RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Running head: KNOWLEDGE, AUTONOMY AND MATURITY

Knowledge, autonomy and maturity: developmental and educational concerns as rhetorical resources in adolescents' discussions regarding the age of electoral majority in England.

Stephen Gibson (York St John University)

&

Lorna Hamilton (University of York)

Correspondence should be addressed to: Stephen Gibson, Faculty of Health & Life Sciences, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York, YO31 7EX. Tel.: +44 (0) 1904 876581; Fax: +44 (0) 1904 876500; E-mail: s.gibson@yorksj.ac.uk

Abstract

Recent debates concerning the age of electoral majority in the UK have focused on the levels of knowledge and maturity of young people. However, little research has explored the ways in which adolescents orient to these concerns themselves. In this paper we present analyses from a qualitative interview investigation in Northern England, and explore the ways in which our adolescent participants treated voting as a responsibility which should be exercised on the basis of a rational, autonomous and informed decision. Such arguments were frequently used to argue *against* a reduction in the age of electoral majority. These findings are discussed in relation to policy and educational debates in the UK.

Keywords: citizenship, discourse analysis, political participation, rhetoric, voting

Knowledge, autonomy and maturity: developmental and educational concerns as rhetorical resources in adolescents' discussions regarding the age of electoral majority in England.

Political participation is a core requirement for democracy, with scholars and policy makes across 'western' liberal democracies engaged in a seemingly continual debate over how best to involve and enthuse young people in the political process. The present paper explores these issues within a UK context, with a particular focus on recent debates concerning the age of electoral majority and the introduction of citizenship education in England. A key focus of these debates has been on the educational and maturational readiness of people under the age of 18 to vote, and the paper is concerned with how adolescents themselves orient to these educational and developmental matters as they debate the possibility of lowering the age of electoral majority.

Young people and political participation in the UK

Debates regarding young people's levels of political participation have been ongoing for several years in the UK (see e.g. Coughlan 2003, Sloam 2007, Tonge 2009, Vaizey 2005, Youth Citizenship Commission 2009a), with some commentators noting that recent concerns are simply the latest in a long line of moral panics over young people's engagement with democratic processes (see e.g. Cowley and Denver 2004). Many studies point to low levels of interest and engagement in politics amongst young people (e.g. Park 1999, 2004, Park *et al.* 2004, White *et al.* 2000), and a weakening of ties to political parties in an era characterized by increasing individualism (Sloam 2007). These trends, together with falling turnout amongst

young adult voters at recent general elections (Henn and Weinstein 2006, Kimberlee 2002)[1], have led to the oft-noted trope of 'apathy' being used to characterise young people's relationship with politics (O'Toole *et al.* 2003). For others, the relatively low rate of political participation amongst young people is unsurprising given what Jefferys (2007, p. 281) has termed the 'anaemic' political culture of the UK as a whole. This perhaps reflects a normative Anglo-British[2] culture of liberal individualism, which some authors have suggested instils a sense of 'passive' citizenship leading to reluctance to participate in political process (see Condor and Gibson 2007, Marquand 1991).

Debates concerning the age of electoral majority in the UK

A focal point for many of the debates concerning young people's political participation in the last decade has been the age of electoral majority, which currently stands at eighteen years of age (see e.g. Cowley and Denver 2004, Curtice 2004, Dawkins and Cornwell 2003, Folkes 2004, Wing Chan and Clayton 2006).[3] A number of groups and organizations (e.g. UK Youth Parliament, Votes at 16) have begun to argue for a reduction in the age of electoral majority to enable young people to vote from the age of sixteen, and the issue has been considered in several official reports intended to inform the work of policymakers (e.g. Youth Citizenship Commission 2009b, Electoral Commission 2004; for a summary see White 2009).

A related development was the introduction in 2002 of Citizenship Education into the school curriculum in England for children aged 11-16, following the report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship (1998), chaired by Bernard Crick, and known informally as the Crick Report (see also Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2007a, b). Although the citizenship curriculum is not overly prescriptive – schools

can, for example, teach citizenship in separate classes or integrate it into other subjects – the aims of Citizenship Education, as laid out in the Crick Report, have been to increase levels of social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998). As Condor and Gibson (2007) noted, the Crick Report was introduced as a direct attempt to effect a 'change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally' (Advisory Group on Citizenship 1998, p. 7; see also Lopes *et al*. 2009). Several contributors to debates regarding the age of electoral majority have suggested that the embedding of citizenship education in the school curriculum provides further grounds for extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds. For example, the 'Votes at 16' coalition argues that '[l]owering the voting age to 16 would allow a seamless transition from learning about voting, elections and democracy to putting such knowledge into practice' (Votes at 16 2008, p. 10; see also Power Inquiry 2006). Similarly, many commentators note that lowering the age of electoral majority might lead to an increase in young people's levels of political participation. For example, reflecting on the results of their focus group study of young people's engagement in politics, White *et al*. (2000, p. 44) suggested that 'the lack of opportunities for young people to engage in the political process until the age of 18 ... contributed to low levels of political interest.'

It is perhaps unsurprising that many of these debates regarding young people's political participation have been played out against a backdrop of more general educational and developmental concerns regarding the appropriateness of different forms of education, the rate at which young people mature and acquire knowledge, and so on. For example, Wing Chan and Clayton (2006) review a range of data regarding young people's attitude stability and consistency, their interest in politics

and their levels of political knowledge, and conclude that 16 and 17 year olds have typically not reached sufficient levels of maturity to merit a vote. This points to the centrality of 'maturity' in these debates (see also White 2009) with a number of commentators on both sides of the argument seemingly in agreement that the age at which one can vote should be set at a point at which the majority of individuals can be considered able to make a mature and responsible decision (see e.g. Electoral Commission 2004, Wing Chan and Clayton 2006).

However, despite the volume of research exploring young people's political participation, few studies have explored how adolescents themselves discuss the possibility of lowering the age of electoral majority, if and how they invoke education and maturity in these discussions, and what commonsense assumptions regarding political participation underscore such discussions. These issues are of central importance as without such a consideration there is a risk of policy and academic debate occurring in an empirical vacuum which fails to pay attention to young people's own constructions of the objects of political and scholarly concern. It is the aim of the present study to undertake such an analysis, and it does so by adopting an approach informed by rhetorical psychology.

