**Global Climate Strike protesters and media coverage of the protests in Truro and Manchester**

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*Abstract*

The Global Climate Strike (GCS) movement is by far the largest and most international youth protest movement to date. Drawing on surveys of UK protesters in two demonstrations, in semi-rural Truro in Cornwall and urban Manchester on 15 March 2019 this chapter assesses strikers’ views on the challenges facing the political system in dealing with the climate crisis. Although there are some differences between younger and older strikers, both groups are overwhelmingly critical of the failures of politicians, but optimistic about the capacity of organised groups within civil society to make a positive difference. We assess the limited extent to which this politics was represented in the public sphere, as measured in an analysis of local newspapers. Although the novelty of young people taking political action led to coverage, reporting over-emphasised the disruptive effects of protests while underplaying the political perspectives of protesters, typically framing the protests in moral rather than political terms. Given that media coverage provides the most authoritative public record of events, this depoliticisation is itself a form of marginalisation for the young people who took part in climate strikes.

*Introduction*

In August 2018 Swedish school pupil Greta Thunberg began missing school regularly on Fridays to protest outside the Swedish parliament against government inaction in the face of climate change. Within months she delivered inspirational TED talks, and speeches to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference (UNFCC) of the Parties in December 2018 (COP24) and the European Parliament. For a grassroots climate change activist, she has had unprecedented attention, some of it hostile but also unforetold access to policy-makers globally. Her message to them is emotive, challenging and deeply political:

Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather than what is politically possible, there is no hope. **We can’t solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis.** We need to keep the fossil fuels in the ground, and we need to focus on equity. And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, maybe we should change the system itself. We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again. We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. (Thunberg speech to the UNFCC COP24[[1]](#footnote-1)).

As is well known,Thunberg’s solo action then inspired others - particularly school children – to join regular climate strikes. On 15 March 2019, an estimated million-plus young people in 2000 cities in 125 countries participated in a climate strike.[[2]](#footnote-2) Their primary demand is for rapid action on climate change, framed as an issue of inter-generational justice. The movement blames adults for their failure to act:

We demand the world’s decision-makers take responsibility and solve this crisis. You have failed us in the past. If you continue failing us in the future, we, the young people, will make change happen by ourselves. The youth of this world has started to move and we will not rest again.

(The global coordination group of the youth-led climate strike, Letter to *The Guardian* 1/3/19)

GCS marks a significant change in the nature of climate change campaigning in the UK, as elsewhere. Previous UK-based climate change mobilisations have been adult-dominated, with the partial exception of participation by young off-spring of parent activists. For example, a “children’s revolt” was encouraged at the G8 meeting at Gleneagles in 2005 and manifested at the 2007 Climate Camp that opposed a third runway at Heathrow airport (Martian 2010[[3]](#footnote-3)). There, primary school age children marched behind a banner with the words “the children are revolting”. A children’s contingent was also planned at the 2010 Climate Camp. But young people have never been as prominent in climate change campaigns prior to GCS.

Adult-led climate activism in the UK has had two significant strands: ritualised marches in central London coinciding with major UNFCCC conferences (Wahlström et al 2013; Saunders 2008); and direct action / civil disobedience. The two have been crudely juxtaposed as operating with different loci – one within the international political framework, the other as intensely critical of engagement with the state, respectively. In practice, reformist and radical sentiments coalesce in surprising ways (Rootes et al 2013, Saunders 2013), for example, the Climate Camps that began in 2006 as direct action radicalism became more reformist over time (Saunders and Price 2013). It is not surprising therefore that that climate strikes in the UK have often also included non-violent direct action, particularly sit-down blockades of roads, as well as conventional rallies. But school strikes are rare: as far as we are aware the only previous incidence of widespread school strikes in the UK was when tens of thousands of pupils missed school to take part in political protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but this was not sustained in the way that the GCS has been.

Alongside the GCS, the other major new development in UK climate activism has been the emergence of a new direct action network, Extinction Rebellion (XR), which launched publicly in the UK in October 2018. XR aimed to broaden the range and numbers of participants in climate protests, by focusing on accessible forms of civil disobedience such as blocking roads in major cities. Its specific focus on the climate emergency and on protests aimed at government is very similar to GCS and in the UK, where XR originated, the two groups have a collaborative relationship in which student-aged XR activists often advise school age climate strikers. In several ways, then, both GCS and XR mark a radical departure from previous waves of UK climate activism, particularly in the focus on recognition that we are in a climate emergency and that action by government is urgent.

