

Future Anxiety Affects Youth's Democratic Support and Engagement

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Abstract

Many of today's young people are anxious about the future. Yet the consequences of their anxiety on democratic support and engagement remain underexplored. In this preregistered survey experiment we tested the causal effects of future anxiety on youth's democratic attitudes. We exposed young people ($N = 1,895$; ages 16–26) to social media posts about the cost of living which were manipulated to induce future anxiety, reduce it through hope, or serve as a control. Increasing their future anxiety (vs. hope) resulted in a small but precisely estimated decrease in democratic support (-2.5 percentage points; 95% CI $[-4.3, -0.8]$), but without any effects on a behavioural candidate-choice task or on self-reported willingness to participate in politics. Conversely, hope (vs. control and anxiety) increased young people's likelihood to seek information on how to get democratically involved ($+6.9$ percentage points; 95% CI $[1.7, 12.0]$). These findings provide experimental evidence that future-oriented feelings shape youth's democratic support amidst multiple crises.

Public significance statement

In times of multiple crises, it is important to understand how young people's worries about the future shape their support for and engagement with democracy. This matters because today's younger generations who according to reports show lower democratic support than older cohorts, will be the ones to uphold democratic values in the future. In a preregistered survey experiment, we find that inducing future anxiety reduced young people's reported support for democratic principles, whereas fostering hope increased their interest in learning how to get civically involved. These findings suggest that taking young people's anxieties seriously and strengthening their hopes may help sustain democratic and political engagement.

Keywords: future anxiety, youth, democratic support, political engagement, emotion induction

Introduction

Concerns about the future are widespread among young people. Six out of ten UK adolescents feel negative about the future of their country, and over half expect to be worse off than their parents (Barnardo's, 2024; The Children's Society, 2023), with similar figures also mirrored in the US (Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2025; Lake et al., 2025). Future anxiety – a predominantly negative orientation towards the future in which feelings of anxiety outweigh hope (Zaleski, 1996; Zaleski et al., 2019) – has intensified as young people face multiple crises, from climate change to economic instability (Asbrand et al., 2023; Kaman et al., 2025; Lass-Hennemann et al., 2023; Poletti et al., 2023). Yet how future anxiety affects young people's democratic attitudes remains largely unexamined. This is a critical research gap with societal consequences. If young people lose faith in democracy's capacity to deliver a viable future, then this might further strain liberal democracies that are already under pressure (Foa & Mounk, 2016; Kwak et al., 2020). Here we provide the first systematic experimental investigation of how future anxiety affects democratic support and engagement among youth.

Psychologically, future anxiety impairs expectations of positive long-term outcomes – such as living a fulfilled and secure life – and increases pessimism about solutions to societal problems (Zaleski, 1996, 2005). These effects could have direct implications on how young people relate to democracy. On the one hand, future anxiety could erode young people's support for a system that seemingly does not deliver for them and fails to provide security. On the other hand, future anxiety could also urge people to act, for example, to protect democratic norms at a time of democratic backsliding. Whether future anxiety ultimately mobilises support for democracy, decreases it, or disengages people from politics is an open empirical question.

This question is particularly relevant during adolescence and young adulthood, when future thinking becomes more concrete and consequential as young people face important life decisions (Nurmi, 1991; Poletti et al., 2023). This same developmental window is also of high political interest (Reyes-Jaquez & Kushnir, 2026), given increases in sensitivity to sociopolitical events (Dinas, 2013; Serra & Smets, 2022), and the formation of political attitudes that tend to stabilise in adulthood (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Rekker et al., 2015, 2017). Concerningly, today's younger generations are often found to report lower democratic support than older cohorts (Foa et al., 2020; Frederiksen, 2024; Open Society Foundations, 2023; Zick et al., 2023), but the psychological underpinnings of these differences remain unclear.

Theoretical perspectives suggest that future anxiety could contribute to lower democratic support. Perceiving the world as dangerous and threatening is a key developmental precursor of authoritarian attitudes (Duckitt et al., 2002; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Osborne et al., 2023), and sociopolitical crises can heighten feelings of threat and relative deprivation associated with politically extreme and antidemocratic attitudes (Campelo et al., 2018; Kunst & Obaidi, 2020; Magni, 2017; Zagórski et al., 2024; Zmigrod & Goldenberg, 2021). Future anxiety shares core features with these appraisals – particularly negative evaluations of one's own and society's circumstances – but is temporally distinct, directed towards the more distant future, and especially pronounced among youth, making its specific political implications an open question that existing evidence does not resolve.

In a recent cross-sectional study among UK youth (ages 16–21), future anxiety was associated with higher democratic support overall, but also with stronger right-wing authoritarian attitudes among young men specifically (Borghi et al., 2025). Other work reports correlations between negative expectations about the future and populist (Zagórski et al., 2024) or more ideologically extreme attitudes (Mitrea et al., 2021). However, the direction of effects remains unclear: future anxiety could lead young people to disengage from a democratic system that does not provide them with a secure future (cf. Osborne et al., 2023), or it could increase democratic support as young people seek stability in established institutions (cf. Borghi et al., 2025). Equally, democratic support could causally affect future anxiety, for instance, if those who value democracy become more anxious as they observe democratic erosion. Our first research question therefore asks whether there is a causal effect of future anxiety on support for democracy (RQ1).