Rhetorical Psychology

Rhetorical psychology (Billig 1991, 1996, Billig *et al*. 1988) is a member of the wider family of discourse analytic approaches which have been developed in social psychology over the last two decades or so (e.g. Edwards 1997, Edwards and Potter 1992, Potter 1996, 2007, Potter and Wetherell 1987, Wetherell and Potter 1992). These approaches are characterised by a broadly social constructionist epistemological framework which emphasises the construction of reality (including

psychological entities) in discourse. In the present paper our specific concern is with the use of rhetorical commonplaces. Billig (1996) traces the notion of the commonplace from the classical study of rhetoric and its concern with the *topoi* or topics of argumentation. In contrast to some classical uses of 'topic' which treat it as referring to the *form* of arguments, Billig (1996, p. 228, italics in original) identifies another meaning which is more concerned with the *content* of arguments: 'In talking of the content of arguments, the rhetorical textbooks often referred to the 'common-places' (*loci communes*) of arguments.' Billig (*ibid.*) goes on to suggest that 'the concept of common-places is an interesting one, in that it stands for the common-sense values and notions, which ideally should be shared by speaker and audience alike.' Here, we follow Billig's concern with using the content of argumentation as a way of studying socially shared commonsense assumptions.

In recent years discursive and rhetorical approaches have been used to study a range of issues relating to citizenship (e.g. Abell *et al.* 2006, Barnes *et al.* 2004, Hopkins *et al.* 2003, Condor 2006a, Condor *et al.* 2006, Gibson 2009, Gibson and Condor 2009; see also Condor 2011). Of particular relevance for the present study is Condor and Gibson's (2007) analysis of accounts of political participation amongst a sample of 18-24 year olds in North-West England. Condor and Gibson pointed to the ways in which their interviewees could position themselves as responsible citizens by virtue of their non-participation, with technical knowledge frequently being treated as superior to rights to opinionation in legitimating political participation. Notably, Condor and Gibson suggest that, for their participants, 'the very fact that 'politics' constituted a curriculum subject could be viewed as good reason to cast political decision making as a technical matter, best left to those with the highest levels of formal qualification and training' (2007, p. 133). This raises the question of how,

precisely, adolescents under the age of 18, who are currently participating in citizenship education classes, might orient to these matters. In the present paper we therefore present an analysis of discussions of political participation and the age of electoral majority amongst young people who have undergone several years of formal citizenship education.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 174 young people (71 males, 103 females) aged from 14 years and three months to 17 years and three months (M = 15 years 6 months), who were all in UK school years 10 (N = 117) and 11 (N = 57), which are currently the final two years of compulsory schooling in the UK.[4] Pupils from eight schools, all of which were located in the north of England, participated in the research. Schools were sampled using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling, with the purposive element involving an effort to sample schools from both the private (fee-paying) and state (publicly-funded) sectors. Six were state schools, with the remaining two being private. Fifty-four participants attended one of the private schools, and 120 attended one of the state schools. Data were collected on parental occupation and although this information was not intended to be used to classify participants according to socio-economic status, it reveals a wide range of occupational backgrounds. Using the UK Office for National Statistics' (2010) socio-economic classification system as a rough guide, parental occupations ranged from those consistent with the definition of 'routine occupations', to those consistent with the 'higher managerial and administrative' and 'higher professional' occupations.

Participants recruited from private schools tended to be from households where at least one parent would be classified in these latter categories.

It should be noted that whereas state schools are bound by the National Curriculum and therefore Citizenship Education is compulsory, this is not the case for private schools. However, both private schools involved in the research taught Citizenship Education. The schools were located in areas which are relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, and as such all but four participants indicated their ethnic background as 'White British' on a standard tick-box ethnicity monitoring form. Two participants indicated their ethnic background as 'White British and other white background', one selected 'Chinese' and one selected 'other mixed background'.

Interviews

In order to generate discussion between participants, a group interview method was employed. Sixty-two semi-structured group interviews were conducted on school premises between March 2006 and November 2007. Each interview was conducted by a single researcher, with each participant taking part in only one interview. Initial interviews were conducted with group sizes of two to four participants, although as the research progressed we increasingly sought to recruit participants in groups of three wherever possible as this generated more discussion than groups of two, and allowed individual participant voices to be picked out more easily for transcription purposes than when participants had been interviewed in groups of four. Seventeen interviews involved two participants, 40 interviews involved three participants, and 5 interviews involved four participants. Interview duration ranged from 19 minutes to 1 hour and 22 minutes (M = 43 minutes).

The interviews were intended to generate discussion on a range of issues related to citizenship, such as military service, employment, environmental issues, immigration, political participation, social inequality and European integration. Seven principle questions were presented in turn on A4-sized cards, and participants were invited to discuss the issues covered by each question. Although the interviewer had a series of possible prompts and follow-up questions that could be used if necessary, participants were allowed to direct the discussion to their own areas of interest. The present paper focuses in detail on discussions of political participation, and specifically of electoral participation, which followed from the presentation of one question card in particular: 'Should the age at which you can vote in elections be reduced from 18 to 16?' All data analysed for the present paper were drawn exclusively from discussions following the presentation of this question card (for analyses of other aspects of the data, see AUTHOR REFS).

Analytic Procedure

Initial selection of data for analysis involved the extraction of all material relevant to the question concerning the reduction in the age of electoral majority. These data were then read with a view to identifying the rhetorical commonplaces employed within arguments for and against a reduction in the age of electoral majority. These commonplaces were evidenced in the interview discussions through the use of a range of specific terms. For example, although the term 'maturity' was itself often used by participants, more colloquial references to 'growing up' were also used, and where contextually appropriate, these were identified as being part of rhetorical commonplaces based around maturity. This stage of the analysis involved repeated reading of the data, and we aimed for over-inclusion by including borderline

cases in the analysis (Potter & Wetherell 1987). We subsequently returned to these borderline cases in order to clarify whether they did in fact exemplify the rhetorical commonplace which had been identified. We then undertook a broader review of the rhetorical commonplaces identified in order to ensure that earlier readings of the data had not unduly constrained subsequent readings. This involved the comparison of instances of commonplaces with each other, and with instances of different commonplaces (both between and within interviews).