As a mobilisation of young people GCS is distinctive in being international and sustained over time, despite its loose organisational structure and co-ordination. The simplicity of the tactic of a school strike, which is easily transferable, is likely to be one reason for this. The strikes are an example of a new twenty first century form of movement organisation in which ”the communication networks become the political organization” (Bennett and Segerberg 2015, 375). Instead of being based on mobilisation by professional NGOs, or via small but highly committed direct action networks, as previously in the UK, the strikes emerged through a mix of social media and face-to-face recruitment among friends. This rapid emergence means that relatively little is known about participants. In this chapter, we focus on the GCS demonstrations in a semi-rural (Truro, Cornwall) and an urban (Manchester) area of the UK on March 15th 2019. As well as the urban-rural contrast, the fact that they are far from London with its concentration of well-resourced NGOs and mass media allowed us to assess the short-term impact of these demonstrations as represented in local media coverage as opposed to a national and international narrative. Comparing local media coverage with survey evidence allows assessment of the extent to which climate strikers’ highly politicised and intergenerational concerns were recognised and respected in local media.

We proceed as follows: first we outline the context in both cities and summarise our own observations of climate strike demonstrations; we then assess how the strikes were covered in the local press; outline the nature of our survey methods and summarise what the data shows about participants’ reasons for taking action and their assessment of the political system.

*The political context and the two Climate Strike demonstrations*

In both cities there were previous demonstrations (similarly sized to those we surveyed) on 15th February. In Truro, the County Council had already declared a Climate Emergency by the end of January 2019. The Declaration of a Climate Emergency committed Truro City Council to preparing a report by June 2019 in which it would detail how it will reduce greenhouse gas emissions in line with a target to prevent more than 1.5˚C of global warming. In Greater Manchester at the time of the March demonstration the Mayor Andy Burnham, had committed to a five-year plan with the longer-term aim of making the city-region carbon neutral by 2038. A more ambitious target (2030) along with a Declaration of Climate Emergency was adopted by Manchester City Council in July 2019 after pressure from climate strikers and other campaigners.

Nationally, the political establishment has been broadly positive about the climate strikes – the right-wing Conservative Party Environment minister – Michael Gove praised them, – although the then Prime Minister – Theresa May and the Education Minister Damien Hinds criticised them as wasting time that would be better spent in the classroom. Party leaders, except Theresa May, also met Greta Thunberg on her visit to London on 23rd April 2019, which came at the end of eleven days of protests by XR.

We estimated around 800 participants in Manchester and 350[[4]](#footnote-4) participants in Truro. The Truro demonstration was outside County Hall – on the pavement, by the traffic lights, and on the Hall’s lawn. Demonstrators repeatedly activated the pedestrian crossing to hold up cars, encouraging motorists to honk car horns in support. Students were chanting “Whose future? Our future!”, and there was one short speech from the organiser. There were a few “study groups” within which school pupils and students completed classwork and homework. Many of the placard/banner slogans referred to the need for urgent action, for instance “protest now or swim later”, another warned that “the climate change kids are coming”. All placards/banners looked handmade by demonstrators themselves.

The Manchester demonstration was similar in many ways. It was held at St Peter’s Square beside Manchester Town Hall. Students made speeches with a megaphone – standing on public benches. Older political activists supported the action: Manchester Climate Action had a banner, and Trotskyist Socialist Workers’ Party activists passed around stickers saying, SYSTEM CHANGE, NOT CLIMATE CHANGE. One solution: revolution” superimposed on the Hokusai “wave” print. But the presence of Left groups was much less visible than in other UK protests/demonstrations. As in Truro, homemade placards replicated slogans seen previously – e.g. “there is no Planet B”; “the seas are rising and so are we”. There was an excited youthful atmosphere, with chanting –mainly of “climate justice!” – and a Manchester-specific touch – singing “Don’t Look Back in Anger” by Oasis – which became a city anthem in 2017 after the tragic terrorist bombing at the end of an Ariana Grande concert. After the demonstration around 150 protesters occupied the tram tracks for over an hour, before marching off when police warned they could be arrested.

