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2017 GENERAL
ELECTION

Re-generated youth citizenship: youth civic and electoral mobilisation at the 2017 General Election

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Now the dust has settled, how should we account for the surge in youth turnout at the 2017 UK General Election with estimates that 64% of those aged 18-24 cast a vote (Hart and Henn 2017) – representing a significant 21-point increase from the 2015 General Election and a departure from recent patterns of youth abstention? After all, our youth are often decried as apathetic and having no sense of civic responsibility or commitment to social and collective endeavour. So when Theresa May unexpectedly called a snap election on 18 April 2017, such an outcome seemed virtually unthinkable. The Conservative lead over Labour in the pre-election polls appeared unassailable (YouGov 2017), and the 50-day campaign period loomed long, flat and predictable. For many young people, another vote, soon after what they considered a deeply disappointing 2016 Referendum outcome to leave the EU, heralded little more than the prospect of another five years in which their concerns would remain ignored by the political elite. The likelihood that Britain's youth would flock to the polls seemed somewhat remote.

Certainly since 1997, election turnouts have been very generational affairs, characterised by strong voting by older citizens and abstention by the nation's youth. At the 2015 General Election (Ipsos MORI, 2015), only 43% of registered 18-24 year olds voted, over 20% below the average turnout and 35% below those aged 65 and over. However, recent voting events suggested a possible change in the electoral wind, that youth could be attracted to the polls in 2017. In particular, over two-thirds (68%) of those aged 16-24 voted at the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (YouGov, 2014) and 60% of 18-24 year olds voted at the 2016 European Union Referendum (Ipsos MORI, 2016), suggesting British youth will vote when motivated by the political issues at stake or feel that they can influence the result.

One early indication that we might see those 2014 and 2016 referenda youth turnout rates repeated in 2017 was revealed in Hansard's Audit of Political Engagement (Hansard Society, 2017) published shortly before Theresa May's announcement. This suggested that 39% of young people said they were certain to vote – a large increase on the 16% who said they were certain to vote at a similar point in 2015.

There were other clues pointing to a possible upsurge in youth mobilisation. Nearly one million (919,691) under 25s signed-up to vote (Gov.UK, 2017) in the month before the 2017 registration deadline; this surpassed registration rates in the build up to the 2016 EU Referendum (709,076) and 2015 General Election (657,570). Furthermore, young people's certainty to vote soared to 63% (Bulman, 2017) in polls before the election.

Jeremy Corbyn seemed certainly to be a factor (Fishwick, 2017) behind this surge and his openness to more direct forms of democracy (Mayes, 2017) appealed to young people who prefer their politics created from below (Soler-i-Marti, 2014). Labour were leading the Conservatives by a huge 57 points (Agerholm, 2017) in the 18-24 cohort according to one poll shortly before the 2017 election, whereas only 16% more of 18-24 year olds (Ipsos MORI, 2015) preferred Labour to the Conservatives at the 2015 election.

So why did Britain's youth feel motivated to vote in 2017? One critical factor was their direct experience of recent government austerity policies. According to the Resolution Foundation (2016) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (2013), young people have faced an unprecedented attack on their socioeconomic conditions in recent years; state support has been withdrawn from them (and often transferred to older age groups), their employment positions are increasingly precarious, access to home ownership is decreasing and wages are below those of previous youth generations.

Moreover, at the 2017 General Election, a number of youth-centred policies were promoted by the parties. All bar the Conservatives and UKIP backed extending voting rights to those aged 16 and 17 (BBC, 2017a). Labour's manifesto promised large increases in the minimum wage for under 25s, the abolition of university tuition fees, restoring the Education Maintenance Allowance and greater employment security. The Liberal Democrats produced a youth manifesto written in consultation with young people, although the Conservative's manifesto commitments were somewhat limited in scope.

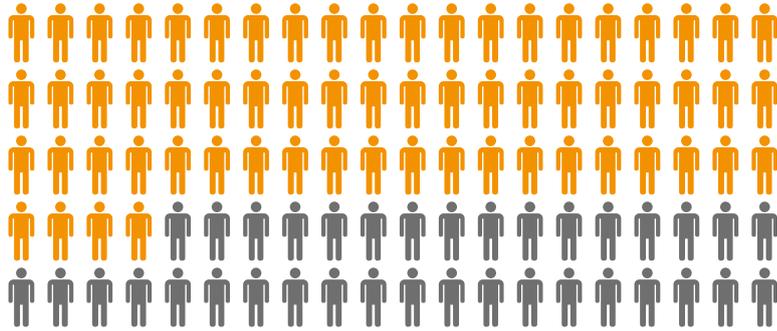
Another potential factor was youth disappointment following the vote for "Brexit" at the EU Referendum (Ipsos MORI, 2016). The fact that three quarters of 18-24 year olds voted to "remain" (YouGov, 2016) may have motivated them to vote in 2017 to contest older generations' preferences, which are often at odds with their political desires. Furthermore, young people may have also been more inclined to vote in 2017 as they believed they could influence the result. The Conservative Party were defending a working majority of 17 seats (Asthana et al., 2017) and research from the BBC (Barford, 2017) before the election suggested young people could influence the result in up to 10 seats. While Henn and Foard (2014) suggest that contemporary youth doubt their influence in politics, their importance to the result of the 2017 election may have made them reconsider the impact they could have.

The 2017 General Election will be remembered for many things. The unprecedented wave of terror attacks that formed the backdrop to the election. The stark ideological choice on offer between a very traditional Conservative party and a resurgent Labour party led by a long-term socialist that ultimately only narrowly failed in defeating the incumbent Conservatives by a 2.4 percentage share of the national vote (BBC, 2017b). The election will also be recalled as the event that captured the imagination of a new generation of civically-minded young people who announced their return to the electoral stage in a way not seen in decades.

10

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In 2017...



64%
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year olds voted



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