The functioning of democracy also depends on citizens' willingness to engage in the political process (Alscher et al., 2026). Even if future anxiety might undermine democratic support, it could simultaneously motivate political action, especially as the future can still be changed. Consistent with this hypothesis, future anxiety among young people has been associated with greater willingness to participate in politics (Borghi et al., 2025; Karkdijk et al., 2025). Sociopolitical crises have been suggested to fuel youth mobilisation by offering a channel to translate worries about the future into activism (Chironi et al., 2024). Yet again causal evidence on the effects of future anxiety on political engagement is scarce. Our second research question therefore asks whether future anxiety increases political engagement (RQ2).

To address these research questions, we conducted a preregistered experiment with a large sample of UK youth ($N = 1,895$; ages 16–26). Participants viewed a social media post about recent developments in the cost of living – the current issue of greatest concern in this age group (Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2025; The Prince’s Trust & NatWest, 2024; YouGov, 2024). In different experimental conditions, we used affective cues to shift the balance of future anxiety and hope: increasing anxiety (anxiety condition), increasing hope (hope condition), or providing information only (control). Specifically, we added prescriptive statements about how young people feel (anxious or hopeful) about the future and mirrored this sentiment in comments under the post, drawing on mechanisms of emotional contagion and social appraisal (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020; Parkinson, 2011; and see Von Mohr & Tsakiris, 2026, for a proof of concept of the effects of affective prescriptions in politics).

In our preregistered analyses, we then estimated the average differences between the anxiety, hope, and control conditions in two primary self-report outcomes: democratic support (RQ1.1) and willingness to participate in politics (RQ2.1). We complemented the self-report outcomes with two secondary behavioural indices: democratic leader preferences in a conjoint experiment (RQ1.2) and decisions to view information on how to get more involved in democracy (RQ2.2). Given the theoretical pathways outlined above, we had competing directional expectations for the effects on democratic support, but expected anxiety, relative to hope and control, to increase political engagement. In exploratory analyses, we investigate differences in how participants engage with the different posts (e.g., open-ended comments, liking and sharing intentions) as well as gender and age-group differences.

In summary, we provide an experimental test of how future anxiety affects youth’s democratic support and engagement – a question of wide societal importance as younger generations grow increasingly pessimistic amidst multiple crises, including a crisis of liberal democracy itself.

Method

In a preregistered experiment drawing on a large, stratified sample of UK youth, we used affectively primed social-media news posts to induce feelings of future anxiety, hope, or a control and estimated the effects on self-reported and behavioural outcomes of support for and engagement with democracy.

Participants

Our analysis sample consisted of $N = 1,895$ young people from the UK (age: $M = 21.7$, $SD = 3.0$, range = 16–26 years; 48.1% men, 51.2% women, 0.6% other). Participants were recruited from two age groups ($n = 950$ aged 16–21; $n = 945$ aged 22–26) and proportionally stratified by gender, region, and locality type (rural village, small town, large city). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three between-subjects conditions (anxiety: $n = 633$; hope: $n = 631$; control: $n = 631$). Detailed sample descriptives and breakdowns by experimental condition are provided in Table S1.

A simulation-based a-priori sensitivity analysis using DeclareDesign (Blair et al., 2019) indicated that with a sample of $N \approx 1000$, Bayesian linear models would yield 95% highest density intervals (HDIs) excluding zero approximately 90% of the time at a true small-to-medium-sized standardised effect of interest of Cohen's $d = 0.25$. Our collected sample of $N = 1,895$ provides substantially greater precision for all estimated quantities.

Procedure

The experiment was part of a larger project (Smets et al., 2025) and administered in collaboration with Gallup International. We first pre-tested the study in a pilot with $N = 100$ UK respondents recruited from Prolific to ensure our experimental stimuli reliably evoked the targeted affective states. The final implementation of the experiment was then scripted and tested in a soft launch before Gallup International recruited participants from their own online panels (technical report shared on OSF). Data collection took place between May 2025 and January 2026. The initial phase (May–October) involved re-contacting Wave 1 panel participants, and the subsequent cross-sectional recruitment that produced 95% of the final sample took place in November and December 2025. Following our preregistered protocol, we excluded participants who failed two or more of the three pre-treatment attention checks, resulting in the exclusion of $n = 94$ participants.

All participants first provided informed consent, followed by demographic questions and a series of political (e.g., ideology) and psychological (e.g., self-control) measures collected for other purposes (full survey available on OSF). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions, after which the main outcome and exploratory

variables reported in the present study were collected. At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed about the purposes of the study and the survey experiment and confirmed their understanding (following the recommendations by Clayton et al., 2024). The median survey duration was 17.8 minutes.

Gallup International provided only anonymised data from completed interviews. All questions required a response, resulting in no missing data. We included three simple attention check questions before the treatment (e.g., “Please choose the response option ‘Strongly disagree’ as answer for this question”). Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Royal Holloway, University of London (REC ProjectID: 4039).