In order to further ensure a robust analysis, we used deviant case analysis (see e.g. Seale 1999, Silverman 2006), a technique recommended by a number of discursive and rhetorical researchers (e.g. Taylor 2001, Wiggins & Potter 2008). This can be understood as a qualitative approach to falsification insofar it requires the analyst to actively seek out apparently atypical cases in order to ensure that emergent findings which fail to account for all relevant data are either modified or rejected. Similarly, we endeavoured to adopt a suitably reflexive approach in our analysis (see e.g. Taylor 2001), in particular in relation to the treatment of the interviews as a specific form of situated social interaction. Reflexivity involves the turning of the analytic gaze on the analyst. In practice, this entailed paying attention to the contributions of the interviewer in the interactions as well as to the responses of the interviewees. Thus, a cornerstone of our analysis was something frequently neglected in social scientific research using interviews or focus groups – that the constitutive nature of the research encounter was key to forming the resultant accounts. However, whereas some discourse analysts have recently argued against the use of interviews as a method of data collection on the grounds that the constitutive nature of the interview context precludes drawing conclusions other than (e.g. Potter & Hepburn, 2005), we sought to analyse our data both in terms of its production in the specific social setting of the

interview, and as an occasion for the mobilization of the broader ideological and cultural currents (i.e. commonplaces). We thus sought to follow Wetherell's (2003, p. 13) argument that although '[t]he interview is a highly specific social production, : : : it also draws on routine and highly consensual (cultural/normative) resources that carry beyond the immediate local context, connecting local talk with discursive history.'

Although our analytic approach is a qualitative one, we do present basic frequency information in order to demonstrate the prevalence (or otherwise) of particular commonplaces within our dataset. Again, this can be seen as a strategy for ensuring the robustness of our analysis insofar as it allows us to demonstrate the prevalence of the rhetorical commonplaces identified across the sample. It should be noted that in doing this, we report the number of interviews in which a particular rhetorical commonplace was used (out of a total of 62), rather than the number of participants who used it. This is because, following the arguments of authors such as Shotter (1993) and Condor (2006b), it was apparent that rhetorical commonplaces were invariably jointly produced and therefore any attempt to attribute 'ownership' to particular individual participants would risk neglecting the complexities of the dialogical character of interaction.

Analysis

By far the most common position on the issue of lowering the age of majority was opposition (N = 47), with a smaller proportion of the interviews featuring arguments in favour of the move (N = 25), and a single interview featuring an argument for the age of majority to be *increased.* Analysis suggested that a common set of rhetorical resources were being deployed by the participants regardless of the particular position

they argued regarding the lowering of the age of electoral majority. The key assumption in most discussions revolved around the requirement for voting to be based on a rational and informed choice. Related to this were concerns about knowledge/education (N = 35), maturity (N = 25) and autonomy (N = 20), which often co-occurred in the same interview. These concerns constituted rhetorical commonplaces insofar as it was typically assumed that rational and responsible voting was contingent upon the prior establishment of a mature and autonomous viewpoint, grounded in sound political knowledge.

The following summary of the analysis is organised into three sections. First, we will show how these commonplaces could be drawn upon by participants arguing for different positions in the debate. Second, we will explore how formal educational experiences could be mobilised in the discussions. Third, we will explore in more detail the use of commonplaces of autonomy and maturity.

Arguments for and against lowering the age of electoral majority

In extract 1 we see a fairly typical example of the rhetorical mobilization of knowledge and autonomy to argue against lowering the age of electoral majority:

Extract 1:

1	Craig:	"Should the age at which you can vote in elections
2		be reduced from eighteen to sixteen?"
3	Claire:	No.
4	Sharon:	No, because at sixteen you don't know-
5	Claire:	Because when you're sixteen you don't have
6		a clue what you're doing. ((laughs))

7	Sharon:	Yeah, exactly you're sixteen you're not old
8		enough to know.
9	Claire:	You- you don't know politics and stuff.
10	Craig:	I don't know, if I could have voted, I wouldn't
11		have voted for Tony Blair.
12	Sharon:	I wouldn't have done. Because you've got your
13		parents that are influencing you into a decision.
14		When you're eighteen your decision is yours -
15	Amy:	I don't know why they'd reduce it to sixteen.
16	Claire:	You're a free person when you're eighteen.
17		Your mind's your own.
18	Sharon:	But when you're sixteen you've got TV that's
19		influencing you, your parents, your friends – it's
20		not your own choice. When you're eighteen
21		you're allowed to make your own choice.

Sharon and Claire both explain their immediate replies of 'no' with reference to 16 year olds' lack of knowledge (ll. 3-9). Craig's response that he would have voted against Tony Blair had he been able to (ll. 10-11) occasions a change of rhetorical strategy from Sharon and Claire, who move from the 'lack of knowledge' argument to draw instead on the autonomy commonplace, referring to parental and other forms of social influence (ll. 12-13, ll. 18-20), and explaining that this is no longer the case when one reaches the age of eighteen, at which time 'you're a free person' (l. 16) and 'the decision is yours' (l. 14).

These commonplaces were also frequently drawn upon in arguments for lowering the voting age, for example:

Extract 2:

1	Hugh:	"Should the age at which you can vote in
2		elections be reduced from eighteen to
3		sixteen?"
4	Jackie:	Yeah
5	Leslie:	Yeah.
6	Jenny:	I thought it was sixteen.
7	I:	Why do you think it should be?
8	Jackie:	Cos at sixteen that's –
9	Leslie:	Cos everyone should have a say shouldn't they.
10	Jenny:	Should be allowed our own, opinions.
11	Jackie:	At sixteen, it's like the age where you get, the
12		legal age for like full time jobs and that, so you're –
13		and then, you'll start having to pay tax, if you
14		get a full time job and paying over a certain
15		amount, but yet you won't get a – but you don't
16		get a say in, who you – to elect.
17	Jenny:	Yeah.
18	I:	Yeah.
19	Jackie:	I think it's a bit tight, I mean you're putting enough
20		in, to like –
21	Jenny:	And you're like, when you're sixteen you're

22   growing up aren't you, it's not as if you're still,

23   like going to be stupid about it, cos it's something

24   serious really isn't it?

Leslie and Jenny work up a rationale for their agreement with the lowering of the age of electoral majority based on equal rights to opinionation (ll. 9-10), and Jackie argues that because 16 year olds can enter employment and pay taxation they should therefore 'get a say in who … to elect' (ll. 11-16). Arguments that the range of other legal rights and responsibilities accorded to 16 year olds meant that they should also be granted suffrage were also present in other interviews where participants argued in favour of lowering the age of majority (N = 5). However, such arguments were rarely offered in isolation, and here Jenny subsequently attends to an unstated objection that 16 year olds might not be capable of voting by asserting that at sixteen 'you're growing up' and are therefore not 'going to be stupid about it, cos it's something serious' (ll. 21-24). Here, we see political participation oriented to as a responsibility which is not to be taken lightly, and which is a 'serious' matter requiring 'grown up' participation.

It can therefore be seen that, regardless of the particular position argued on the question of the age of majority, the participants treat voting as a responsibility which requires knowledge and is not to be treated frivolously.

