

2017 General Election:

Where can young voters make the most impact?

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The Intergenerational Foundation (www.if.org.uk) is an independent, non-party-political charity that exists to protect the rights of younger and future generations in British policy-making. While increasing longevity is to be welcomed, our changing national demographic and expectations of entitlement are placing increasingly heavy burdens on younger and future generations. From housing, health and education to employment, taxation, pensions, voting, spending and environmental degradation, younger generations are under increasing pressure to maintain the intergenerational compact whilst losing out disproportionately to older, wealthier cohorts. IF questions this status quo, calling instead for sustainable long-term policies that are fair to all – the old, the young and those to come.

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Executive Summary

- This short report sets out to identify the marginal constituencies in England and Wales where young voters could make the greatest impact at the 2017 general election.
- This research found that there are 43 marginal seats where the number of “new” voters – those who’ve turned 18 since the last election two years ago – exceeds the incumbent MP’s majority.
- Of the 15 seats where “new” voters outnumber the incumbent’s majority by the biggest margin, 11 belong to the Conservatives and 4 belong to Labour.
- This research also found that there are 39 marginal seats where the incumbent MP’s majority equates to less than 10% of the number of potential voters aged 18 to 34.
- Of the 15 seats where this group outnumbers the incumbent MP’s majority by the largest amount, 8 belong to the Conservatives and 7 belong to Labour.
- Evidence demonstrates that the Millennial generation is disengaged from electoral politics. The UK suffers from one of the largest gaps between the electoral participation of older and younger people in any developed country.
- IF argues strongly that the youngest voters in the electorate need to make their voices heard at the ballot box in the 2017 general election if they want to have their say on the big issues that will affect Britain over the next five years.



1. Introduction

Too many young people have become disillusioned with politics. Data from the British Social Attitudes survey demonstrate that between 1991 and 2013 the proportion of survey respondents aged 17 to 34 who said “It’s not really worth voting” in general elections increased substantially (Fig.1). This growing sense of disillusionment has been matched by declining turnout among the youngest groups of voters at the general elections which have taken place over the past 20 years¹ (Fig.2). Cross-national comparisons emphasise the extent to which young people’s disillusionment is particularly acute in the UK: the UK has the lowest turnout by young voters in general elections of any country among the original 15 countries of the European Union (for example, voters aged 18 to 24 in Sweden turnout at twice the rate of their counterparts in the UK) (Sloam, 2015), and one of the largest “turnout gaps” between 18 to 24 year-olds and the electorate as a whole of any current EU member (Leach et al. 2016). It is also the case that the younger you are, the less likely you are to be registered to vote in the UK (House of Commons Library, 2017); the problem of electoral disenfranchisement was exacerbated by the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration in 2014, which removed thousands of young adults from the electoral register (Electoral Commission, 2016).

Young peoples’ disengagement with politics has a number of causes. In part, it appears to be motivated by a sense that the majority of politicians are simply not interested in younger voters’ interests. It has been observed that:

“...many young people feel they are uniquely isolated or even excluded from a self-serving political system which is reluctant to acknowledge its own limitations.”
(Mycock et al. 2012)

For the generation that was born between 1980 and 2000, who comprise the youngest members of the current electorate, this perception has almost certainly been influenced by having lived through a number of scandals which undermined the political class more broadly, such as the misleading of the public over the case for invading Iraq and the parliamentary expenses scandal. Unfortunately, political disengagement is perniciously self-reinforcing: research has demonstrated that voting is a habit that people are less likely to take up in later life if they don’t do it when they are young (IPPR, 2015), and politicians have a rational incentive to ignore the interests of young people in favour of other social groups who are more politically engaged if they know that there are no votes in it for them, which you would expect to perpetuate further disengagement. A number of analyses have demonstrated that the Coalition government’s austerity agenda had a disproportionate economic income on younger people (Lupton, 2015), from the trebling of tuition fees to the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the closures of Sure Start

¹ Although it’s worth noting that this decline did reverse somewhat the last general election in 2015.



children’s centres; subsequent government policies, such as the withdrawal of housing benefit for under-25s and the loss of tax credits for families with more than two children, have continued this trend (Yoshioka, 2015). Finally, last year’s Brexit referendum, in which Millennial voters appear to have voted overwhelmingly for Remain only to find themselves outnumbered by older voters who were in favour of Leave, may have contributed to the damaging perception that young people can’t bring about the changes they would like to see through the ballot box.

