

# Political engagement and young people in Great Britain: A new trend or a transitory phase? The death throes of democracy or a democratic phoenix?

*Emerging findings from the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS)*

## Citizenship + civic engagement are changing

- Globalisation and the shift towards post-national/ cosmopolitan values and identities
- Decline of identities based on ideologies, political parties and class cleavages
- Post-materialism and the shift towards 'expressive', 'self-actualising', or issue politics
- Technological developments - esp. the internet

# The implications are contested

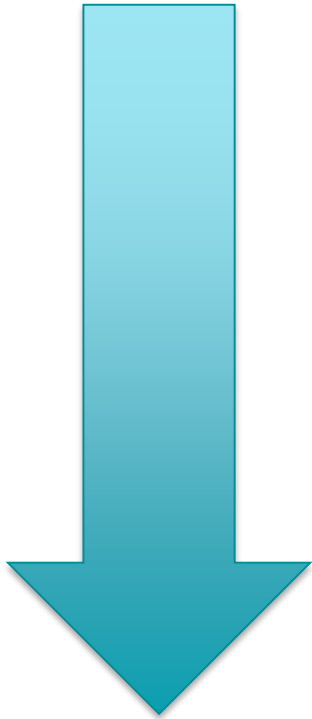


Civic engagement is in decline,  
democracy in its death throes

Democracy is being re-invented, a  
phoenix arising from the ashes of  
institutional politics

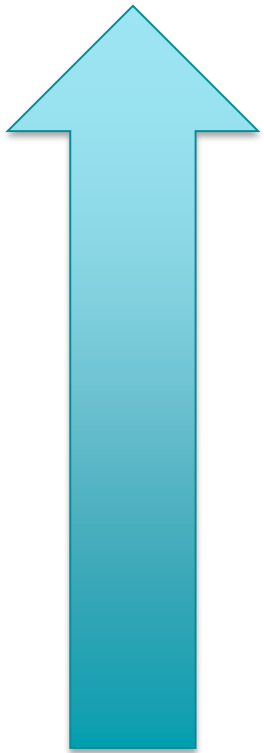


## Thesis 1: Democracy in decline?



- Steep decline in participation in conventional measures of political behaviour
  - Voting in general elections
  - Membership of political parties
  - Trust in political institutions

## Thesis 2: Transformation, not crisis?



- Yes, voting has declined, but that's OK because **new** 'expressive' repertoires of citizenship are emerging:
  - Boycotts and 'buycots'
  - Petitions and protests
  - Contacting the media + using social media
- In short, "...citizenship is not dead, but found in new places... the site of citizens." (Scammell, 2000: 351)

## Transformation thesis invigorated by technological developments

- Internet – increases access to information, lowers the cost of gathering information
- Web 2.0 tools – lower the cost of participation, but also create new spaces for expressive participation
- Creates new communities and new opportunities for fostering trust
- May even boost off-line civic engagement

## Young people at the heart of this debate

- **The ‘generational replacement’ thesis –**
  - Young people = the least likely to participate in conventional political activities like voting
  - In 2015, 43% of 18-24 year olds voted v 66% overall v 78% of the over 65s.\*\*
- **The ‘digital natives’ thesis –**
  - Young people = the *most* likely to be on-line and most likely to use the tools that are supposed to be facilitating new types of citizen-led civic engagement

## Current research challenges

1. How widespread are these expressive activities?
2. How equitably distributed are these activities?
3. How unique are these activities?
4. And how do we measure a moving target?
5. And where do we get the best data from?



## Key findings

- Yes, the *range and types* of expressive engagement are proliferating
- But only a small proportion of young people using most of these tools. Voting still matters.
- Engagement is also typically unequal
- And these inequalities emerge at an early age

# Data sources

## 1. Cross-sectional

- Web survey in June/ July 2014 (N = 2025)
- Young people age 22 - 29
- England (n= 1003), Scotland (n = 520) and Wales (n = 502)