Knowledge and education

The observation that these young people frequently treated knowledge as a pre-requisite for suffrage follows Condor and Gibson's (2007) finding that their sample of 18-24 year old young adults could often treat formal political knowledge as a criterion

for political participation, and that this led to an image of a population composed of members who are differentially qualified for political participation. In the present study, the possibility of formally assessing political knowledge could be raised as a solution to the problem of variation in levels of political knowledge amongst 16 year olds. For example:

Extract 3:

1	Tim:	"Should the age, at which you can vote in elections
2		be reduced from eighteen to sixteen?"
3	Rob:	No.
4	Tim:	No, I don't think it should.
5	Rob:	I don't think you have the er same, knowledge
6		about it all when you're sixteen. Like I – if I was
7		doing it, now – well June, so a couple of months'
8		time when I become sixteen, I wouldn't, I wouldn't
9		have a clue.
10	Tim:	You'd just be ticking a box, wouldn't you?
11	Rob:	Yeah, you'd like – you'd pick the same one that
12		your dad picked or something like that, yeah.
13	I:	Yeah.
14	Tim:	Erm (3) I don't know, I think a lot of people
15		don't – don't know – you ask any – a lot of
16		sixteen year olds won't even know what elections
17		are.
18	I:	Yeah?

19	Tim:	So I think it's daft to –
20	Rob:	Or the different parties or anything like that, they
21		wouldn't have a –
22	Tim:	And not all eighteen year olds vote do they?
23	I:	Yeah.
24	Tim:	So.
25:	I:	Do you think –
26	Tim:	Maybe if you say you can vote, like, do a quick
27		amplitude ((*sic*)) test so you can tell who they are
28		or something daft.

Rob illustrates the insufficient knowledge of 16 year olds by constructing himself as not 'hav[ing] a clue' (ll. 5-9). Tim's assertion that 16 year olds' voting would amount to 'just ticking a box' draws on a commonplace in which a vote not based on some informed rationale was treated as effectively meaningless. Rob and Tim go on to invoke the prospect of parental influence (ll. 11-12) and a lack of knowledge about elections and political parties (ll. 14-17, 20-21), before Tim points out that not all 18 year olds vote (l. 22). Tim then suggests that a formal test to assess suitability to vote might be administered (ll. 26-28), although he orients to this as 'daft'.

In many respects, of course, this 'daft' suggestion represents the logical conclusion of many of these young people's arguments that at sixteen, people are not generally knowledgeable enough to be entrusted with voting rights. As noted, such arguments create an impression of a differentially politically qualified populous, who might therefore be differentially entitled to political rights (Condor and Gibson 2007). Similar arguments were present in many interviews, with some participants arguing

that the capacity for responsible political participation was dependent upon formal educational experiences. For example:

Extract 4:

1	Vicky:	And a lot of like, a lot of people, are like aren't,
2		don't, really get involved with political matters
3		at our age, a lot of people don't have time for it,
4		and so, they, they wou- might feel like they have
5		to vote but, they wouldn't know what to vote for
6		they wouldn't, understand people's policies and-
7	Sophie:	Mm
8	I:	Yeah
9	Lilly:	Whereas at eighteen, I dunno, if you, might grow
10		up studying law and you want to go and do
11		something then maybe you would have more of
12		a, kind of law what am I on about, I dunno,
13		politics and s- yeah
14	Vicky:	Economics yeah
15	I:	Yeah
16	Lilly:	Then you might have more of an idea whereas at
17		sixteen you're kind of, you don't really know
18		much about, parliament …

In this extract, Vicky predicates a lack of political involvement on the part of people 'our age' not on immaturity, but on a lack of time, which leads to a deficit in

understanding and knowledge (ll. 1-6). Lilly then follows this up by suggesting that by the time one reaches eighteen, one may have studied law (subsequently corrected to politics and, by Vicky, economics), and that by virtue of this 'you might have more of an idea'. In contrast to Vicky, Lilly does link educational experiences to maturity/adulthood with the reference to 'grow[ing] up' (ll. 9-10). The guiding assumption appears to be that political participation should be undertaken responsibly, and that such responsible participation requires a certain level of knowledge, which in this case can be gained by studying politics and economics.

Similarly, when participants did make claims to political knowledge they were often predicated on particular educational interests or experiences:

Extract 5:

1	I:	So d'you feel now at sixteen like you'd like to
2		vote or you could vote and you think y-
3	Sarah:	I think I'd need, I think I need a bit more time,
4		just because some stuff I don't even know what
5		I think about, what I think yet so
6	Louise:	I don't, I don't know enough about politic-,
7		politics at all to vote
8	I:	Mm
9	Louise:	I don't, it would be a waste of a vote to be honest
10	Sarah:	Yeah
11	Chloe:	I dunno, cos I know quite a lot cos my brother
12		does politics and I'm doing politics next year
13	Sarah:	Mm

14	Chloe:	and it's like quite an interesting
15	I:	Mm
16	Chloe:	thing for me, but I wo- I don't think, I wouldn't
17		vote cos there's some-
18	Louise:	I find it interesting but I just wish I knew more
19		about it
20	Sarah:	I think it's really interesting, but ((inaudible)) yeah
21	Louise:	I really think we should be taught, more about it
22		when we're younger

Of interest in this extract is the way in which two speakers, Chloe and Louise, mobilise education in their arguments. Sarah's initial response to the question concerning whether they 'feel' they would 'like to vote' or 'could vote' mobilises a lack of knowledge of *her own opinions* (ll. 4-5: 'I don't even know what I think about…'). Louise then follows this up with an explicit statement concerning her lack of knowledge *about politics* (ll. 6-7) and that, as a result, her vote would be 'a waste' (l. 9). Again, we may note how the assumption here is that voting that is not well informed is without merit. In contrast to her colleagues, however, Chloe positions herself as knowing 'quite a lot', and this is accounted for by virtue of her brother's studies, and her own plans to study politics 'next year' (ll. 11-12). She states that 'it's … quite … interesting' before going on to say that, despite this, she would not vote. As she is explaining this, Louise interjects to assert that 'I find it interesting', which serves to challenge Chloe's apparent elision of knowledge and interest, which potentially carried with it the implication that Louise, in claiming to lack *knowledge* about politics, was simply not *interested* in politics. Louise explicitly dissociates the two concepts by suggesting that although she finds it 'interesting', she wishes she

'knew more about it' (ll. 18-19). At this point Sarah also asserts that she finds it 'really interesting' (and note the upgrade here from Chloe's 'quite … interesting' and Louise's 'interesting'). Following the logic of Chloe's argument, Louise then states that she thinks more formal education in these matters is needed, thereby accounting for her lack of knowledge as stemming from a lack of formal education on the subject, for which she is not responsible.