*The Representation of the Protests in Local Newspapers*

Based on previous analyses of newspaper coverage of protest (Earl et al 2004, Jennings and Saunders 2018), we anticipated that there would be coverage of the Manchester and Truro GCS demonstrations. This is because of their proximity to local newspaper outlets; the novelty of the demonstrations (the leading role of young people); and the increased salience of the issue due to Greta Thunberg and COP24. However, on the other hand, we might expect coverage to be fairly insignificant because of the lack of violence, the challenge that the issue poses to elites, the relatively small size of the local demonstrations and the competition in the UK that climate change has for issue salience with Brexit (McCarthy et al 1996, Smith et al 2001). In relation to the tone of the demonstrations, analysis by Donson et al (2004) of anti-globalisation protests leads us to suspect that negative aspects of the demonstrations will be over-estimated and that the protesters’ causes will be under- or mis-represented.

We searched all local newspaper outlets (online and print) for articles on GCS events held in Truro (February-April 2019) and in Manchester (February-July 2019). We identified 11 newspaper articles on GCS in the Cornish press for the period we analyse. Four articles were negative about protesters, and the rest were neutral or positive. The negative sentiments were critical of: students missing out on their education (Whitehouse 2019a); eggs being thrown at Cornwall Council offices (Becquart 2019); graffiti on council offices’ sign (Whitehouse 2019b); and general rowdiness and disrespectfulness of the crowd (Trewhela 2019). Councillors were particularly critical of students walking out of school. Councillor Fitter is reported as saying “I don’t believe that children should be protesting during a school day. The fact that some parents think it is fine, I think it is totally inappropriate”. Yet even some of the negative reporting was balanced. Councillor Fitter’s comments contrast with a comment from Councillor James, who said that although the council did not welcome the protesters to County Hall, once they were there, they were willing to talk to them, for to not do so would cause more problems (Whitehouse 2019a). Bequart’s (2019) article that featured coverage of “egging” (throwing eggs at the Council offices), also reported how Cornwall Council, although disappointed by this, was willing to continue to work alongside the “passionate” majority of respectable students. The *Cornish Guardian* (20th March) supported the Council’s approach: “while some have questioned the local authority’s tacit support of these schooltime (sic) protests, we would be wise to remember that it is this generation that will inherit the world as we know it. As such, their actions have certainly drawn attention to the climate change agenda”. In addition, the reports overwhelmingly emphasise the youthfulness of the participants, referring to “school children”, “students”, “youngsters” and “school pupils”. Only one report estimates the size of the Truro demonstration on 15 March 2019 as consisting of 150 people (Rucki 2019), which seems to us seriously under-estimated.

The *Manchester Evening News* (*MEN*) is the only daily newspaper in the city. It provided detailed coverage of climate strike rallies in February, March, April and May 2019 and the controversies around them. It also reported on the involvement of activists from GCS in meetings with local authorities. We identified 14 articles which reported on climate strikers in the period we covered: two were positive, none was negative, but all the others included some critical as well as positive themes. There is a marked change in the themes of coverage between the first and later protests. On February 15th the tone was positive, noting the large, but probably over-estimated numbers involved in the rally “Thousands Gather”. The rally was linked to others taking place across the UK and other countries (Jack 2019). As in Truro, the youth of participants – “school and college students” – was stressed. There was some coverage of the Prime Minister’s criticism that students were missing valuable class-time (Robson 2019a and others). But the main focus was on the primary issue raised by the protesters. Four students were interviewed about their motivations in a six-minute video posted in the report on the newspaper’s website.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this they pointed to the failure of government to act; the generational injustice of climate change and voiced their concerns about climate change deniers such as Donald Trump being in positions of power. Importantly, however, their interviews were only posted on the website, and did not appear in the print edition.