"Which one of these statements comes closest to your view of voting in general elections?" (17 to 34 year-olds)

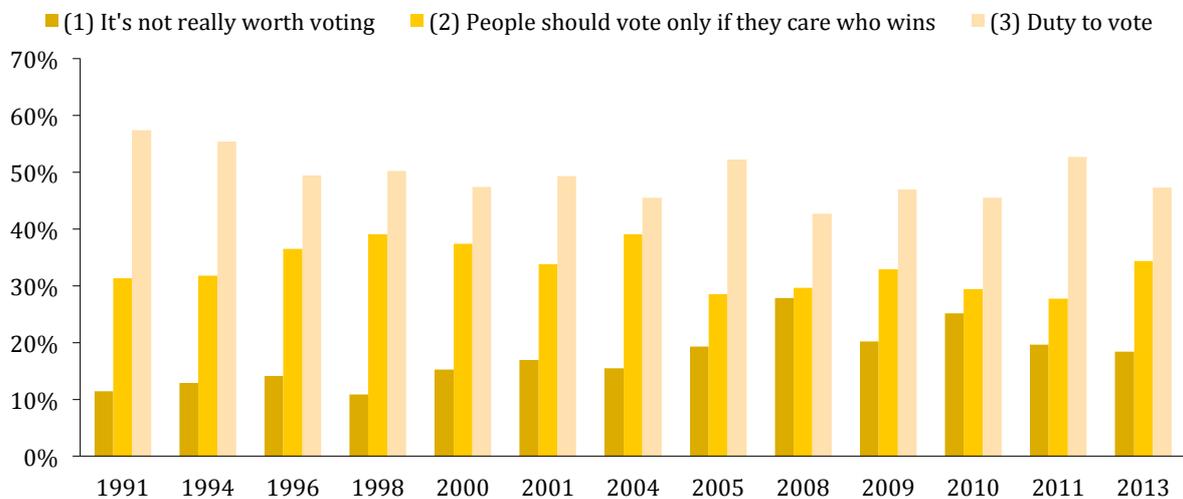


Fig.1 Opinion polling on young peoples’ perceptions of voting in general elections (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2017)

How did turnout vary between different age groups at recent general elections?

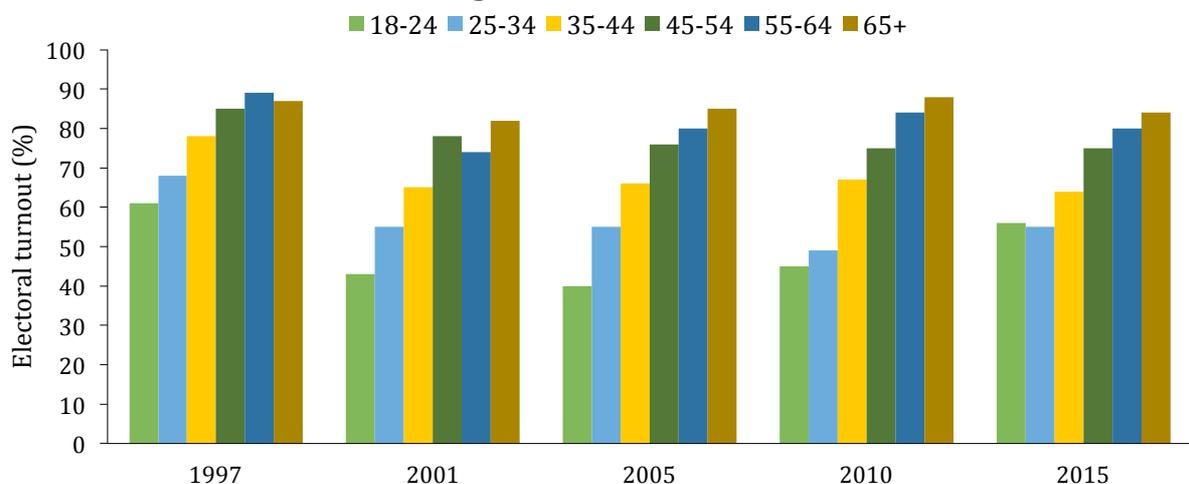


Fig.2 Variation in turnout by age groups at recent general elections (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2016)