Despite their differential claims to knowledge, both Chloe and Louise rhetorically invoke formal education in their arguments. For Chloe, formal education provides the grounds for her claim to 'know quite a lot', whereas for Louise the absence of formal education is invoked to mitigate against her claim to lack knowledge about politics being treated as evidence of a lack of interest in politics.

Although in most interviews participants treated knowledge levels as a matter of either individual differences (e.g. extract 3, ll. 26-8) or as characteristic of their age group as a whole (e.g. extract 1, ll. 4-9), in one deviant case political knowledge was linked to the type of educational establishment one attends. However, this case nevertheless still exemplifies the basic underlying assumptions of rationality as a pre-requisite for voting:

Extract 6:

1	Steph:	… Erm, "Should the age at which you
2		can vote in elections be reduced from
3		eighteen to sixteen?" Well hasn't the
4		((inaudible)) erm hasn't Gordon Brown
5		already been talking about this?
6	Tiffany:	Mmm.

7	I:	Yeah.
8	Steph:	Erm, I think, erm, it depen- it – it – I think it just,
9		depends on, how educated you are. Cos some
10		sixteen year olds like, who go to a private
11		school like we do, I think we'd have a better
12		un- understanding of – than people – cos I know
13		some pe- I used to go to a state school, and um
14		(2) I just don't – they're not half as, like, cle-
15	Tiffany:	They're not interested in it. I used to as well.
16	Steph:	Yeah they're not interested that's it.
17	Tiffany:	Mm.
18	Steph:	They don't really care, and so therefore they
19		don't really want to say anything, and they
20		don't really want to, know about anything.
21	Tiffany:	You know they'd just abuse their power you know
22		they'd all group up and vote for some stupid thing,
23		and if everyone does that, who are like that then it
24		would just you know –
25	Steph:	I think it's better if it stays at eighteen.

Steph's initially equivocal response to the question of a reduction in the age of electoral majority again draws on the importance of knowledge, and links this to formal educational experiences, but she predicates suitability for political participation explicitly on the type of school one has attended. Positioning herself as a member of a private school-attending in-group (ll. 10-11: 'sixteen year olds … who

go to a private school like we do'), she suggests that access to this form of education leads to greater 'understanding' than state school education. At this point Steph's talk is marked by a number of false starts, hesitations and qualifiers, all of which are associated with 'delicate' talk, such as when a speaker is orienting to the possibility that their talk may be construed as indicative of prejudice (van Dijk 1984). She further attends to this by claiming experiential grounds for entitlement to speak about the issue (l. 13: 'I used to go to a state school', see Pomerantz 1984). As Steph struggles to finish her turn (l. 14), Tiffany completes and summarizes Steph's positional statement by saying 'They're not interested in it', before also attending to her entitlement to make such a claim by declaring that she also used to attend a state school (l. 15). The use of 'interest' is again notable here as it avoids the overt implication that people who attend state schools are not as intelligent as those who attend private school.[5] Steph then offers an agreement and re-statement of Tiffany's 'interest'-based summary (l. 16), and re-formulates state school pupils as not caring about politics, which ultimately leads to them not wanting to 'know about anything' (ll. 18-20). Tiffany then upgrades the critique of state school pupils by suggesting that they would 'abuse their power' by acting collectively to 'vote for some stupid thing'. The danger of allowing those with an inferior level of education to vote is therefore grounded in the spectre of ill-informed voting *en masse*. This line of argument may be atypical of the current dataset, but it exemplifies the common underlying assumptions that voting should be undertaken responsibly (*some stupid thing*), autonomously (*all group up*) and that it should be based on an informed choice (*a better … understanding*).

Autonomy and maturity

Having explored in some detail the various ways in which knowledge and education

could be invoked in arguments concerning the age of electoral majority, we now turn

our attention more specifically to the closely related commonplaces of autonomy and

maturity. To begin with, consider extract 7, in which autonomy and maturity are

invoked as alternatives to knowledge as criteria for electoral majority:

Extract 7:

1	Adam:	"Should the age which you can vote in elections
2		be reduced from eighteen to sixteen?" (1) I think,
3		no.
4	Grace:	Yeah
5		(1)
6	Tim:	Yeah I think it (0.5) it could be quite good.
7	Adam:	Mm
8	Grace:	I think like, lots of people have, strong views
9		about it so why aren't, why can't their views be
10		(1) heard or whatever.
11	I:	Heard yeah.
12	Adam:	When you're sixteen you're- not really mature
13		enough.
14	Grace:	But saying that when you're, sixteen or seventeen
15		you don't really know about the, about like the,
16		the money side of it or the-
17	Adam:	Yeah like you could-
18	I:	I'm sure there are plenty of older people who

19		don't really know
20	Grace:	Yeah
21	I:	their economics and things like that.
22	Tim:	It should be more when you're, like living
23		alone, or when you're kind of more independent.
24	Grace:	Yeah I suppose so.
25	Adam:	Yeah it's like, you don't really want, understand
26		and you're not mature enough to make a decision
27		like
28	I:	Yeah
29	Adam:	you could be forced into making a decision, not
30		like make your own decision.

In this extract we can see the participants resolving a dilemma between knowledge and participation (Billig *et al*. 1988) by jointly constructing a criterion based around independent living, which is linked to maturity. Grace and Tim both indicate support for lowering the age of majority, with Grace predicating this on rights to political participation based upon opinionation (ll. 8-10). However, Adam invokes maturity to strike a more cautionary note (ll. 12-13), and this is taken up by Grace who marks her shift in argument (l. 14: 'But saying that…') before moving on to invoke a lack of knowledge regarding 'the money side of it' (ll. 14-16). The interviewer's turn at lines 18-21 is important here as the suggestion that 'there are plenty of older people who don't really know … their economics' challenges the knowledge deficit argument as grounds for opposing a reduction in the age of electoral majority. It is in this context that Tim and Adam jointly construct an

argument against lowering the age of majority based around autonomy (ll. 22-23),

understanding and maturity (ll. 25-26), with Adam suggesting that one might be

'forced into making a decision' (l. 29).