From March onwards the focus in reports shifted to the disruption caused by the protests and measures taken by the police in response. The tram line blockade was the main subject of reports in the *MEN* on 15 March along with the chalking of slogans on a war memorial **(**Scheerhout and Smith 2019). A few days later an article asked “Should we be listening to our children about climate change?” and cited Gemma Tognini who called “the weaponisation of children for political leverage and political gain dangerous and morally bankrupt” (McLaughlin 2019). On 28 March the *MEN* reported that “Student climate change protesters pledge more direct action in Manchester - this time targeting cars” (Green 2019). This was a selective headline, since the main body of the article was based on an interview with one of the climate strike organisers, Emma Greenwood, who explained that the blocking of the trams on 15 March had been “spontaneous” and a mistake, “So we’ve decided we’re going to do something like a walking march next time because that obviously affects cars which are more of a pollutant than electric trams”. But the *MEN*’s headline for the report on the next rally on 12 April was “Youth climate change protests block off Oxford Road” (Blakey 2019).

A second feature of coverage in Manchester was a controversy about the response of the authorities, including the police. In June the *MEN* revealed that the police had written to local education authorities to warn them that students faced potential prosecution for engaging in protests. During the April rally a small group of students had been “kettled” (detained) briefly by police and only released when they provided their names and addresses. They were subject to a dispersal order, the legitimacy of which was challenged by one parent, quoted in the *MEN*, who argued that the students were acting legally. Other students noted how their friends had stopped attending rallies as they felt intimidated by police evidence gathering teams and a parent accused the police of trying to scare off participants (Robson 2019b). These stories made the national as well as the local press, as did the case of three Manchester girls who were banned form their school prom for having missed school to attend the climate strike rally in May.

Despite these punitive moves, the climate strikers were praised by other authorities, including the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham. He spoke at the climate strike rally on May 24th and referenced Manchester’s proud tradition of protest (Robson and Halle-Richards 2019). This theme had also been evident in a video interview with one young striker, who noted that the rally was being held close to the site of the 1819 Peterloo massacre (a peaceful demonstration for democratic rights, MEN, 15 February). Despite this, the relationship between the strikers and local politicians was not without conflict. In particular, when the Mayor invited climate strikers to join him on the stage for the annual Greater Manchester Green Summit in March 2019, young activists from XR seized the microphone and criticised the lack of action by the local authority on climate change. This criticism was repeated when Burnham spoke at the GCS rally on 20th September 2019 when a 10 year old female climate striker, who was also speaking on the platform, accused him of being a liar. But climate strikers also played a role in a key political decision: a small group of GCS strikers were invited to address Manchester City council on 10 July, after which the councillors voted unanimously to declare a climate emergency. (Eccles 2019). Although reporting of the Manchester climate strikes in the *MEN* shifted from the issue of climate change to the nature of protest rights and policing, the participation of young climate strikers in these other climate change political events was a feature of its coverage. The *MEN* reports linked the climate strike to Greta Thunberg and in that sense the local strikers were able to capitalise on her ability to frame climate breakdown as a crisis (Snow et al 2001). In contrast, Greta Thunberg was not frequently mentioned in the Truro coverage, and the reports were generally shorter. Furthermore, the *MEN* did not under-estimate the size of the demonstrations in the way that at least one paper in Cornwall did.

The Cornish papers only appeared weekly and so were less focused on immediate reporting of events than the daily *MEN*. Ten different journalists reported on the Climate Strike for the *MEN*, which also signals its greater size and resources. Analysis of local newspaper coverage therefore shows that the nature of the newspaper and its format matter for how events such as the climate strike are reported. What is less clear, though, in modern times, is the role of newspapers in shaping political narratives. Bennett and Segerberg (2015, 372-3) make the point that while newspapers still retain their function as a conduit to elites and political institutions they now speak mainly to older civic generations who continue to consume print journalism. The papers we examined are likely to be accessed by young people via websites, and alongside and through social media, which provide a multiplicity of accounts and narratives. Although newspapers remain influential, and professional journalists provide the authoritative record of events, it is harder than ever to gauge how far they shape the political narrative, particularly for younger generations.

As Catherine Walker (2019) has argued, young people are variously represented in the public sphere as victims of climate change (since they will suffer more of its effects than older generations); as saviours (able to correct the failure of the older generations); or as villains (high consumers with little sense of political or environmental responsibility, at least in the global North). While the media coverage of the protests in Truro and Manchester certainly reproduced elements of the first two themes, the variation on the third took the form of a focus on the disruption caused, rather than the ideas of the strikers. What were these ideas? To assess this we turn now to the evidence about the participants in the climate strikes from our survey.