## 2. Longitudinal data

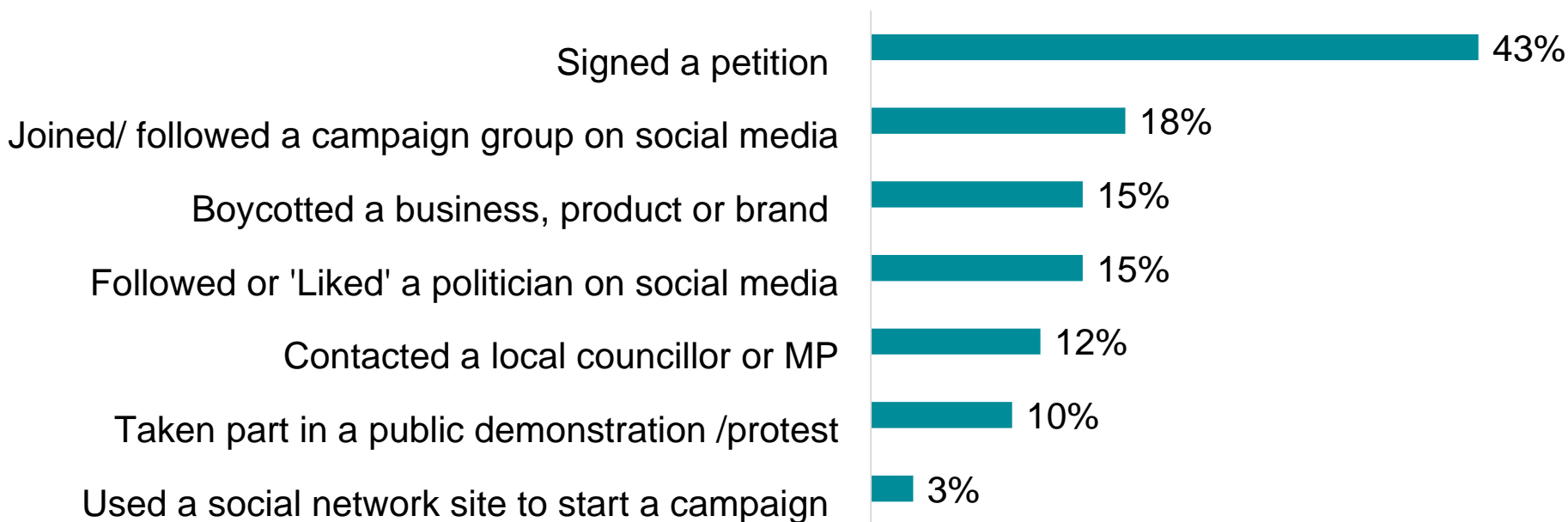
- CELS data from England
  - 6 waves (aged 12, 14, 16, 20, 23)
- **Both datasets weighted to reflect**
    1. Gender, region, ethnicity and highest qualification per country,
    2. (For cross-sectional) Proportional size of population in GB

## Finding 1

*The range of expressive activities may be proliferating, but for the most part, they are still not practiced widely*