The notions of autonomy/independence used by participants sometimes

reflected Tim's concern in extract 7 that electoral majority should be contingent upon

physical separation from the familial home ('living alone') which could be treated as

enabling one to experience the 'realities' of self-sufficiency. However, more

commonly this reflected a lay socio-psychological theory of social influence and

development whereby 16 year olds' lack of knowledge and understanding was treated

as likely to lead to them following their parents' lead. For example:

Extract 8:

1	Eleanor:	… if you look at erm, the sixteen as an
2		average (0.5) the age sixteen as an average
3		most people won't understand politics or
4		what's going on. And they'll just be voting
5		as their parents are voting, which is not an
6		individual's vote …

Similarly, the way in which maturity was used varied, with some participants

(such as Adam in extract 7) invoking universal patterns of maturation to suggest that

people would be more capable of responsible political participation at eighteen,

whereas others invoked maturation as part of a rhetorical strategy based around the

construction of notions of individual difference:

Extract 9:

1	Luke:	"Should the age at which you can vote in elections
2		be reduced from eighteen to sixteen?"
3	Gabby:	No.
4	Luke:	Yeah.
5	I:	No, yes.
6	Luke:	No, I mean no. I meant no.
7	I:	You meant no ((laughs))
8	Luke:	Cos it'd just get really silly and people would just
9		be doing it as a joke.
10	I:	Right.
11	Gabby:	Yeah. I think some people are mature enough to
12		do it but not like-
13	I:	some people what sorry?
14	Gabby:	Are mature enough
15	I:	Mature enough.
16	Gabby:	to decide stuff like that but, I mean, most people
17		aren't really.
18	Luke:	Like, I'll vote for him he's got a funny name or
19		something like that
20	Gabby:	((laughs))
21	Luke:	I just ((laugh)) I don't, well, I-
22	James:	Gordon Brown, that's the colour of my jumper
23		I'll vote for him.
24		((all laugh))

25	Luke:	Yeah I- I just don't think, well some people are
26		but some people will not be mature enough and
27		just, really ((laughs)) could screw up the country,
28		to be honest.

Gabby asserts that 'some people are mature enough' to vote at sixteen (ll. 11-12) but suggests that most are not (ll. 16-17). Her fellow interviewees illustrate the potential consequences of a reduction in the voting age through a series of exemplars of 'joke' voting (ll. 8-9, 18-19, ll. 22-23), before Luke suggests that such 'silly' and immature voting could actually carry serious consequences (l. 27: 'screw up the country'). Once again, in the critique of 'just' treating voting 'as a joke', these participants orient to voting as a serious responsibility, one that should be treated with due respect given the consequences it might have for 'the country'. Rhetorical strategies which involved the construction of individual differences in maturation can be understood in terms of their rhetorical function as concessions (Antaki and Wetherell 1999). Note in extract 9 how Gabby (l. 11; ll. 16-17) and Luke (ll. 25-28) both structure their argument in the form of *some people are mature enough to vote but…*. In this respect, then, we might suggest that these interviewees are attending to the possibility that categorical statements concerning the levels of maturity of *all* 16 year olds might themselves be received as unwarranted, and potentially irrational, generalizations.

It is notable that the invocations of maturity in the present data resonate with the concerns of those academics, policy makers and other commentators involved in the debates around the age of electoral majority. In this respect, the participants appear to be drawing on a series of culturally available commonplaces surrounding

political participation in which voting requires an autonomous, informed, mature and, above all, responsible decision. It is equally notable that this image of the 'model voter' could be constructed not only by participants arguing in favour of suffrage for 16 and 17 year olds, but also by those adolescents who were themselves arguing against a reduction in the age of electoral majority. Such arguments therefore depended, somewhat paradoxically, on these young people demonstrating an orientation to precisely those norms of responsibility and rationality that they argued were beyond themselves and/or their peers.

Discussion

Participants in the present study oriented to voting as a responsibility requiring an informed decision that should be exercised independently from parental or peer influences. Above all, participants treated voting as something that required rational, mature and responsible participation, and this assumption permeated the discussions regardless of the actual position being argued (e.g. for or against lowering the age of electoral majority).

These findings suggest that the commonsense assumptions found amongst a sample of 18-24 year olds by Condor and Gibson (2007) also represent the taken-for-granted background against which this younger sample discussed the age of electoral majority. Ultimately, participants in both studies treated political participation as requiring rational and responsible involvement, with the corollary that it would be more responsible for anyone incapable of meeting these requirements not to participate. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating the use of these arguments in a younger sample who have undergone at least three and a half years of formal citizenship education. Moreover, it highlights the ways in which

participants perform rationality and responsibility in arguing that they, and their peers, are not sufficiently rational and responsible to be trusted with political rights.

In many respects, then, the assumptions underpinning the arguments identified in the present research echo much of the formal institutional discourse of citizenship education and related policy debates regarding political participation and the age of electoral majority. Of particular note is how closely these arguments appear to reflect some of the values enshrined within formal Citizenship Education policies. For example, Crick (2007, p. 236) argued that '[d]emocracy is a necessary element in good government but not a sufficient one, unless subjective opinion is enshrined over knowledge', and it is clear that the adolescents interviewed in the present research did indeed base their arguments on the assumption that political participation should be well-informed. However, these young people often drew on these commonplaces in order to argue against their own involvement in the political process. It might therefore be speculated that attempts to encourage young people to see themselves as 'active citizens' capable of political participation, may in fact reinforce the availability of a culturally powerful set of arguments *against* young people's political participation.

As has been noted before (Electoral Commission 2004), such arguments can themselves be understood as essentially mature and responsible. It is not the aim of the present study to draw conclusions regarding these young people's 'actual' levels of maturity or responsibility, but it is, nevertheless, worth noting that the cultural-communicative competencies evidenced by the deployment of these rhetorical commonplaces points to a fundamental sense in which these young people are already competent members of a political culture of non-participation (see e.g. Jefferys 2007). However, the finding that these commonplaces are mobilized by a sample of

adolescents who have undertaken several years of formal citizenship education lends credence to the suggestion that citizenship education, far from beginning to change the political culture of the UK, may in fact risk exacerbating the very aspects of that culture that it set out to change.

This study also highlights the advantages of adopting a constructionist epistemological approach and treating, for example, claims to lack knowledge not as more-or-less straightforward reports of 'actual' lack of knowledge, but as rhetorical strategies which can be used to accomplish specific social actions in particular contexts. In this instance, we see how the young people interviewed could, for example, invoke a lack of knowledge as grounds to excuse themselves from the prospect of political participation. We should also be cognizant of the local interactional function of such formulations. In the context of the research interview, it is worth considering that in positioning themselves as lacking in relevant political knowledge, the participants were attending to self-presentational concerns when faced with a social science researcher asking questions on a range of political issues. Specifically, it is likely that the location of the interviews on school premises made educationally-bound identities, such as pupil identity, omni-relevant (Sacks 1992), regardless of their actual invocation at any given point in the interview. In this respect, then, we might suggest that claims to lack knowledge represented a more general strategy of positioning the self as still under instruction, yet-to-complete-education – a strategy which ultimately manages one's own accountability for one's lack of knowledge (see extract 5 above).

