normally reserved for boardrooms. As it gives students information about the budget of their institution and/or students' union and debate ideas with others, it helps students to make considered judgements. The transparency of the process relies on the training and facilitation, before, during and after the process. The inclusivity is also subject to the way the process is administered.

## Combining Democratic Innovations

As outlined above, each of these innovations are good in different ways. No one single innovation alone is likely to satisfy the needs and preferences of students in how decisions are made, but by combining them, they can come close. For example, a student assembly selected by sortation is strong on transparency, inclusiveness and considered judgement, so if, for example, online petition is introduced to allow students to challenge the decision of the assembly, then more popular control can be introduced into the system.

## Conclusion

One of the wonderful things about democracy being an idea, or rather an ideal, not an event or administrative process, is that students' unions are unlikely to ever be totally democratic. The advantage of democracy and representation being unclear in terms of meaning is that we can interpret this idea(l) within our locality, within our *terroir*.

What Smith's model does is give us a framework to play with, a starting point to begin to ask some interesting questions and interrogate what we have now, as we have begun to do in this research. When this interrogation throws up results that don't support the status quo, we have to think critically about why we're doing what we're doing and how it can be improved.

On reflection, it's probably not that surprising that students don't engage particularly vivaciously in the traditional, electoral, representative democratic systems used to make decisions in most students' unions. As the research from the Hansard Society (in the appendix) and a raft of other statistics show, the turn-out gap between the oldest and youngest in Britain is by far the highest in Europe. Only 32% of 18-24 year olds are certain to vote in the next general election, compared to 74% of those over 65. Can we really expect more young people to vote for their students' union president than for their prime minister?

The worst thing we can do is conclude from this that students are apathetic. Indeed, students are often over-represented in organisations and popular movements that use other forms of more unitary decision-making. Perhaps it is not surprising that democratic engagement is greater in organisations that don't mimic and reproduce the structures and hierarchies that exist within the institutions they exist to challenge.

After all, coming to terms with the reality that we have to revolutionise the way we structure our decision making because it is out of sync with the values and preferences of our members is far more reassuring a reality for anyone with genuinely democratic aspirations, than the idea that, after a rich history of political engagement, acting at the heart of the public consciousness, students have simply become apathetic, individualists, seeking only to become more cost-effective citizens in a society with an ever-expanding democratic deficit. But let us be clear, if we fail to make this change, if we are unable or unwilling to imagine something better; then our existing adversarial, competitive and ultimately masculine forms of democracy will function (as they do elsewhere) to serve and reproduce an elite political class.

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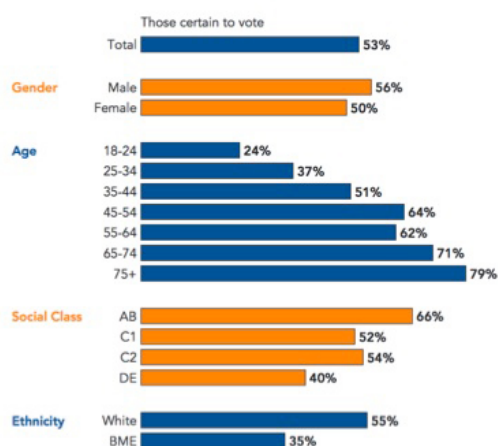
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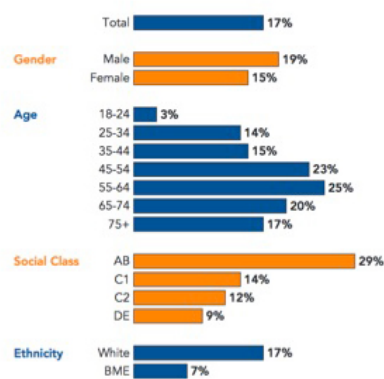
# Appendix

"Social class has more of an impact on political engagement levels than any other factor. On every single measure in this year's Audit, people classified as social grades AB are more politically engaged than DEs, frequently by a margin of around 15 to 20 percentage points. Correspondingly, university graduates are significantly more engaged than those with fewer or no qualifications, and readers of quality newspapers more so than readers of the popular press. All three factors are strongly inter-correlated" – Hansard Society Annual Audit of Political Engagement



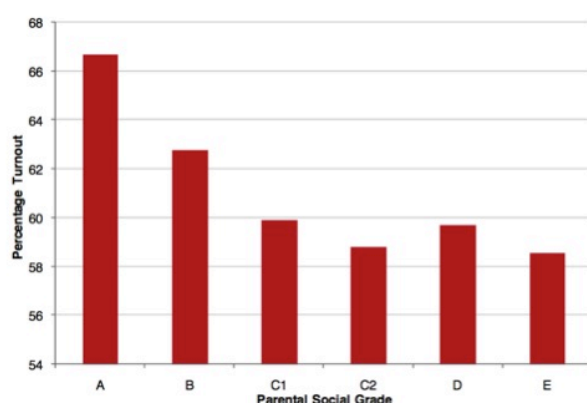
Base: 1,051 British adults 18+. Fieldwork dates: 11 – 17 December 2008

Q Which of these, if any, have you done in the last two or three years?  
'Presented my views to a local councillor or MP'



Base: 1,051 British adults 18+. Fieldwork dates: 11 – 17 December 2008

The two tables above are taken from the Hansard Society annual audit of Political Engagement, clearly illustrating how levels of engagement vary with gender, age, class and ethnicity. A comprehensive analysis of the political views of the student population over a four-year period by Professor Paul Whiteley (University of Essex) identified as similar trend. The table below shows percentage of students who voted in the last general election from different socio-economic groups.



The law firm BWB have provided the following advice regarding quorums:

The Equality Act does allow membership organisations to take positive action if the following two conditions are met:

Participation in an activity by persons who share a protected characteristic (e.g. sex) is disproportionately low – e.g., if women’s participation at Company Law Meetings is disproportionately low compared to men’s participation; and

The action is a proportionate means of achieving the aim of enabling or encouraging persons who share the characteristic to participate in that activity – i.e. if introducing the 50% quorum is a proportionate means of enabling or encouraging women to participate in Company Law Meetings.