*Survey Methodology*

The survey of the GCS demonstrations in Truro and Manchester used a modified version of the Caught of the Act of Protest (CCC) project protocols (Walgrave and Verhulst 2011). Instead of distributing a mail back survey we handed out flyers with a link to an online survey. The logic is that a comparison of a face-to-face interview sample with the sample who completed the much longer and more detailed online survey, allows for estimation of response rate bias. This assumption is fair given that, generally, around 95% of those asked will participate in a brief interview, whereas only 25-40% of those asked return surveys (based on previous climate change protest surveys). Note that ethics compliance prevented us from interviewing people under the age of 16 without written parental consent. Of course, this was generally impossible because parents were not present in most cases. Our research ethics compliance also required us to not knowingly interview or hand a survey to anyone under the age of 12. Thus, we must note that that our surveying procedures mean that younger children are under-represented among respondents.

In Manchester, we gave out 398 flyers, completed 76 face-to-face interviews and, for those aged 12-15 years, collected 17 consent forms. In Truro, we handed out 260 flyers, conducted 62 interviews and, for those aged 12-15 years, collected 19 consent forms. In both places, interview refusal rates were very low – around 2%. Our response rate to the online survey, in contrast, is low at 15.2% (15.6% in Manchester, 14.6% in Truro).

Given low response rates tests of representativity are essential. There are notable differences between the two samples (online and face-to-face) on most variables common to the online and face-to-face surveys. 75% of face to face respondents were school pupils or students but among online respondents, this dropped to 54%. Thus it is clear that younger participants were less likely to complete the longer online questionnaire than those aged over 24. This was reflected in some further differences: online respondents were markedly older (mean age 33.2 years compared to 23.1 years among face to face respondents), less likely to be protest novices (23.3% claimed the GCS was the first demonstration they have ever attended, compared to 37.7% of the face-to-face respondents), 73.5% had or were studying for a degree compared to 54.8% of face-to-face respondents and were considerably more determined to participate in the demonstration (mean of 4.5 compared to 2.7 on a 5-point scale). Nonetheless, the two samples are similar in relation to the proportion of women (around two thirds in both samples) and in their dissatisfaction with democracy (mean 3.7 on a 10 point scale). It is important to note that the fact that most of our online survey respondents are above the official school leaving age (18 years) is an artefact of data collection protocols. Thus, although we did have a good number of responses from young people, the under-sampling of under16s, who could not give us parental consent and the exclusion of under 12s, needs to be borne in mind. In Manchester, one quarter of our online survey respondents were under the age of 18, compared to 34% in Truro.

Overall, we have 100 survey respondents. In our analysis, we compare the responses of 44 young people (aged 24 or younger) to 46 older participants. Although much of the focus in climate strikes has been on school age participants, categorising young people as under 24 allowed us to also include university students, as well as to balance the under-sampling of under 16s. Moreover, this distinction chimes with existing work on young people, who are generally conceived as being 24 years old or younger (see Pickard and Bessant 2018, Pickard 2019). It is also important to recognise the participation of older age groups in the climate strikes. Although the GCS is a movement initiated and led by young people there are a range of interdependencies with older age groups, given that younger children (who we could not survey) were often accompanied by parents; and some teachers also supervised groups from schools, while others attended without young people, for instance as part of other climate change groups. This means we need to understand the GCS rallies as cross-generational rather than exclusively a movement of younger people.

Climate Strikers who took the day off school or college to participate in the action all reported the importance of their school as a site for mobilisation. All school/college students who responded to the survey claim to have participated alongside fellow schoolmates/students. Moreover, they claim that both schoolmates/fellow students as well as teachers approve of their participation in the demonstration. On a scale of 1=11, the mean score for “school mates/fellow students are supportive of my participation in the demonstration” is 8.3 (standard error 4.9). Twenty-six percent of them gave the highest ranking. Support from teachers is almost equally high (mean 8.1, standard deviation 0.6), with 40.5% giving teachers the highest possible ranking for that question. This indicates that the culture in schools is an important source of support for the GCS.