Materials and Measures

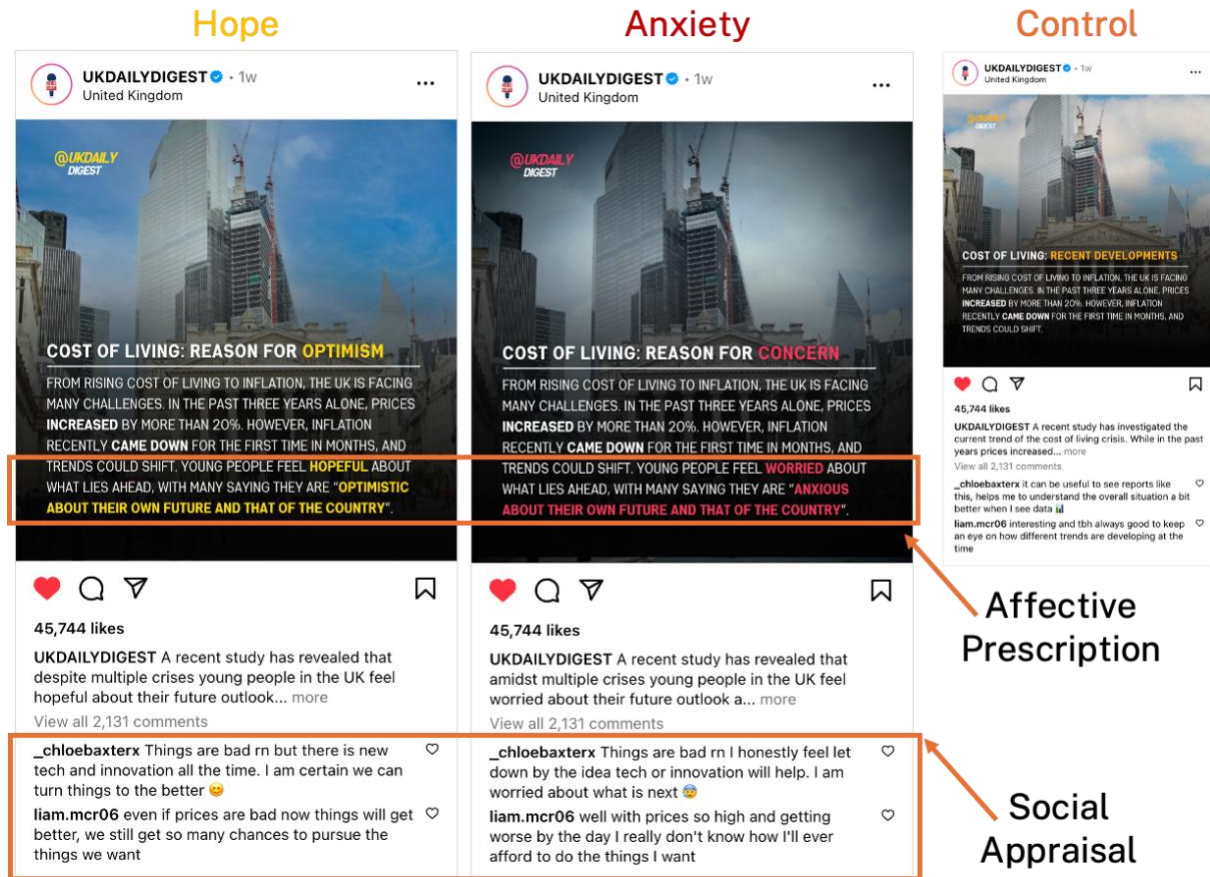
Experimental Manipulation

To shift participants’ feelings about the future, we presented them with realistic-looking but experimentally manipulated social media news posts (Figure 1). The stimuli resembled Instagram posts, given that the latest Eurobarometer Youth Survey (European Parliament et al., 2025) indicated Instagram as the most common platform from which young people access social and political news. In all conditions, the post provided information on developments in the UK cost of living crisis derived from credible news sources (see Supplementary Materials). All posts displayed an equal number of likes and came from the same source.

To maximise the effectiveness of the emotional induction, we simultaneously varied three components of the posts, each designed to affect the targeted feeling of future anxiety. We added text either stating that young people feel worried and anxious (anxiety condition) or hopeful and optimistic (hope condition) about the future; the control condition displayed only the informational text. Two comments under each post mirrored the target sentiment: comments in the anxiety condition highlighted negative trends, comments in the hope condition reappraised the issue more hopefully, and comments in the control condition focused on the presented statistics. The visual properties of the posts (e.g., sky brightness in the background image, text colour) were matched to the intended emotional tone of each condition. These three elements were designed to evoke the target feeling state, paralleling how affective cues naturally co-occur in social media environments.

Figure 1

Stimuli used in the three experimental conditions



Note. Visualisation of the stimuli used in the three between-subject conditions. All posts displayed the same factual information about the cost of living, but the prescribed affect, social appraisal, and visual emotional tone were manipulated to increase (anxiety, red) or decrease (hope, yellow) future anxiety.

Post Engagement

Directly below the social media post in all conditions, we included several questions asking participants about their reactions and opinions about the post. This included (1) an open-ended text box asking participants to write what they would comment on the post, (2) a question asking which of five emojis varying in emotional valence they would use to “react” to the post, (3) how likely they would share the post with friends, and (4) how likely they would leave a like (both rated on five-point Likert scales from “*Very unlikely*” to “*Very likely*”). The primary purpose of these items was to increase engagement with the experimental treatment. In addition, we used responses for exploratory analyses and as additional manipulation checks (e.g., coding of the sentiment of open-ended comments using large language models; Rathje et al., 2024).

Outcome Measures

Democratic Support. As our primary measure of democratic support, we used the sum score of a well-validated 7-item scale of support for democracy (Claassen et al., 2024), shown to be a reliable measure across several countries including the UK. Each item taps into a different electoral (e.g., universal suffrage) or liberal (e.g., equality before the law) aspect of democracy, rated on a five-point Likert scale (“*Strongly disagree*” to “*Strongly agree*”). As the only modification to the original scale, our instructions asked participants to state their agreement thinking about “the political system that is best for the future of the UK.” We scaled scores to a 0–1 range. The internal consistency of the scale was McDonald’s $\omega = .73$.