However, as a young peoples' charity, IF strongly disagrees with the view that young people shouldn't vote because it won't change anything. Britain's system of parliamentary democracy and the right to universal adult suffrage were both hard-won triumphs by previous generations for which millions of people laid down their lives; and for all the changes that politics has undergone in recent decades, elections still remain the single most decisive forum for influencing political decision-making. It is also very important to emphasise that young peoples' disengagement from formal political structures shouldn't be misinterpreted as a lack of interest in politics per se, as there is significant evidence to show that young people are just as interested in political issues as members of previous generations were, but that they choose to "do" politics differently. Members of Generation Y are more individualistic than previous generations and are more predisposed to seek to deal with problems on their own rather than relying upon collective solutions, as evinced by their lower levels of support for the welfare state (Duffy et al. 2013). For example, research by Demos among teenagers who were aged between 14 and 17 in 2014 (the vast majority of whom will have the vote at the upcoming election) found that they were highly concerned about political issues and social causes, but they were much more likely to believe that volunteering, raising money for a cause, signing a petition or launching a social media campaign would be effective methods of producing change than engaging with the formal political system would be (Birdwell and Bani, 2014).

This evidence does suggest that younger members of the electorate are amenable to becoming voters as long as they believe that voting really can be an effective means of creating political change. Effectively, they need to be convinced that their votes really can make a difference. However, this is challenging because under Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system some votes really are much more important than others; in any given election only a small minority of the most marginal constituencies actually change hands, while the vast majority are safe seats for one party or another. Given that winning British elections is about winning marginals, the purpose of this short paper is to investigate what impact the youth vote could have on swinging the outcome in them, in order to demonstrate that younger voters really could change the outcome of the election if enough of them vote. Specifically, it looks at two questions:

- a. How could first-time voters affect the outcome of the election?
- b. How could higher turnout among all voters aged 18 to 36 affect the outcome of the election?

Section 2 of this report describes the methodology that was used to try to answer these questions; Section 3 provides the results and analysis and Section 4 is the conclusion.



2. Methodology

This research paper had to confront the significant obstacle that there are no officially published estimates of the UK's eligible electorate (ONS, 2017). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes two different sets of estimates of the population of each parliamentary constituency in England and Wales: mid-year population estimates of the entire population of each constituency by sex and single year of age, and separate estimates of the number of registered electors in each constituency (which are not broken down by age). However, for this research we needed to have an estimate of the number of people who are *eligible to vote* in each constituency by age; this group is smaller than the total population of the constituency but larger than the number of registered electors, because the number of registered electors is nearly always an undercount of the eligible population (especially among younger voters, who are less likely to be registered than older ones).

Therefore, estimates of the population of each constituency which is eligible to vote by age group had to be manually created by combining the following three separate datasets and making some significant assumptions:

- Electoral Commission (2015) *2015 UK Parliamentary general election results* London: Electoral Commission
- ONS (2016) *Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2015* Swansea: ONS
- ONS (2013) *2011 Census: Quick Statistics for England and Wales on national identity, passports held and country of birth* Swansea: ONS

Eligibility to vote in UK general elections is restricted to people who are over 18 and a citizen of the UK, Ireland or a Commonwealth country who has been a permanent resident of the UK within the last 15 years and is not legally excluded from voting. This meant it was necessary to estimate the share of the population within each constituency who were not British, Irish or Commonwealth citizens. The only available means of doing that was to use data from the 2011 Census on passport-holding within each constituency as proxy measure for citizenship: the percentage of the population in each constituency in 2011 who held a non-British or non-Irish passport was calculated in order to estimate the share of ineligible residents, and this was then multiplied by the estimated population of each constituency in 2015 (the most recent year for which total population estimates were available) and the result subtracted from the total population to produce an estimate for the population of eligible voters.

