

Young Voters UK: Engagement, Disengagement and Re-engagement?

Abstract

This study explores young voter behaviour in terms of engagement, disengagement and re-engagement following the 2017 ‘snap’ UK General Election. This study builds on the work of Pich *et al.* (2017) who investigated how young voters engaged cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally with the 2016 UK-EU Referendum. Their findings revealed that young voter engagement is multi-faceted and varies enormously, particularly for behavioural engagement online. Although many respondents indicated that had voted in the 2016 EU Referendum they were *uncertain* to vote in *future elections*. This shift observed in young voters’ engagement highlights the need to understand in-depth 1) the underlying reasons for this engagement transition across different political events and 2) how current and future engagement relate to each other. Responding to this identified gap, this research aims to investigate why these young citizens were *apathetic* with the 2017-UK General Election however *engaged* with the 2016-EU Referendum. Semi-structured interviews were conducted June-July 2017. The sample comprised thirty respondents from the original Pich *et al.* (2017) study who voted in the 2016 EU Referendum yet highlighted uncertainty to vote in future elections. The findings have implications within and beyond the realms of political marketing.

Keywords: younger voter engagement; disengagement; re-engagement; political marketing

Literature Review

Political marketing has been defined as “*a set of activities, processes or political institutions used by political organisations, candidates and individuals to create, communicate, deliver and exchange promises of value with voter-consumers, political party stakeholders and society at large*” (Hughes and Dann 2009:244). Despite progress made within political marketing, many gaps remain (Needham and Smith 2015; Nielsen 2016; O’Cass and Voola 2011). Specifically, there are explicit calls for more empirical research of voter-centric perspectives such as how young voters engage in the political process and how engagement develops through time (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013; Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2017; Macnamara *et al.* 2012).

Political marketing can only progress if it continues to develop new concepts or reapply advanced theories and frameworks (O’Shaughnessy and Henneberg 2007; Smith and Speed 2011; Speed *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, what happens if voter-consumers fail to engage or disengage with the political processes or disbelieve the political promises put forward by political organisations, candidates and individuals? According to Simons (2016:4) in “*recent years there has been an increased level of voter volatility which has been matched by an interest in understanding electoral behaviour*”. Previous research suggests, “*young people are the most disengaged of all the electoral segments in Britain*” (Dermody *et al.* 2010:422) and often feel alienated with politics (Nickerson 2006). Young people [18-24 years] are less likely to vote, hold negative attitudes towards the electoral process and are less likely to be involved in conventional political activities such as joining and supporting political parties (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014; Macnamara *et al.* 2012). However, young voter engagement is complex and considered paradoxical by some (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014; Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2004; Dermody *et al.* 2010; Gorecki 2013). Young people are described as being alienated, cynical and disengaged with voting, yet also being interested and knowledgeable about political processes such as elections and voting (Dermody *et al.* 2010; Macnamara *et al.* 2012; Nickerson 2006). Few existing studies consider whether the type of election [referendum or national elections for example] has an impact on young voter engagement and participation (Quinlan *et al.* 2015). The majority of studies in this area tend to focus on periodic elections rather than intermittent elections like referenda (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014; Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2004; Dermody *et al.* 2010; Gorecki 2013).

Nevertheless, the work by Pich *et al.* (2017) revealed young people were engaged *cognitively, emotionally* and *behaviourally* with the referendum and its associated campaigns engaged with political discussion and actively followed political accounts online, and directly communicate with political representatives and organisations. Further, the study suggested *current* engagement remains connected with *future* engagement and highlights the challenges of sustaining long-term political interest due to the ‘malleable’ nature of young voters’ electoral biographies (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014; Gorecki 2013; Nickerson 2006). The findings outlined in Pich *et al.* (2017) support the idea that young voters who are interested and knowledgeable of political issues can offset negative emotional valence that would otherwise prevent behavioural engagement (Dermody *et al.* 2010; De Vreese 2005; Pinkleton and Austin 2002). However, the Pich *et al.* (2017) study identified a third of their sample were *apathetic* about participating in future general elections, despite having participated in the EU referendum. This raises a profound question of the parliamentary political system in the UK: why are so many young people reluctant to engage, despite showing an ongoing interest in political issues?

Responding to the identified gaps, this research explores the engagement, disengagement and re-engagement of young citizens following the 2017 ‘snap’ General Election. Further, this research responds to explicit calls for comparative research of young voter engagement and participation in political marketing (Needham and Smith 2015; Nielsen 2016; Ormrod and Henneberg 2011; Pich and Dean 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015). This study builds on the work of Pich *et al.* (2017) by focusing attention on the thirty participants from the previous sample who were apathetic about participating in future general elections. This in turn develop our understanding of voter behaviour [engagement, disengagement and re-engagement] and will develop the discipline of political marketing which can advance if we build on previous research and revisit core topics (O’Cass and Voola 2011; Scammell 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015).