# Proportions of young people participating in expressive activities

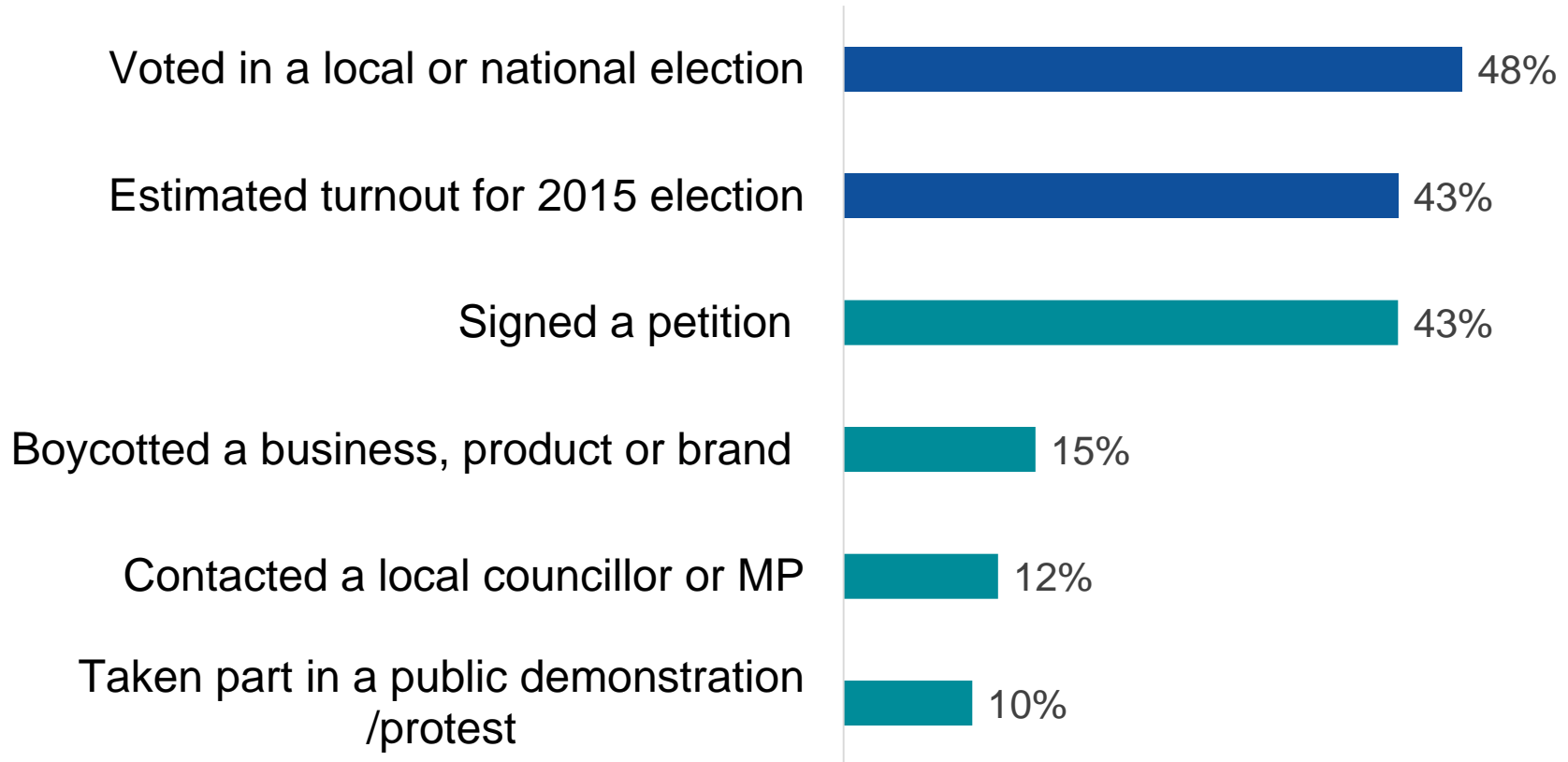
*Have you ever.... (% yes)*



*Source: 2025 young people aged 22-29 in England, Scotland and Wales, June-July 2014*

## Finding 2

*Today's youth may vote less than their elders (or than previous generations), but more young people are using this type of political expression than expressive politics (or at least most of them)*

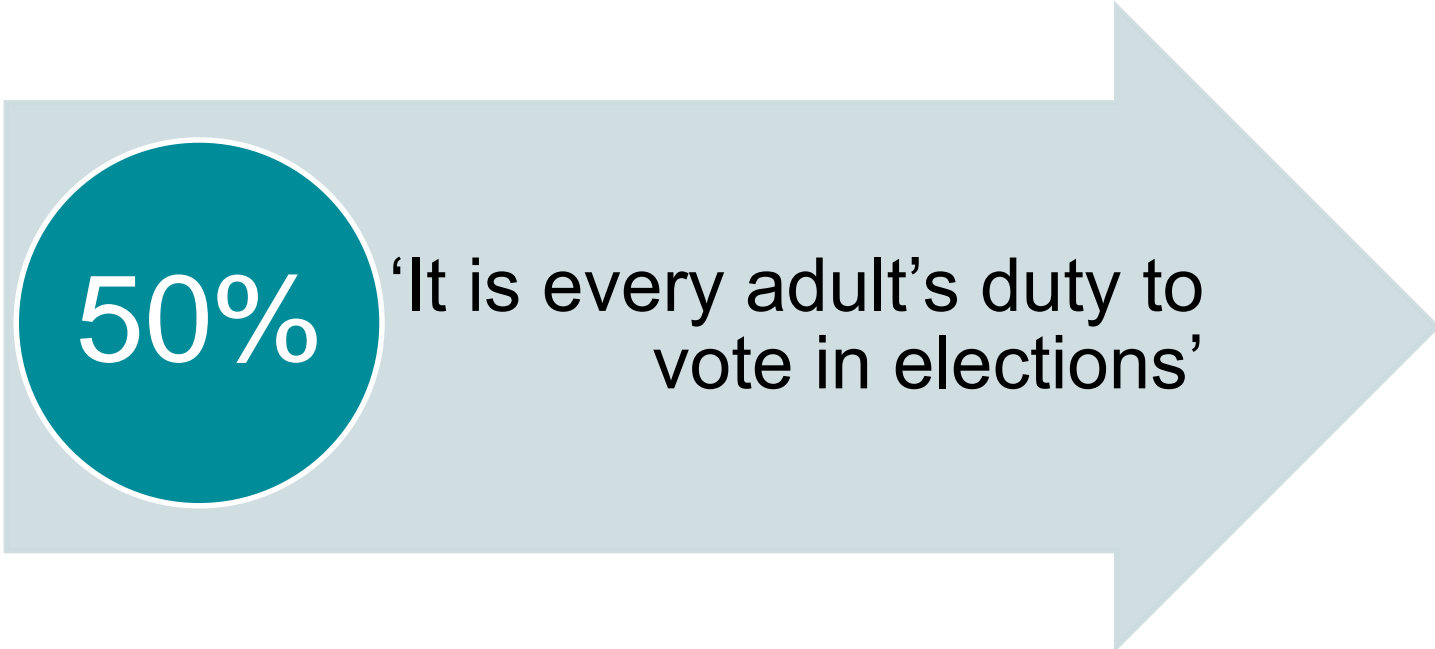


*Source: 2025 young people aged 22-29 in England, Scotland and Wales, June-July 2014*

# The ballot box still matters to young people...

A teal-colored circle with a white border, containing the text '50%' in white, bold, sans-serif font.

50%

A large, light blue arrow pointing to the right, containing the text '50%' and a quote.