This means that the estimates used in this report have a number of significant limitations: all the data are several years out of date and overlook changes in the



size of the foreign-born population of each constituency since 2011; holders of foreign passports are not necessarily ineligible to vote and vice-versa; it excluded Commonwealth citizens living in the UK from the percentage of eligible voters (the Census data was insufficiently granular to include them); and it meant excluding Scotland because the Scottish census data on passport-holders wasn't compatible with that for England and Wales (Northern Ireland was also excluded because of the differences between their electoral politics and those in the rest of the UK). However, they were the most robust estimates that could be produced given the severe limitations of the official data.

This produced a new dataset which contained an estimate of the number of eligible voters who regularly live within each constituency in England and Wales in 2015, broken down by single year of age. In order to bring the estimates up-to-date for 2017, each single-year age cohort was simply brought forward by two years, which enabled IF to estimate the number of new voters in 2017. The key limitation of this method was that it took no account of immigration and emigration in each constituency during the past two years, so the numbers which were arrived at can only be regarded as estimates. Once this dataset had been created it was compared with the Electoral Commission dataset on the composition of the current Parliament to work out how the population sizes compared with the majorities of incumbent MPs.



3.Results and analysis

a. How could first-time voters affect the outcome?

IF estimates that approximately 1.25 million “new” voters have come of age in England and Wales during the 2015–17 parliament who will get the opportunity to vote for the first time at the upcoming general election. As indicated above, research has shown that people who fail to vote at the first general election when they are eligible are significantly less likely to become habitual voters in the future, so it is important that as many of them are encouraged to vote as possible. Significantly, in 43 of the most marginal constituencies in England and Wales the number of these “new” voters is larger than the majority of the incumbent MP. These seats are identified below in Fig.3