Research Objectives

- *Understand how apathetic young citizens engage with the electoral process after the 2016 UK-EU Referendum*
- *Examine the process of young voter engagement-disengagement following the 2017 UK General Election*
- *Assess future voting intention and political re-engagement of young citizens 18-24 years*

Research Design

As this study aimed to explore political engagement-disengagement of young citizens 18-24 years following the 2017 UK General Election, a qualitative approach was adopted. This research conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with young citizens aged 18-24 from 11th June 2017 – 11th July 2017. The thirty respondents were selected on the basis that they had taken part in the study of Pich *et al.* (2017), indicated that had *voted* in the 2016 EU Referendum however were *uncertain* to vote in future periodic-intermittent elections. The semi-structured interview guide built on the key findings from the work of Pich *et al.* (2017) who adopted a mixed method study combining multiple-phase questionnaires, longitudinal social network analysis of Twitter and sentiment analysis, which provided a rich empirical description of young voter engagement. This allowed us to develop personalised yet consistent schedules to facilitate the interview sessions. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed by the authors and analysed using Butler-Kisber’s (2010) two-stage thematic inquiry analytical process.

Initial Findings & Discussion

Our *initial* findings confirm the vast majority of our respondents voted to ‘remain’ contradictory to the collective outcome to ‘leave’ the European Union [EU]. However, when the ‘remain respondents’ were probed to reveal the rationale for voting ‘remain’ many respondents failed to outline ‘one single issue’ and instead made their decision based on ‘a selfish way’ and the ‘personal impact’ leaving the European Union would have on their lives rather than consider collective responsibility. Further, the majority of respondents continued to engage *cognitively, affectively* and *behaviourally* with politics and were not apathetic with the electoral process following the UK-EU Referendum in June 2016. For example, the vast majority ‘remain’, respondents were ‘disappointed’, ‘frustrated’ and ‘shocked’ by the outcome yet continued to discuss political issues such as the ‘NHS, the ‘economy’ and ‘Brexit’ and the ‘importance’ of voting in future election. However, the majority of respondents believed the prospect of a second EU referendum would be ‘undemocratic’ and argued that despite the fact the UK would be leaving the EU they ‘reluctantly respected’ the outcome of the referendum. Further, respondents continued to ‘share’ rather than ‘create or comment’ on political news stories and political issues on social media platforms and continued to ‘discuss-debate’ politics with family and friends as Brexit would have long-term implications to everyone in the UK. The three dimensions of young voter engagement [cognitive, affective and behavioural] rather

than disengagement were present following the 2017 ‘snap’ General Election [GE]. The outcome of the EU Referendum strengthened the level of ‘interest’ and maintained attachment with the political process. For example, the majority of respondents believed they were more ‘knowledgeable’ of political issues, ‘what the parties stood for’ and more ‘clued up’ on policies and pledges put forward by political stakeholder. However, at times respondents continued to feel ‘overwhelmed’ by a General Election rather than a focused ‘remain or leave’ referendum and also returned to ‘habitual voting’ along the line of family and past political allegiances. Yet, participants were often ‘surprised’ at the level of their newly required interest and continued to ‘discuss’ and ‘debate’ politics with family, friends and co-workers, share rather than create or comment on political and ‘desire’ to review political news stories rather than their usual ‘show-biz’ stories. Further, several respondents reflected on how they voted in the 2017 GE and aspired to have known more about the political policies and spent more time researching political information rather than rely on the voting behaviour of parents to assist them in finalising their decision before voting.

Nevertheless, the numerous of respondents [including non-Conservative supporters] were becoming ‘tired’ of ‘continuous elections’ and did not relish the prospect of another snap General Election and believed the country needed a period of ‘stability’ and for the government to ‘get on with the job’. Further, many respondents argued they would vote in long-term future elections and believe it was important to exercise civic duty and take part in the electoral process. However, several respondents questioned whether they would actually vote if an election were called tomorrow due to election fatigue and the fact respondents were still confused and unsure which party or candidate to vote for. Nevertheless, many respondents acknowledged that in time their personal circumstances would change such as leaving university, getting married or buying property and this could change their political ideology and have an impact on who they would vote for in the future. It was also outlined respondents would like to spend more time ‘researching’ and ‘investigating’ the different political parties, candidates and policies in future elections and possibly vote for a different political parties and not vote based on family political allegiances. Finally, this additional research would address the ‘confusion’ and allow them to become ‘enthusiastic’ about political issues. Therefore, the initial findings suggest the three engagement dimensions [cognitive, affective and behavioural] could have an impact on future voting intension and sustaining young voter engagement yet highlight opportunities and challenges for political stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study investigates young voter behaviour in terms of engagement and disengagement following the 2017 ‘snap’ UK General Election and explores future voting intention and political re-engagement of young citizens 18-24 years. The findings have implications not only for political parties but also for politicians, candidates and other political actors. More specifically, political stakeholders will be able to use this study as a guide of how to understand young voter engagement and disengagement and respond to opportunities in order to develop targeted strategy and tactics to re-engage disillusioned young citizens. Further, political stakeholders have the opportunity to appeal to a wider ‘market’ as political ‘party’ support has moved beyond habitual tribal voting of traditional party lines. This study also has implications for theory as this study advances knowledge in relation to young voter behaviour and future voting intention and provides insight as to how young voter behaviour changes periodic and intermittent elections. Finally, this research responds to explicit calls for comparative research of young voter engagement and participation which in turn develops the discipline of political marketing (O’Cass and Voola 2011; Needham and Smith 2015; Nielsen 2016; Ormrod and Henneberg 2011; Pich and Dean 2015; Scammell 2015; Speed *et al.* 2015).

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