This draws our attention to the limits of generalizability from the present study. The geographical and cultural location of the sample is highly specific, and further research is necessary to assess the use of these, and other, rhetorical

commonplaces. Moreover, the continually evolving nature of citizenship education (see e.g. Ajegbo *et al*. 2007) might mean that, as institutional discourses evolve, so the discursive resources which form the cultural commonsense of young people change too. Furthermore, although the substantive topical focus of the present study has been on voting, numerous authors have pointed out that this is only one of a variety of ways in which young people might be engaged in the political process (e.g. Haste and Hogan 2006, Marsh *et al*. 2007, Pattie *et al*. 2004, Weller 2007). Clearly, further research is needed to extend the application of the approach outlined here to the analysis of adolescents' commonsense conceptions of other modes of political participation.

To conclude, it is interesting to note that the conception of autonomous personhood assumed by these young people reflects precisely the variety of Western individualism that has been critiqued within the social sciences for several decades now (e.g. Bauman 2001, Gergen 1999, Gilligan 1982, Sampson 1993). Such individualism sits particularly uneasily alongside the observation that, for the most part of the twentieth century, voting patterns within the UK tended to follow trends based particularly around class (see e.g. Anderson and Heath 2002, Anderson *et al*. 2006). It might therefore be time to re-orient official institutional discourses of citizenship education to emphasise the impossibility of genuine autonomy as commonly understood, and of the validity of social influence in arriving at a decision regarding where to place a cross on the ballot paper. It may be necessary to assert the inevitability of making a decision based on only the vaguest grasp of the relevant 'facts'. If young people (or indeed any people) are given the impression that they have to wait until they are fully autonomous and in possession of sufficient 'knowledge' before they can engage with the political process, then politicians, social

scientists and media commentators alike should not be bemoaning the current state of

political participation, but marvelling that anyone participates at all.

References

Abell, J., Condor, S., and Stevenson, C., 2006. "We are an island": geographical imagery in accounts of citizenship, civil society, and national identity in Scotland and in England. *Political psychology*, 27 (2), 207-226.

Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998. *Education for citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools.* London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

Ajegbo, K., Kiwan, D., and Sharma, S., 2007. *Curriculum review: diversity and citizenship*. Nottingham: DfES.

Anderson, R., and Heath, A. F., 2002. Class matters: the persisting effects of contextual social class on individual voting in Britain, 1964-97. *European sociological review*, 18 (2), 125-138.

Anderson, R., Yang, M., and Heath, A. F., 2006. Class politics and political context in Britain, 1964-1997: have voters become more individualized? *European sociological review*, 22 (2), 215-228.

Antaki, C., and Wetherell, M., 1999. Show concessions. *Discourse studies*, 1 (1), 7-27.

Barnes, R., Auburn, T., and Lea, S., 2004. Citizenship in practice. *British journal of social psychology*, 43 (2), 187-206.

Bauman, Z., 2001. *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity.

Billig, M., 1991. *Ideology and opinions: studies in rhetorical psychology*. London: Sage.

Billig, M., 1996. *Arguing and thinking: a rhetorical approach to social psychology*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Billig, M., *et al*., 1988. *Ideological dilemmas: a social psychology of everyday thinking*. London: Sage.

Condor, S., 2006a. Temporality and collectivity: diversity, history and the rhetorical construction of national entitativity. *British journal of social psychology*, 45 (4), 657-682.

Condor, S., 2006b. Public prejudice as collaborative accomplishment: towards a dialogic social psychology of racism. *Journal of community and applied social psychology*, 16 (1), 1-18.

Condor, S., 2011. Towards a social psychology of citizenship? Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of community and applied social psychology,* 21 (3) 193-201.

Condor, S., and Abell, J., 2006. Vernacular constructions of 'national identity' in post-devolution Scotland and England. *In*: J. Wilson and K. Stapleton, eds. *Devolution and identity.* London: Ashgate, 51-75.

Condor, S., and Gibson, S., 2007. 'Everybody's entitled to their own opinion': ideological dilemmas of liberal individualism and active citizenship. *Journal of community and applied social psychology*, 17 (2), 115-140.

Condor, S., Gibson, S., and Abell, J., 2006. English identity and ethnic diversity in the context of UK constitutional change. *Ethnicities*, 6 (2), 123-158.

Coughlan, S., 2003. *Young people vote against politics* [online]. Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2699275.stm [Accessed 2 November 2009].

Cowley, P., and Denver, D., 2004. Votes at 16? The case against. *Representation*, 41 (1), 57-62.

Crick, B., 2007. Citizenship: the political and the democratic. *British journal of educational studies*, 55 (3), 235-248.

Curtice, J., 2004. *What's the point of giving 16-year-olds the vote?* [online]. Available from: http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-curtice-whats-the-point-of-giving-16yearolds-the-vote-562261.html [Accessed 13 October 2009].

Dawkins, R., and Cornwell, R. E., 2003. *Dodgy frontal lobes, y'dig? The brain just isn't ready to vote at 16* [online]. Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2003/dec/13/highereducation.voterapathy [Accessed 13 October 2009].

Edwards, D., 1997. *Discourse and cognition*. London: Sage.

Edwards, D., and Potter, J., 1992. *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.

Electoral Commission, 2004. *Age of electoral majority: report and recommendations* [online]. Available from: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/63749/Age-of-electoral-majority.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Folkes, A., 2004. The case for votes at 16. *Representation*, 41 (1), 52-56.

Gergen, K., 1999. *An invitation to social construction*. London: Sage.

Gibson, S., 2009. The effortful citizen: discursive social psychology and welfare reform. *Journal of community and applied social psychology*, 19 (6), 393-410.

Gibson, S., and Condor, S., 2009. State institutions and social identity: national representation in soldiers' and civilians' interview talk concerning military service. *British journal of social psychology*, 48 (2), 313-336.

Gilligan, C., 1982. *In a different voice: psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haste, H., and Hogan, A., 2006. Beyond conventional civic participation, beyond the

    moral-political divide: young people and contemporary debates about

    citizenship. *Journal of moral education*, 35 (4), 473-493.

Henn, M., and Weinstein, M., 2006. Young people and political (in)activism: why

    don't young people vote? *Policy & politics*, 34 (3), 517-534.

