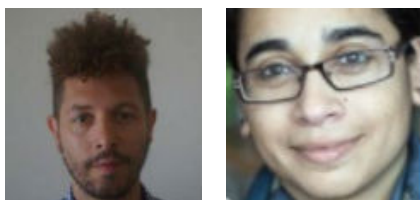


Using it, losing it: what has EU citizenship meant to young people in Britain?



*British young people will shortly lose their EU citizenship. Since 2015 **Sam Mejias** and **Shakuntala Banaji** (LSE) have explored what this citizenship means to them and to what extent they are able to exercise it. The resulting picture of young people's active civic and political contributions includes some surprising findings.*

One of the EU's longstanding goals is to ensure [young people are involved](#) in representative democracy. In practice, this means 'bridging the gap' between young people and EU institutions, and improving dialogue so as to build trust and encourage active engagement with the EU. The LSE was part of a [consortium of eight universities](#) in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and the UK which sought to find out how academic literature across various disciplines has conceptualised and studied active citizenship for young people in a European context.



Momentum staffers film a short 'vox pop' video asking people on the street to tell Theresa May how they feel about her skipping the General Election leaders' debate on 31 May 2017. Photo: Sam Mejias

With funding from the European Union Horizon 2020 Young 5a programme and bringing together scholars from different disciplines (psychology, political science, sociology, media and communications, and education) the [Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth](#) (CATCH-EyoU) project aims to identify factors, meanings and practices that influence different forms of youth active engagement across Europe. Against the backdrop of Brexit, and led by UK project director [Shakuntala Banaji](#), LSE's team in the Department of Media and Communications has been working on the project since September 2015. We've used a range of empirical approaches to gather, collect, generate and triangulate data about the different factors influencing the perspectives of young people on the EU, and to build a picture of young people's active civic and political contributions in Britain. Our findings, along with those from the full eight-country consortium, will be explored in [our forthcoming seminar](#) on 31 May 2018 at LSE's Department of Media and Communications.



Visualisation of word associations generated by TLab 9 software to identify gaps in associations between the word 'European,' and the concepts of young people and citizenship across 770 texts

What does 'European citizenship' mean?

We analysed [over 700 texts](#) about citizenship, engagement, participation, activism, youth political socialisation, political and civic engagement – and found a significant gap in literature on both the concept of European citizenship and on the activities, practices and position of young European citizens. Drawing on our discussions about competing definitions of youth active citizenship and European citizenship, we highlight the normative implications of the disjuncture between dominant conceptions of citizenship accepted by authorities, and critical accounts of youth active citizenship.

A dearth of meaningful policies

We used qualitative document and discourse analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore [how government policies conceptualise young people and their citizenship](#). In the UK, our study found a dearth of meaningful and integrated policies to advance young people's citizenship, and a [significant gap](#) between how public policies understand and respond to it and the reality of young people's [needs, context and diversity](#).

Inadequate media representations

Perhaps unsurprisingly, our extensive thematic content analysis of [the representation of young people](#) and their citizenship in UK news and entertainment media showed that, within our selected sample, young people are still interpreted through narrow and reductive discursive lenses. They are overwhelmingly conceptualised as [vulnerable and problematic](#), but also as digitally savvy ['service users'](#) with considerable voice. Neither of these views serves their social, political and economic interests or helps make them critical, active citizens.

Since the referendum, support for EU institutions has risen among the young

In a two-wave longitudinal quantitative survey of around 2000 young people across the UK, we found significant evidence that young British people are socially conscious, tolerant of different languages and cultures, and possess a strong commitment to democratic structures and expected normative forms of participation (voting, volunteering, and online activism). We also found that since the EU referendum, young people have expressed more support for EU institutions and less for UK institutions. Additionally, when compared with the samples of the other seven EU countries participating in the survey, UK young people were [among the most pro-European](#) and among the most welcoming of migrants and refugees.

Solidarity and a strong desire for change

The qualitative survey and ethnographic strand of the study, which was led by LSE, gave us the chance to explore the meanings and practices of 'successful' youth active citizenship in depth. We began by mapping the youth active civic organisations in which young people participate, finding a wide spectrum of topics, motivations, and types of initiative. Moving from this mapping exercise which was largely textual and relied on the documented aspects of youth civic initiatives, we asked questions about what motivated the young people involved in them. Our ethnographies of [Momentum](#) and [My Life My Say](#) provided fascinating examples of grassroots youth citizenship practices that are trying to [work within](#) and [fundamentally change](#) institutional politics in the UK. The timing of our fieldwork in 2017 gave us a front row seat as young people mobilised during the June 2017 snap general election, revealing [innovation, solidarity and passion for change](#) – which has been likened to a 'youthquake' in both [British media](#) and [academic scholarship](#).

Join us at a [public seminar](#) on 31 May at 6.30pm to [explore the highlights, insights and policy recommendations](#) of our study. Further publications are coming: watch this space.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

[Shakuntala Banaji](#) is Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE.

[Dr Sam Mejias](#) is a Postdoctoral Research Officer in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE for [CATCH-EyoU](#). He is also a co-Investigator on the Wellcome Trust (UK) and National Science Foundation (US) funded project 'Science Learning Plus: Creativity and Equity in STEM Learning'.