Democratic Leader Choice. To complement stated preferences with a behavioural indicator of democratic attitudes (revealed preferences), we adapted a four-round conjoint candidate choice task previously used to study youth democratic preferences (Frederiksen, 2024). In each round, participants chose between two simultaneously displayed candidates running for prime minister in the 2029 UK general election. Candidates varied on five attributes: Sex (male, female), Age (30–69), Party (Labour, Conservatives, Reform UK, Green, Liberal Democrats), Recent Behaviour (four statements describing actions that violate democratic norms and four that support democratic norms), and Economic Reputation (Good, Bad, Neither). As preregistered, we coded Recent Behaviour into a binary factor (democratic vs. undemocratic; see Supplementary Materials) and focused on the marginal component effect of this attribute, with undemocratic behaviour as the reference level.

Political Participation. We measured willingness to engage in political action using 5 items in the standard format commonly used in political surveys (e.g., Smets et al., 2025), selected and adapted for young people with a focus on online participation (e.g., “Send a political TikTok / Reel / Short to a friend on your social media”). Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (“*Very unlikely*” to “*Very likely*”) and scaled to a 0–1 range. The scale had high internal consistency (McDonald’s $\omega = .88$).

Interest in Democratic Involvement. As a behavioural indicator of political engagement, at the end of the survey we asked participants whether they would like to optionally view information about ways to get more involved in democracy in the UK. Participants who opted in were presented with a 260-word text describing five concrete ways for young people to participate in democracy (see Supplementary Materials). We assessed both the decision to view this information (yes / no) and the time spent viewing the information. While we model effects on both, we consider time spent on the information page

a noisier behavioural proxy that may be influenced by factors beyond political engagement (e.g., reading speed, attentiveness).

Manipulation Checks

After the assessment of all outcome variables, participants indicated how they felt when viewing the social media post on 0–100 rating sliders for five emotions: Anxious, Angry, Hopeful, Happy, and Calm. As our primary manipulation check, we combined the Anxious and Hopeful ratings – two future-oriented feelings differing in valence – into a single Anxiety–Hope dimension using the formula:

$$\text{Anxiety–Hope Dimension} = \frac{1}{2} \times ((\text{Anxiety Rating} - \text{Hope Rating}) / 100 + 1)$$

where values of 0 indicate maximum hopefulness and minimum anxiety, 0.5 indicates emotional balance, and 1 indicates maximum anxiety and minimum hopefulness. We expected the anxiety condition to produce higher scores and the hope condition lower scores relative to control. Given affective responses to political information often do not map neatly onto discrete emotion categories (Bakker et al., 2021), we also examined the individual ratings of positive valence (Hopeful, Happy, Calm) and negative valence (Anxious, Angry) emotions as supplementary manipulation checks.

Statistical Analyses

We estimated all models within a Bayesian framework using the brms package (Bürkner, 2017) in R version 4.5.2. We chose this approach for three reasons. First, brms allowed us to fit all preregistered models, from linear regression and logistic mixed-effects models to hurdle models, within a single framework that is seamlessly integrated in the broader R ecosystem. Second, Bayesian estimation characterises uncertainty through full posterior distributions, enabling direct probabilistic interpretation of parameters given the data and models (Kruschke & Liddell, 2018). Third, weakly informative priors provide gentle regularisation while making minimal assumptions (Gelman et al., 2017). All models were fit with 4 chains of 4,000 iterations (2,000 warmup) and model convergence was confirmed via $R\text{-hat} < 1.01$ (see Supplementary Materials).

An overview of all preregistered models and priors is provided in Table S2. For democratic support and political participation (continuous outcomes), we estimated linear regression models with the experimental condition as the predictor (dummy-coded; control as reference). For the conjoint task, we estimated a logistic mixed-effects model in which the binary choice on each trial was predicted by all conjoint attributes as main effects and the interaction between democratic behaviour and experimental condition, with by-participant random intercepts to account for the four repeated trials (following Heiss, 2023). For interest

in democratic involvement, we estimated a hurdle log-normal model to capture the two-stage process: a logistic component for the decision to view information (yes/no) and a log-normal component for time spent viewing, conditional on deciding to view the information (Bürkner, 2017).

From each model, we derived pairwise average comparisons between conditions (anxiety vs. control, hope vs. control, hope vs. anxiety) as our primary quantities of interest using the *marginalEffects* package (Arel-Bundock et al., 2024). We summarise posterior distributions using the median and 95% credible intervals (CIs; highest density intervals). If the 95% CI of a pairwise difference excludes zero, we infer evidence for a credible effect in the corresponding direction. To supplement this, we report the probability of direction (PD) – the proportion of the posterior sharing the sign of the median estimate – which provides a measure of the certainty with which an effect goes in a particular direction (Makowski et al., 2019).

Transparency and Openness

We preregistered our research questions, analysis models, and experimental materials on OSF accessible at <https://osf.io/c95nr>. All data and materials have been made publicly available on OSF and can be accessed at <https://osf.io/cfst2>. To ensure the reproducibility and verifiability of our analyses, we provide both raw R Quarto scripts with packages loaded with groundhog (Simonsohn & Gruson, 2025) and already executed scripts as html documents. We further report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions, all manipulations, and all measures in the study in the previous sections and in Supplementary Materials.

Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, we used Claude to code the sentiment of participants' open-ended comments (see Supplementary Materials). We further used Claude to assist with coding tasks and to enhance the clarity and language of the manuscript. We have carefully reviewed and edited all code and text and take full responsibility for the article's content.