Hopkins, N., Reicher, S., and Kahani-Hopkins, V., 2003. Citizenship, participation

    and identity construction: political mobilization amongst British Muslims.

    Psychologica Belgica, 43 (1-2), 33-54.

Ipsos MORI, 2010, How Britain voted in 2010 [online]. Available from:

    http://www.ipsos-

    mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613&vie

    w=wide [Accessed 19 August 2011].

Jefferys, K., 2007. *Politics and the people: a history of British democracy since

    1918*. London: Atlantic.

Kimberlee, R. H., 2002. Why don't British young people vote at general elections?

    Journal of youth studies, 5 (1), 85-98.

Lopes, J., Benton, T., and Cleaver, E., 2009. Young people's intended civic and

    political participation: does education matter? *Journal of youth studies*, 12

    (1), 1-20.

Marquand, D., 1991. Civic republicans and liberal individualists: the case of Britain.

    European journal of sociology, 32 (2), 329-344.

Marsh, D., O'Toole, T., and Jones, S., 2007. *Young people and politics in the UK:

    apathy or alienation?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Office for National Statistics, 2010. *The national statistics socio-economic

    classification (NS-SEC rebased on the SOC2010)* [online]. Available from:

http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec--rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html [Accessed 23 April 2012].

O'Toole, T., Lister, M., Marsh, D., Jones, S., and McDonagh, A., 2003. Tuning out or left out? Participation and non-participation among young people. *Contemporary politics,* 9 (1), 45-61.

Park, A., 1999. Young people and political apathy. *In*: R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park and K. Thomson, eds. *British social attitudes: the 16th report*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 23-44.

Park, A., 2004. Has modern politics disenchanted the young? *In*: A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson, C. Bromley and M. Phillips, eds. *British social attitudes: the 21st report*. London: Sage, 23-48.

Park, A., Phillips, M., and Johnson, M., 2004. *Young people in Britain: the attitudes and experiences of 12 to 19 year olds*. Nottingham: DfES.

Pattie, C., Seyd, P., and Whiteley, P., 2004. *Citizenship in Britain: values, participation and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pomerantz, A. M., 1984. Giving a source or basis: the practice in conversation of telling 'how I know'. *Journal of pragmatics*, 8 (5-6), 607–625.

Potter, J., 1996. *Representing reality: discourse, rhetoric and social construction*. London: Sage.

Potter, J., 2007. *Discourse and psychology* (3 vols). London: Sage.

Potter, A. and Hepburn, A., 2005. Qualitative interviews in psychology: problems and possibilities. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 2 (4), 281–307.

Potter, J., and Wetherell, M., 1987. *Discourse and social psychology: beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.

Power Inquiry, 2006. *Power to the people. The report of Power: an independent inquiry into Britain's democracy* [online]. Available from: http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/documents/PowertothePeople_002.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007a. *Citizenship: programme of study for key stage 3 and attainment target* [online]. Available from: http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/uploads/QCA-07-3329-pCitizenship3_tcm8-396.pdf [Accessed 6 March 2010].

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007b. *Citizenship: programme of study for key stage 4* [online]. Available from: http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/uploads/QCA-07-3330-pCitizenship4_tcm8-397.pdf [Accessed 6 March 2010].

Sacks, H., 1992. *Lectures on conversation* (Vol. 1). Oxford: Blackwell.

Sampson, E. E., 1993. *Celebrating the other: a dialogic account of human nature*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Seale, C., 1999. *The quality of qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Shotter, J., 1993. *Conversational realities: constructing life through language*. London: Sage.

Silverman, D., 2006. *Interpreting qualitative data*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.

Sloam, J., 2007. Rebooting democracy: youth participation in politics in the UK. *Parliamentary affairs*, 60 (4), 548-567.

Taylor, S., 2001. Evaluating and applying discourse analytic research. *In*: M. Wetherell, S. Taylor and S. J. Yates, eds. *Discourse as data: a guide for analysis.* London: Sage, 311-330.

Tonge, J., 2009. Revitalising politics: engaging young people. *Representation*, 45 (3), 237-246.

Vaizey, E., 2005. Connecting with young voters. *Parliamentary affairs*, 58 (3), 627-631.

van Dijk, T. A., 1984. *Prejudice in discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Votes at 16, 2008. *16 for 16: 16 reasons for votes at 16* [online]. Available from: http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/16for16.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Weller, S., 2007. *Teenagers' citizenship: experiences and education*. London: Routledge.

Wetherell, M., 2003. Racism and the analysis of cultural resources in interviews. *In*: H. van den Berg, M. Wetherell and H. Houtkoop-Steenstra, eds. *Analyzing race talk: Multidisciplinary approaches to the interview*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11–30

Wetherell, M., and Potter, J., 1992. *Mapping the language of racism: discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

White, C., Bruce, S., and Ritchie, J., 2000. *Young people's politics: political interest and engagement amongst 14-24 year olds* [online]. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available from: http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/1859353096.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

White, I., 2009. *Reduction in voting age* [online]. Available from: http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/briefings/snpc-01747.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Wiggins, S., and Potter, J., 2008. Discursive psychology. *In*: C. Willig and W. Stainton-Rogers, eds. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology*. London: Sage, 73–90.

Wing Chan, T., and Clayton, M., 2006. Should the voting age be lowered to sixteen? Normative and empirical considerations. *Political studies*, 54 (3), 533-558.

Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009a. *Making the connection: building youth citizenship in the UK* [online]. Available from: http://www.ycc.uk.net/publications/YCC%20-%20Final%20Report%20-%20July%202009.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009b. *Old enough to make a mark? Should the voting age be lowered to 16?* [online]. Available from: http://www.ycc.uk.net/publications/YCC%20-%20Final%20Responses%20-%20June%202009.pdf [Accessed 29 October 2009].

Footnotes

[1] The decline in turnout amongst young voters appears to have recovered somewhat at the 2010 election (Ipsos MORI 2010).

[2] Given the empirical focus of the present paper on Northern England, this discussion of political culture, participation and the age of electoral majority focuses on the English context. Evidence points to differing political cultures in other parts of the UK (see e.g., Condor and Abell 2006), which it is not within the scope of the present paper to consider.

[3] The Isle of Man, Jersey and Guernsey have all reduced the age of electoral majority to 16 (see White 2009), but these territories are technically not part of the UK.

[4] The eldest participant (17 years 3 months) was older than the usual age for year 11 pupils, but was catching up with missed time due to personal circumstances.

[5] Although somewhat speculative, it seems reasonable to suggest that the unfinished particle 'cle-' (l. 14) may well have been the first syllable of 'clever'.