'It is every adult's duty to vote in elections'

## Finding 3

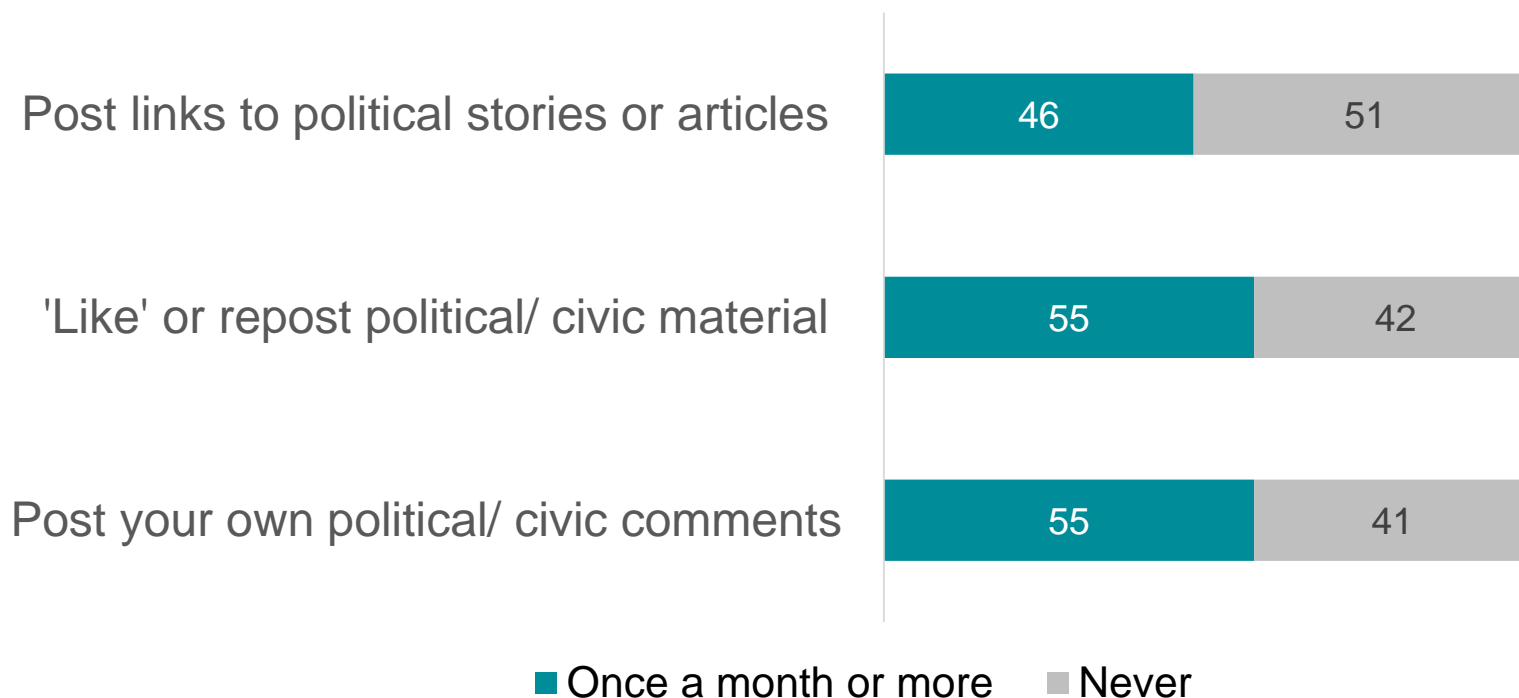
*Not active, but still interested...*

*And interest in electoral/ conventional politics increases over time, while interest in expressive conventional usually does not.*