Deviations from Preregistration

We preregistered a target sample of approximately $N = 1,000$ respondents aged 16–22 as part of Wave 2 of a larger panel study. However, Gallup International achieved only a 5% retention rate from Wave 1. Following negotiations with Gallup International, we agreed on a larger cross-sectional sample as compensation, extending recruitment to include participants aged 22–26. The resulting sample deviated from the preregistered target in both size and age range. Critically, this deviation was not the result of any data-dependent decision by the

research team as the agreement was reached before any data were collected or made available to us. Additionally, the larger sample provides greater statistical precision, and restricting analyses to an arbitrary subset after data collection would introduce unnecessary researcher degrees of freedom. We therefore focus on the full sample, but complement this with models including interactions with age group (16–21 vs. 22–26) and analyses restricted to the originally targeted sample summarised in the main text and detailed in the Supplementary Materials.

Results

Manipulation Checks and Post Engagement

Before turning to our primary preregistered analyses, we present exploratory analyses of the manipulation checks and post engagement measures to establish that our experimental conditions successfully shifted future anxiety.

Figure 2

Manipulation Checks and Post Engagement in Different Experimental Conditions



Note. Panel I displays posterior distributions from Bayesian linear regression models with weakly informative priors for manipulation check and engagement outcomes by experimental condition. The Anxiety-Hope Dimension is a bipolar index where 0 = maximum hopefulness, 50 = emotional balance, and 100 = maximum anxiety. Comment Sentiment reflects the valence of open-text comments coded by Claude Sonnet 4.5 (0 = very negative, 100 = very positive). Likelihood to Share and Likelihood to Like reflect self-reported intentions (0 = very unlikely, 100 = very likely). Panel II displays posterior distributions for five emotion ratings (0 = not at all, 100 = extremely) across conditions. In both panels, points represent posterior medians and bars 95% highest density intervals (HDIs). Letters indicate pairwise comparisons with a compact letter display (CLD): conditions sharing a letter do not credibly differ from each other (i.e., the 95% HDI of their difference includes zero), while conditions with no letter in common credibly differ. A bridging label (e.g., ab) indicates a condition that

does not credibly differ from either of two groups that themselves credibly differ from each other: e.g., if Control = a, Anxiety = b, and Hope = ab, then Hope is not credibly different from either Control or Anxiety, but Control and Anxiety are credibly different from each other. Panel III shows the distribution of emoji reactions selected by participants in each condition. All continuous outcomes were rescaled to 0–100 percentage points for visualisation purposes.

Our manipulations successfully shifted the target state of future anxiety (defined as anxiety outweighing hope). The anxiety condition increased and the hope condition decreased future anxiety, compared to each other and to control (Figure 2, Panel I). The conditions also more generally resulted in differences in negative and positive affect in the expected directions in the ratings of emotions, and effect sizes were notable (Figure 2, Panel II). For example, the predicted average anxiety rating was 61.11 (95% CI [58.93, 63.16]) and thus clearly above the midpoint (50) in the anxiety condition, whereas it was below the midpoint (47.16; 95% CI [45.02, 49.28]) in the control condition, and even smaller in the hope condition (42.87; 95% CI [40.60, 44.93]).

These self-reported emotion ratings were supported by how participants engaged with the posts. Open-ended comments written by participants in the anxiety condition were coded as more negative in sentiment using Claude Sonnet 4.5 (following the approach described by Rathje et al., 2024; see Supplementary Materials for details) than comments in the hope and control conditions (Figure 2, Panel I). Participants in the anxiety condition were also descriptively more likely to select a negative valence emoji as reaction to the post (Figure 2, Panel III). Finally, participants in the anxiety condition reported a greater willingness to share the post compared to control ($\beta = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.016, 0.085]), whereas no credible differences emerged for the intention to like the post. Together, self-reported emotion ratings, LLM-coded comment sentiment, and emoji reactions consistently suggested that our manipulations affected future anxiety and, more broadly, the balance of negative and positive affect in the intended directions.