*Why did participants engage in the Global Climate Strike?*

For the most part, the strikers are presented in apolitical terms in the local news reportage whereas the anger from the young at older generations and need for urgent and rapid political action shines through strongly in their responses to the survey. In response to an open question asking them why they decided to participate in GCS, participants offered a range of answers, which can be largely categorised in the following ways: to express concern about the urgency of the climate situation; to show solidarity with or supervise youthful participants; to persuade the government to take action; as a moral imperative; to raise awareness; and because of a sense of generational efficacy resonant with the notion that “we, the young can do it”.

For several respondents, the urgency of the situation was paramount. A 24-year old told us that “climate change is a killer, and the number of deaths will increase exponentially”, and a 22-year old agreed, suggesting that they participated because “we need the government to understand that we are all going to die soon”. Relatedly, several participants commented on the need to persuade *governments* to take action. There was sense of positivity among young people and older supporters that the protests of younger people might be listened to (*efficacy*). One of our respondents joined the GCS because “I believe we, as students and young people, are the ones who can change the older generations and companies” minds” (age 21). Older people sometimes expressed their solidarity in moral terms “I felt a moral imperative to show my support” (age 30), whilst younger participants framed their participation in terms of inter-generational justice (Snow et al 2001): “I despair of adults doing much – too many vested interests”. This theme was also strongly conveyed in pictures of the slogans on placards.

Table 1 shows the motivations of GCS participants as revealed in their responses to closed questions, which are consistent with the open-ended answers discussed above. Motivations are similar for young people as for older adults except for “defend my interests”, which is a considerably more powerful motivator for young people who will face worse effects of climate change, and “express solidarity”, which, unsurprisingly, is a stronger motivating force for older adults. Nearly all participants responded that raising public awareness was a motivation. In contrast, influence from others seems to be insignificant for both young and older groups, confirming that participants understood their own action as autonomous and principled.

**Table 1. Motivations for participation in GCS**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Reasons for participation** | **Young People (n=44)****%** | **Older adults (n=46)****%** |
| Defend my interests | 81.8 | 48.9 |
| Express my views | 86.4 | 93.3 |
| Raise public awareness | 97.7 | 95.7 |
| Express solidarity | 84.1 | 95.7 |
| Moral obligation | 81.8 | 82.6 |
| Someone asked me to | 15.9 | 13.0 |

Notes. The percentages refer to the proportion of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Greta Thunberg had an impact on many participants’ decision to join the strike: 41.3% of young people said that she had “very much” affected their decision to participate, and 38.8% of older participants said the same. She also made around one-fifth of the GCS participants more interested in the issue of climate change (19.6% of adults and 23.9% of young people).

Young people and older adults appear to have contrasting views on the prognosis for solving environmental problems. Younger GCS participants are more likely to consider that science should play a significant role in solving the climate debate and also that voluntary lifestyle changes by individuals are important. Most respondents – across both age categories – have little faith in governments or companies to solve the problem (Table 2). This statement from a 20-year old female from Manchester is illustrative: “The major gas and oil companies making a profit off the destruction of the planet and the killing of people, animals and the environment.”

When we asked them “what can be done?” there was overwhelming support for the proposition that that “Government must act on the science even if the majority of people disagree” (Table 2). This is despite scepticism about whether “Governments can be relied on to solve environmental problems.” The most likely interpretation is that respondents view government as the body with the greatest capacity and responsibility even if current and past governments have failed. This is supported by open answers which often referred to the need for drastic government action, recognition of the crisis and of the need to scale up all efforts to mitigate greenhouse gases.