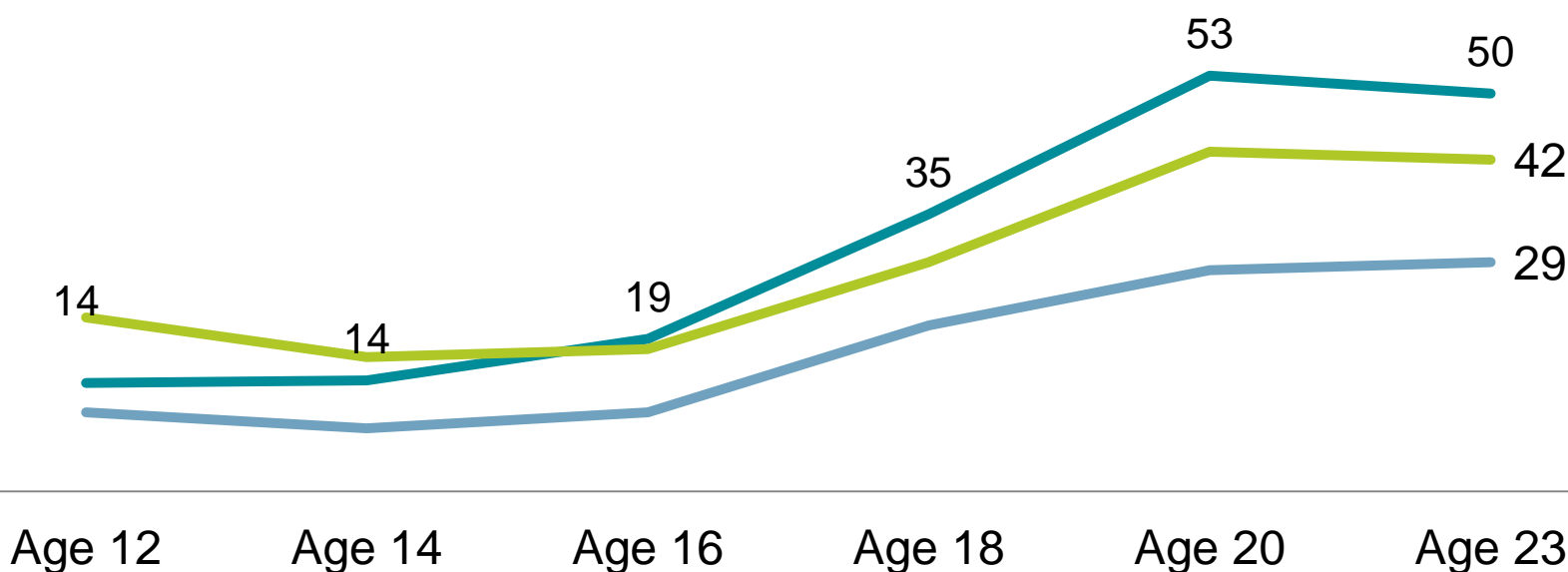


## Young people using social media to engage in political discussion

*How often do you use social networking sites to do the following? (%)*



## Interest in voting and in politics increase during transition to + through early adulthood



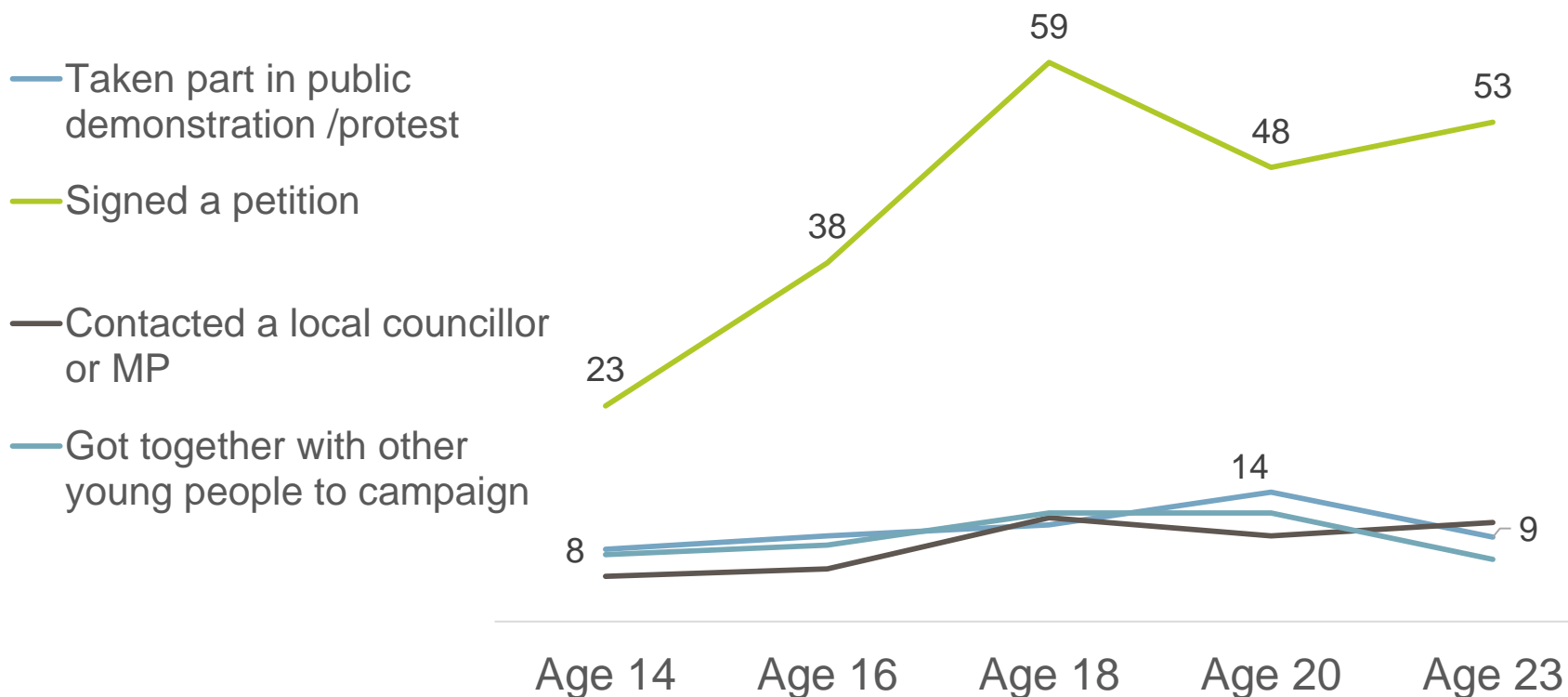
— In the future I will vote in future elections

— I am very interested in politics

— People like me can have a real influence on government if they get involved

By contrast, reported participation in expressive activities – little change except for signing petitions