Effects on Democratic Support and Democratic Candidate Choice

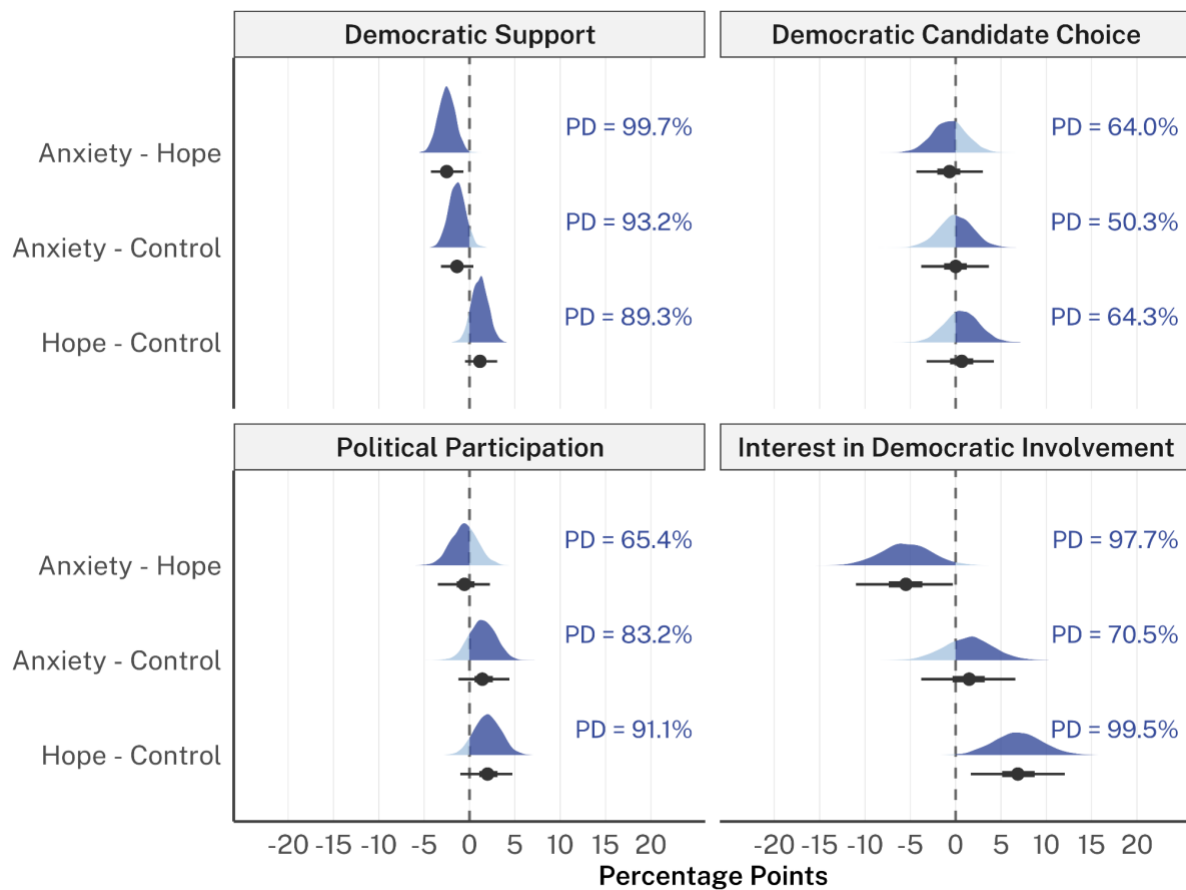
Support for Democracy (RQ1.1)

Turning to our primary preregistered analyses, we estimated the average pairwise differences between our three experimental conditions in participants' democratic support from a Bayesian linear regression model (Tables S3-S4). Model-based predictions showed that the average democratic support score across conditions was about 54.1 percent (anxiety:

0.528, 95% CI [0.515, 0.541]; hope: 0.554, 95% CI [0.541, 0.566]; control: 0.542, 95% CI [0.529, 0.555]). Pairwise comparisons indicated that participants reported 1.4 percentage point (pp) lower democratic support in the anxiety condition compared to control ($\beta = -0.014$, 95% CI [-0.032, 0.004]), whereas they reported 1.1 pp higher democratic support in the hope condition compared to control ($\beta = 0.011$, 95% CI [-0.006, 0.030]), with zero included in both 95% credible intervals. The direct comparison between the anxiety and hope conditions, however, yielded a credible difference: participants in the anxiety condition reported 2.5 pp lower democratic support than those in the hope condition ($\beta = -0.025$, 95% CI [-0.043, -0.008]; Figure 3).

Figure 3

Average Differences in Political Outcomes Between Conditions



Note. Posterior distributions of average pairwise comparisons between the three experimental conditions (anxiety vs. hope, anxiety vs. control, hope vs. control) for four political outcomes. Democratic Support: sum score of 7-item scale, scaled so that 0 = the lowest and 100 = the highest possible democratic support. Democratic Candidate Choice: differences in the marginal component effect of democratic (vs. undemocratic) candidate behaviour in the

conjoint task. Political Participation: sum score of 5-item self-report scale of willingness to participate in politics (0 = lowest to 100 = highest willingness). Interest in Democratic Involvement: differences in the predicted probability of choosing to view an optional survey page with information on how to get more democratically involved. Density slabs show the full posterior distribution, with the darker shading indicating the proportion of the posterior sharing the sign of the median estimate (probability of direction, PD). Points indicate posterior medians, thick bars 50%, and thin bars 95% highest density intervals. The dashed line at zero indicates no difference between conditions.

Democratic Candidate Choice (RQ1.2)

To complement our self-report measure of democratic support with a behavioural outcome, we estimated the effects of the experimental conditions on candidate preferences in the conjoint task. Conditional marginal component effects from a Bayesian logistic mixed-effects model (Tables S5-S6) suggested that in all three conditions participants on average had an approximately 15.9 pp preference for democratic over undemocratic candidates (anxiety: 0.159, 95% CI [0.144, 0.174]; hope: 0.163, 95% CI [0.138, 0.190]; control: 0.156, 95% CI [0.129, 0.182]), with the differences between conditions centred around and not credibly different from zero (Figure 3).

RQ1 Summary. Our analyses provided evidence that viewing a social media post that increases future anxiety, compared to the same post framed more hopefully, resulted in lower reported democratic support. The effect was small (2.5 pp) but precisely estimated. However, we did not find corresponding effects in the conjoint task, where preferences for democratic over undemocratic candidates did not credibly differ between conditions.

Effects on Political Engagement

Willingness to Participate in Politics (RQ2.1)

Contrary to our preregistered expectation that future anxiety might increase motivation for political action, we found no credible effects of the experimental conditions on self-reported willingness for political participation (Tables S7–S8). Across conditions, the predicted willingness to participate in politics was about 57 percent (anxiety: 0.575, 95% CI [0.555, 0.595]; hope: 0.581, 95% CI [0.561, 0.602]; control: 0.561, 95% CI [0.541, 0.582]). Compared to control, both the anxiety ($\beta = 0.014$, 95% CI [−0.012, 0.044]) and hope conditions ($\beta = 0.020$, 95% CI [−0.010, 0.048]) slightly increased willingness for political

participation, but zero was among the 95% most credible values given our model and data in both cases (Figure 3).