**Table 2. Solving environmental problems**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The prognosis for environmental problems** | **Young People (n=44)****%** | **Older adults (n=46)****%** |
| Science can be relied on to solve environmental problems | 74.5 | 37.0 |
| Governments can be relied on to solve environmental problems | 13.2 | 4.3 |
| Companies and the market can be relied on to solve environmental problems | 19.6 | 6.5 |
| Stopping climate change must be primarily through voluntary lifestyle changes by individuals | 51.8 | 21.7 |
| Government must act on science even if the majority of people disagree | 94.7 | 98.5 |

Notes. The percentages refer to the proportion of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Scepticism about current governments is reflected in broader levels of generalised distrust that climate strikers have for political institutions. Young people are slightly less likely to be negative about the government’s role in solving environmental problems than older GCS participants. This pattern is reflected also in generalised trust (Table 3). More than two-fifths of adult participants are “not at all” trusting of national government, compared to around a quarter of young people. Trust for national parliament and political parties is generally higher than for national government, with young people more distrustful of parliament than older GCS participants. It is important to note that not one single respondent claimed to trust political parties “very much” (i.e. no respondents trust political parties a lot). The EU and environmental groups have much higher levels of generalised trust among both of the age groups we analyse (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Generalised distrust in political institutions**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Institution** | **Young People (n=44)****%** | **Older adults (n=46)****%** |
| National government | 24.4 | 42.2 |
| National parliament | 17.1 | 13.3 |
| Political parties | 12.2 | 20.0 |
| The EU | 2.5 | 6.7 |
| Environmental groups | 0 | 2.2 |

Note: The percentages refer to the proportion of respondents who claimed to be “not at all” trusting of the institutions listed.

Negativity with politics is further expressed in climate strikers’ responses to questions about political participation. A very high majority of both age groups agree or strongly agree that “most politicians make a lot of promises but don’t actually do anything” (88.1% young people, 71.1% older adults). However, they are not so negative that they “don’t see the use of voting, parties do whatever they want anyway”. Only 9.5% of young people and 6.7% of older participants agreed with this statement. Young people have a slightly more optimistic view about their individual efficacy (83.3% of young people and 77.8% of older adults agreed or strongly agreed that “my participation can have an impact on public policy”) and it is important to note the faith in organised groups of citizens to make changes to public policy (92.95% of young and 86.7% of older participants agreed or strongly agreed that “organised groups of citizens can have a lot of impact on public policy in this country”). This suggests underlying faith in democracy as a process.

*Conclusions*

Our research has demonstrated that participants in the GCS demonstrations in Truro and Manchester on 15th March 2019 had a politically sophisticated rationale for their actions. There were some differences between young people and older supporters with young people more likely to stress their own interests as a motivation for action. But all groups were sceptical of politicians, government, and the market while optimistic about the role of political mobilisation by grassroots actors in tacking climate change. However, very little of this was covered by the most authoritative source for establishing a local narrative, the local press. None of the Truro coverage discussed the severity of the climate issue, or the urgency with which it needs to be addressed, save for rather bland references to the notion of a “Climate Emergency”. In Manchester, the reporting was somewhat more sophisticated, probably due to the presence of a daily newspaper, as compared to the three weekly newspapers in and around Truro. However even in Manchester emphasis was given to disruptive aspects of protests and to controversies in the local council. This is not surprising given entrenched journalistic norms that place news value in novelty, controversy and violence – which make for more gripping stories (Myers & Schaeffer Caniglia 2004).

This chapter is a first contribution to the debate about young people’s engagement in climate protest and newspaper coverage. Our analysis reflects the current state-of-the-art of surveying protests. Despite this, it also indicates that the method is more fallible to response rate bias when ethical demands make it difficult to survey younger people. There is also scope for further research into the interplay of social media and face to face networks in schools as sites of political mobilisation. The Climate Strike movement shows that we need to better understand the conditions that facilitate the move of young people from political exclusion to voice. The decentralised nature of GCS with its roots in informal networks, and its very general frame and demands mean that it is difficult to read its politics (Wahlström et al 2013). Surveying participants provides a fuller and more nuanced understanding of their politics. Although most local media coverage avoided the ‘folk devil’ caricature on the one hand, on the other it failed to reflect the deeper politics of the GCS. Given the novelty of a major international movement led by young people this was important as GCS challenges the way in which young people’s politics are conventionally portrayed (Koopmans 2004). Local newspaper coverage of the GCS may have contributed to raising awareness of the need for urgent action on climate changes but by failing to represent the range of young people’s ideas local newspaper coverage functions to exclude them from meaningful political voice.

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4. We are quite sure that our estimates of the demonstration sizes are accurate because of the numbers of flyers we handed out (the flyers included a brief information sheet and the QR code and web link to the survey). See methods section for more information. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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