*Have you ever....? (% yes)*

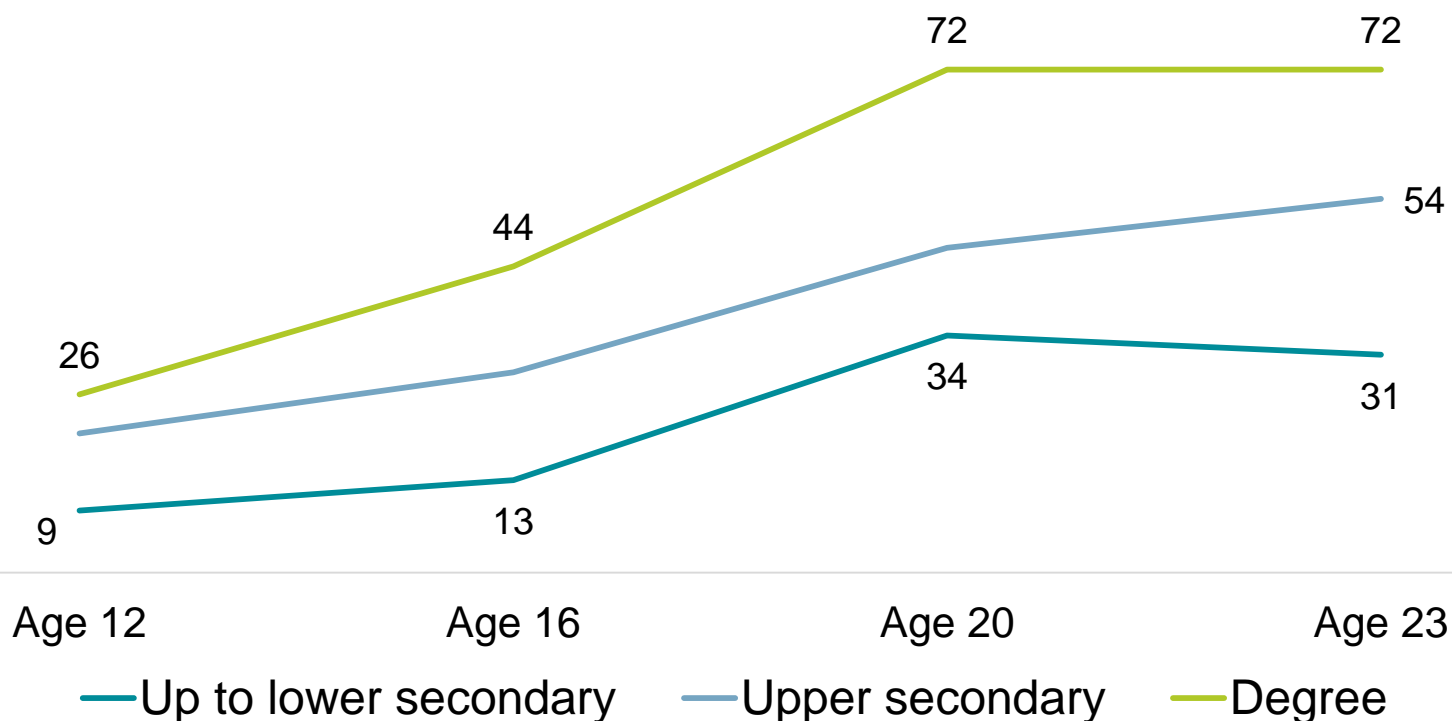


## Finding 4

*Levels of engagement are unequal, and this inequality is across all types of engagement, and emerges at an early age*

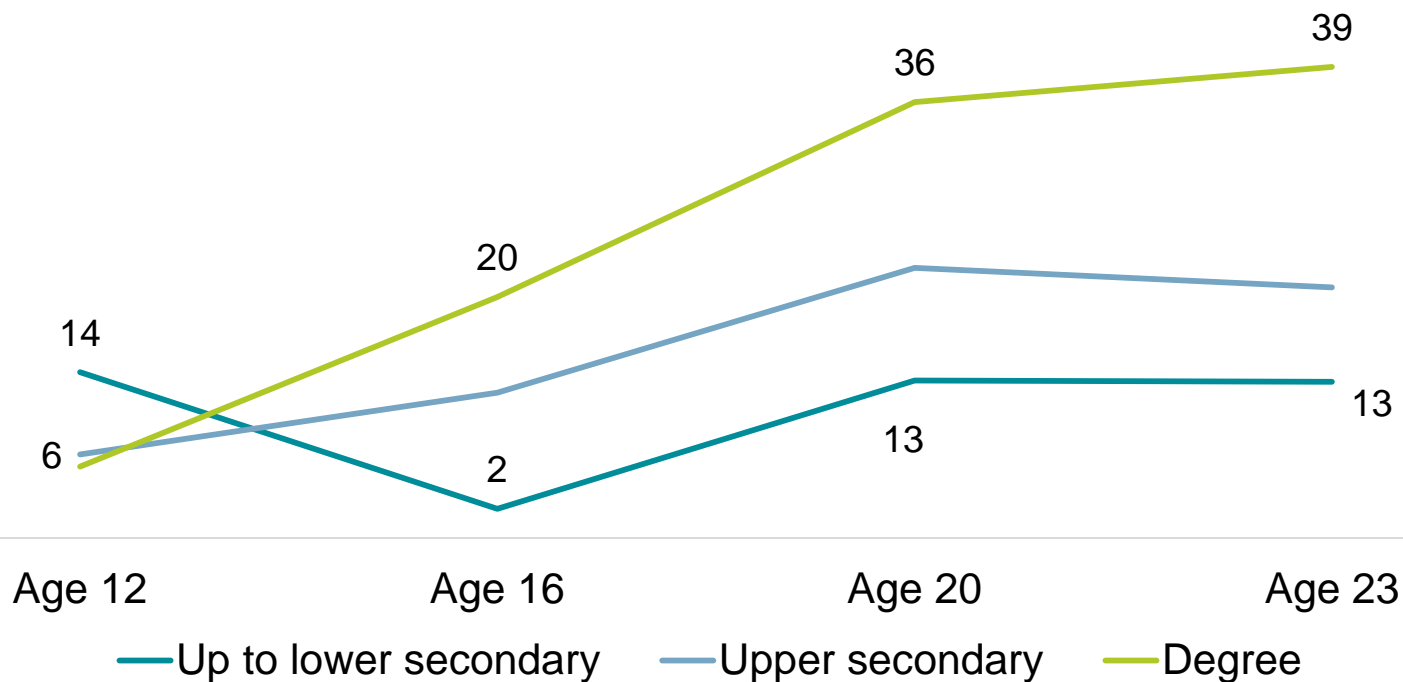
## Growing interest, but also a growing engagement gap