Interest in Democratic Involvement (RQ2.2)

We next investigated the effects of the experimental conditions on participants' interest in getting more democratically involved, modelling both the decision to view optional information (initiation) and how long participants viewed it (extent) as a two-step decision (Tables S9–S10).

Model-based predictions suggested that on average about 38.9 percent of participants chose to view the information (anxiety: 0.376, 95% CI [0.338, 0.412]; hope: 0.431, 95% CI [0.394, 0.470]; control: 0.362, 95% CI [0.325, 0.397]). Participants in the hope condition were credibly more likely to choose to view the information compared to control ($\Delta = 0.069$, 95% CI [0.017, 0.120]), with a 6.9 pp higher probability. The anxiety condition did not credibly differ from control ($\Delta = 0.015$, 95% CI [−0.038, 0.066]). The direct comparison of anxiety vs. hope was credibly negative ($\Delta = -0.055$, 95% CI [−0.110, −0.003]), indicating that hope was more effective than anxiety at prompting information seeking.

Among participants who chose to view the information, the predicted median viewing time across conditions was about 9.326 seconds (anxiety: 9.856, 95% CI [8.642, 11.260]; hope: 9.163, 95% CI [8.174, 10.410]; control: 8.971, 95% CI [7.820, 10.190]). None of the differences between conditions were credibly different from 0. Participants in the anxiety condition viewed the information 0.883 seconds longer than control (95% CI [−0.913, 2.582]), those in the hope condition 0.187 seconds longer (95% CI [−1.366, 1.895]), and the anxiety–hope comparison was also not credibly different from zero ($\Delta = 0.688$, 95% CI [−0.947, 2.475]).

RQ2 Summary. We found no credible effects on self-reported willingness to participate in politics. However, reduced future anxiety (hope) increased the likelihood that young people chose to view information about democratic involvement.

Exploratory Analyses: Heterogeneity by Age Group and Gender

Finally, we explored whether effects varied by age group (16–21 vs. 22–26) and gender (men vs. women), and we estimated our main models using only the preregistered sample. The manipulation worked similarly across age groups, whereas women showed a slightly stronger response to the anxiety condition on the Anxiety–Hope dimension ($\beta = 0.050$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.10]) and across individual positive emotions.

For democratic support, the effects relative to control differed descriptively (Figure S2): democratic support was credibly lower in the anxiety vs. control condition among 16–21

year-olds and men, whereas democratic support was credibly higher in the hope vs. control condition among 22–26 year-olds and women. However, the interaction terms themselves were not credibly different from zero, so these subgroup patterns warrant cautious interpretation. No subgroup differences emerged for democratic candidate choice (Figure S3). For political engagement (Figure S4), no credible age group interactions emerged for any outcome. However, there was a credible interaction between gender and the anxiety condition for political participation ($\beta = -0.063$, 95% CI $[-0.121, -0.007]$): while there were no effects on average, this interaction indicated that young men in the anxiety condition reported credibly higher willingness to participate in politics compared to control ($\beta = 0.048$, 95% CI $[0.006, 0.089]$). For interest in democratic involvement (Figures S5-S6), the effect of hope (vs. anxiety and control) on choosing to view information was slightly more pronounced among women, but none of the interactions were credibly non-zero.

Across all outcomes, analyses restricted to the initially preregistered sample (16–21, and recontacted 22-year-olds) were consistent with the effects in the younger age group (16–21) in the interaction models reported here (Tables S11–S14).

Discussion

We tested whether shifting young people's future anxiety through inductions of anxiety or hope had a causal effect on democratic support, preferences for democratic candidates, and political engagement. Our results show that affectively charged social media posts successfully changed participants' feelings, with downstream effects on some political outcomes. Increasing future anxiety (anxiety vs. hope) had a small but precisely estimated negative effect on support for democratic principles. Decreasing future anxiety (hope vs. control) increased young people's willingness to view information about democratic involvement. No meaningful average differences were found in democratic candidate preferences or self-reported willingness to participate in politics.

The finding that future anxiety might causally decrease support for democracy among youth is particularly relevant at a time when multiple crises can make the future appear bleak and uncertain for many young people (Barnardo's, 2024; Harvard Public Opinion Project, 2025; Poletti et al., 2023; The Children's Society, 2023). Previous research suggests that the democratic attitudes of young generations can critically determine the direction political systems take (Foa & Mounk, 2016), as these attitudes may partly reflect cohort rather than age effects and could thus persist as young people replace older cohorts in the electorate. Political systems also tend to adjust to their future, with cross-national evidence suggesting that youth trust in political institutions predicts the quality of liberal democracy several years later (Kwak et al., 2020). If young people become less supportive of democracy as they grow more concerned about the future, this could therefore have detrimental effects on the future of democracy itself.

While the effect on democratic support was small in absolute terms and did not extend to the noisier behavioural candidate choice, our manipulation was a single, brief exposure to a social media post – a minimal intervention compared to the affective environments young people navigate daily. Repeated exposure to future-anxiety-inducing content may produce cumulative effects (Funder & Ozer, 2019). Moreover, the effect emerged on a scale measuring generally stable principles about liberal democracy (e.g., universal suffrage, equality before the law), making the observed changes all the more noteworthy. At scale, such effects could account for part of generational differences in democratic support (e.g., Open Society Foundations, 2023), and one direction for future work would be to assess baseline differences in future anxiety and its political effects between generations.

