

Book reveals young people's views of politicians

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Politicians need to consider more carefully how they communicate with young people if they are to be trusted and respected as much as 'celebrity' politicians, according to a new book by academics at the University of East Anglia.

From Entertainment to Citizenship: Politics and Popular Culture explores how politics features in [popular culture](#) - from soap operas to pop songs and video games - and reveals for the first time how [young people](#) in Britain use popular culture to shape and express their [political views](#) and values.

It comes amid widespread concern about young people's disengagement from politics, and a widespread assumption that part of the explanation for this is mass media in general and popular culture in particular.

The book, by Professor John Street, Dr Sanna Inthorn and Dr Martin Scott, challenges these assumptions and draws on research that compared different forms of popular culture. The researchers focused on first-time voters, young people aged 17-18 years old, and how they talk about the popular culture they enjoy and dislike.

The book reveals how the young use shows like X-Factor to comment on how power ought to be used, and how they respond to celebrity [politicians](#) like Bono and Bob Geldof. For example, young people afford some celebrities the right to lead or 'represent' them, but this right is granted cautiously and conservatively. Just because they like a star, it

does not mean that they trust them as a political representative.

Music entrepreneur and X Factor creator Simon Cowell was seen as powerful and someone who might make a good prime minister, while TV presenter Jeremy Clarkson was someone with the ability to speak for the people. Rapper and [music](#) producer Kanye West had 'legend' status and was therefore someone who could be trusted, while singer Kylie Minogue was seen as a credible advocate for a cancer research campaign. But Bono and Geldof were treated with less respect because they were seen as 'lecturing' to people.

Prof Street said: "Celebrities to these young people represented a welcome alternative to elected politicians whom they distrusted. Their positive attitude to celebrity politics represented a challenge to the traditional conduct of politics. Yet while they may be perceived as more authentic political actors, not all celebrities were thought to be cut out for political leadership.

"Young people are often portrayed as the most politically disenchanted of all generations. The young people we spoke to were deeply suspicious of politicians' motives. They thought politicians were boring, but also argumentative, bossy and not like ordinary citizens. They told us several things which we think are important for politicians who want to engage with young citizens and who want to get them interested in politics."

Politicians need to come across as people who care about and understand an issue, and young people like to know if someone's personal experience has informed their political views. Politicians willing to reveal a little bit about themselves, who explain why something matters to them, might not gain 'legend' status like certain musicians or celebrities, but might improve their chances of being trusted and listened to.

"Politicians who pretend they are someone they are not, have no chance of being respected by young people," said Prof Street. "All they want is to know who you are and why what you do matters to you and them. The display of emotions, giggling and a youthful demeanour should also have a place in politics. Formal politics is important, however the performance of importance can be off-putting to a young person taking the first tentative steps towards engagement in formal politics."

The book explores how young people connect the pleasures of popular culture to the world at large, and how it is not simply a matter of escapism and entertainment, but of engagement too through a range of television genres, popular music and video games representing political issues.

Prof Street said the place of popular culture in politics, and its contribution to democratic life, had too often been misrepresented or misunderstood, something the book aimed to correct.

"The links between popular culture and politics are dismissed when it is thought that popular culture diminishes politics, for example when politicians appear on television shows like I'm a celebrity get me out of here. The assumption is that what they are doing is a desperate attempt to appear 'relevant' or to revive a flagging career. "But there are times when these links are taken with the utmost seriousness. During the Arab Spring of 2011, much was made of the role played by music and musicians inspiring the rebellion in Tunisia or the crowds gathered in Tahrir Square in Cairo."

Prof Street added: "Perhaps more than ever it is crucial that young people have an opportunity to explore the values that govern the relationship between members of society, and the institutions of government and state that influence their everyday lives. They need more confidence in their own ability to make their voices heard and to

have an impact on government [politics](#). They need to feel entitled to do so and not to be intimidated by a culture that privileges masculinity, maturity and capitalist success."

From Entertainment to Citizenship: Politics and Popular Culture is published by Manchester University Press.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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