*In the future, will you vote in general elections?  
(% definitely plan to do this)*

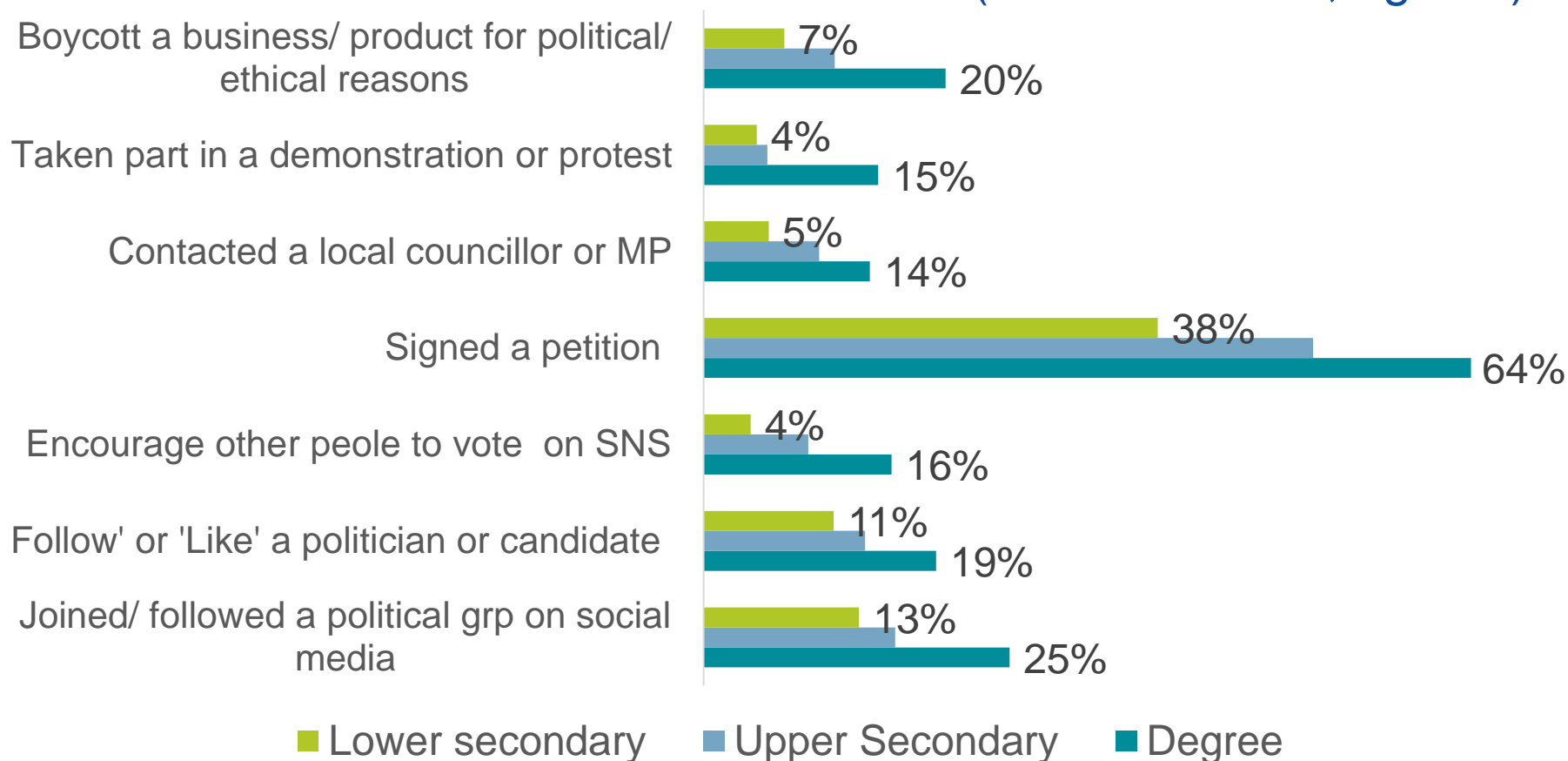


At age 12, interest in politics is actually higher among students who end up leaving school at 16. But the engagement gap emerges by age 16.