Our findings complement and extend previous correlational work linking pessimism about the future to populist preferences (Zagórski et al., 2024) and cross-sectional findings

among UK youth (Borghi et al., 2025) by providing causal insights. For example, the observed negative effect of future anxiety on democratic support was in the opposite direction to the correlation reported in a recent UK-based sample of similar age (Borghi et al., 2025). This stresses the need to test causal assumptions to better understand the nuanced role of feelings in politics (Brandt & Bakker, 2022). The previous correlational findings could be reconciled with the present study if a confounding variable (e.g., general well-being) or a reverse causal path from democratic support to future anxiety can be identified, both of which are fruitful directions for future research.

Even though contrary to our expectations we did not observe average differences in self-reported willingness to participate in politics, the hope condition increased young people's likelihood to seek out information on how to get more democratically involved. Our a-priori expectation was based on previous links between anxiety and increased political information-seeking (Valentino et al., 2008). However, this literature has sometimes proven hard to replicate (Funck & Lau, 2024) and primarily concerns general anxiety or anxiety about proximate political events. Future anxiety is directed at outcomes that have not yet materialised, and because the future does not yet exist – only expectations of it do – hope may be a more important precondition for willingness to participate and build a better future than anxiety about its potential deterioration.

This is consistent with research showing that hope can facilitate engagement with societal challenges among young people if it evokes a sense of possibility for change (Ojala, 2023). Importantly though, according to this account, hope may not result in greater engagement if it is based on the belief that everything will work out fine without having to pursue counteraction. Therefore, one perspective that may be missing from our operationalisation of future anxiety – with anxiety and hope as opposing ends along one dimension – is that in practice these feelings can co-occur. Many young people report being anxious about what lies ahead while simultaneously feeling positive about the future (e.g., in relation to climate change; Sangervo et al., 2022). An open question for future research is whether the simultaneous induction of anxiety and hope for the future most robustly predicts civic engagement, by pairing feelings of urgency with those of agency.

Finally, our exploratory analyses suggested that the political effects of future anxiety could differ by gender. It is important to note that interaction effects were not distinguishable from zero, and our study was not set up to test subgroup effects formally, but there was some indication that while women showed a stronger affective response to the anxiety condition, the downstream effects on democratic support and political participation were concentrated

among men. This parallels previous correlational findings (Borghi et al., 2025), and future work should test more systematically how future anxiety differentially affects the political attitudes of young men and women. For example, young men and women might differ in how they cope with future anxiety. Men could be more likely to perceive future anxiety as a threat to status or life prospects (Mehring et al., 2025), resulting in unique political consequences, whereas women may be more adept at regulating these feelings through other strategies (Campelo et al., 2018; Tamres et al., 2002). If the effects of future anxiety on political attitudes are indeed stronger among young men, this could be a contributing factor to the widening ideological gender gap or the political radicalisation of young men (Mathisen, 2025; Mehring et al., 2025; Nennstiel & Hudde, 2025). Future research could also test this by investigating the extent of future-anxiety-evoking narratives used by radical movements and online influencers, and whether young men are more attracted or exposed to such communication.

Limitations

There are two design choices in our study that warrant consideration when interpreting the reported effects. First, although we designed the control condition to hold information constant across conditions, displaying factual information about the cost of living may itself have evoked some degree of future anxiety. This could have narrowed the difference between treatment and control, potentially making it harder to detect effects that might appear larger against a pure no-exposure baseline. At the same time, this also means that our analyses provided a more conservative test of our research questions. To both replicate our methodologically conservative estimates and to investigate how information about a crisis itself or together with affective cues affects political outcomes, future research could add an additional no-exposure control condition, which was not feasible with the resources available for this study.

Second, as a single-exposure experiment, our design does not speak to how the observed effects unfold over time, nor to whether they accumulate or decay under repeated exposure. Future research could complement our findings by testing the effects of negative future-related emotions through repeated exposure, for example within social-media simulators or more naturalistic online environments.

Constraints on Generality

Our inferences are intended to apply to experimentally induced increases and decreases in future anxiety among UK residents aged 16–26, delivered through affectively framed social media content about a salient societal crisis. We would expect similar effects in broadly comparable contexts, but several features of the study should be considered when generalising beyond this scope.

First, we chose the cost-of-living crisis based on data suggesting it is the issue of greatest concern in this age group and the UK. While this topic features prominently as a concern across young people in several Western democracies, it remains a single topic. Different crises may evoke different appraisals and coping strategies, with potentially distinct downstream consequences for democratic support and engagement. Future research could systematically vary crisis topics and the framing of their future implications (personal vs. societal) to capture heterogeneity in their political effects.

Second, while our sample was stratified across key demographic indicators, it was drawn from UK youth aged 16–26 recruited through an online panel, and our inferences should be considered specific to this context. The political consequences of future anxiety may depend on the sociopolitical environment in which young people form their attitudes, and future cross-national replications would be valuable to determine which effects generalise and which are contingent on the UK context. Our findings should also not be assumed to extend to younger adolescents or older adults without studies explicitly examining these groups, as the scale and content of future-oriented and political thinking may differ across the lifespan.

Conclusion

As younger generations face an uncertain future amidst multiple crises, understanding how their feelings shape their relationship with democracy is highly relevant. Our findings suggest that future anxiety could contribute to decreases in young people's support for democracy, whereas hope might promote interest in democratic involvement. Importantly, despite widespread concern about the future, many young people also often simultaneously remain positive about what lies ahead. Future research could thus test how realistic hope about the future can be leveraged in interventions to strengthen the democratic engagement of younger generations.

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