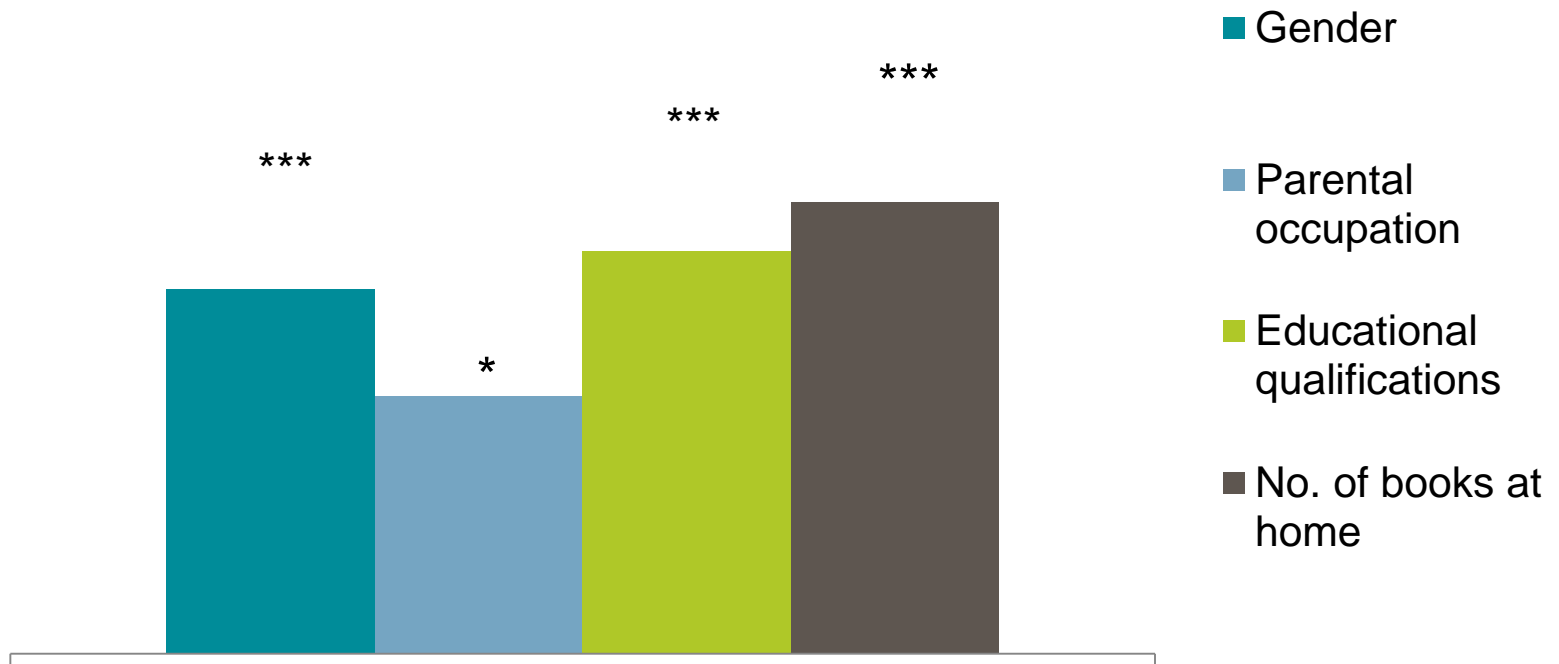
*"I am very interested in politics"*  
 (% agree & strongly agree)



## Similar engagement gap in expressive activities.... (W6 CELS data, age 23)



## Comparing regression coefficients for online political actions





## Simple 'access' argument may not be relevant any more

- Around 95% of young people aged 14 – 34 use the internet, and 87% of this sample are current members of SNS
  - The income-divide in access is also closing (OxII, 2013: 19, 21)
- Other 'resources' seem to be more pertinent
- Next step for our research

# Conclusions

- More ways to engage, but only a minority of young people in British avail of these opportunities.
- Voting remains a important means of political engagement – practically and symbolically
- Young people get more interested in politics as they get older and make the transition to adulthood
- But participation is stratified – and this gap starts at an early age

## Questions that remain

- Are these patterns unique to Britain and/ or to this age group?
- What about other civic attitudes/ values or radical / extremist political views?
- Can these patterns be explained/ changed by parental socialisation or citizenship education?

## Educational stratification – can civic education compensate?

- CELS evidence suggests ‘yes’... and not just through formal classroom education
  - New Keating and Janmaat article in Parliamentary Affairs looks at the lasting impact of school-based political activities such as school councils and mock elections (now online and free to access).
- But only one part of the puzzle

## More information

- Research brief
  - More findings
  - More about the data sources
- LLAKES website ([www.llakes.ac.uk](http://www.llakes.ac.uk))