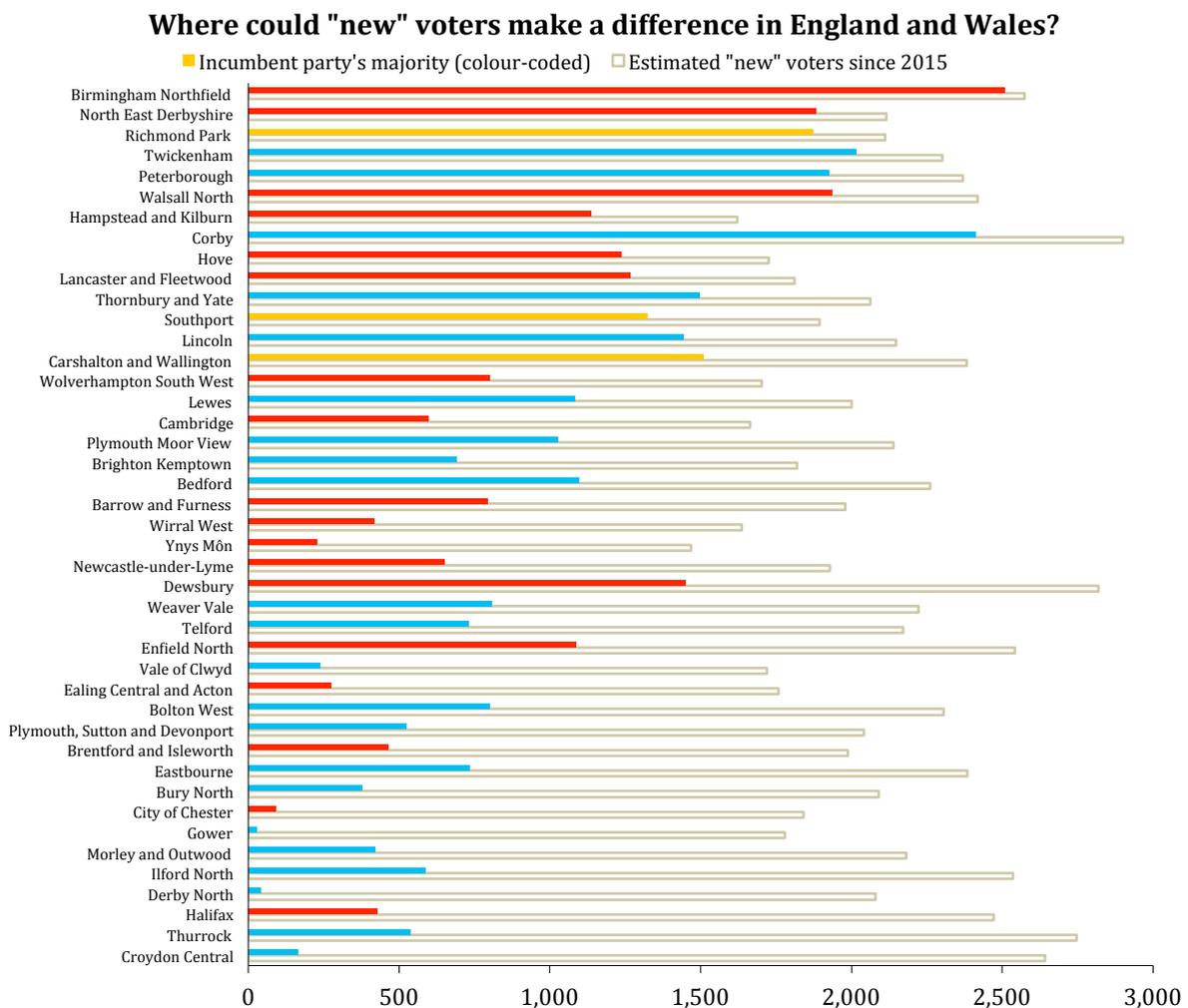


Fig.3 Marginal seats in England and Wales where the number of voters who've turned 18 since the last general election is greater than the incumbent MP's majority



IF is non-party-political: we want to see all young people exercise their vote, regardless of who they vote for. However, it is interesting to note that these seats are very evenly distributed between the two major parties: 21 are currently held by the Conservatives while 19 belong to Labour. The 3 remaining seats are held by the Lib Dems, which is actually a third of the total number they currently hold. However, although there is still time for the situation to change before the election, polling data in early May was suggesting that the 40% of people aged 18 to 24 who were planning to vote wanted to vote Labour, compared with only 15% for the Conservatives and 12% for the Liberal Democrats (YouGov, 2017); although the individual situation will vary considerably from seat to seat, this suggests that higher turnout among new voters in any of these marginals would be likely to benefit Labour significantly more than it would the Conservatives, all things being equal. Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect all of these voters to give their allegiance to the party which finished second at the last election, but in many of these seats only a small proportion of new voters would need to do so in order to change the outcome. Fig.3 also demonstrates that of the 15 marginal seats where the gap between the number of new voters and the incumbent's majority is largest, 11 are currently held by the Conservatives; these are all so marginal that only a small share of the new voters would need to back the second-placed party for the seat to change hands. By contrast, this gap tends to be smaller for most of the Labour and the Lib Dem seats, so more of the new voters would need to back the second-placed party to generate the same result (and, because these seats are less marginal, the outcome will be more affected by how other age groups choose to vote in any case).

These data are not meant to suggest either that first-time voters can dramatically shift the outcome of the whole election or that those who live in safe constituencies shouldn't bother to vote; they are merely meant to illustrate the point made in the Introduction that young people hold more power than probably either they, or for that matter many politicians, have realised.

b. How could higher turnout among all voters aged 18 to 34 affect the outcome of the election?

The data presented in Fig.2 demonstrated that there was a significant gap in turnout between voters in the two youngest age categories – 18 to 24 year-olds and 25 to 34 year-olds – and their older counterparts (although it was smaller than it was at the previous general election in 2010). There was a gap of roughly ten percentage points between the turnout rate among both of the two youngest age groups and that of the next-youngest, who were aged 35 to 44. While the size of the gap between them means that it would be unrealistic to imagine a world in which the turnout of the



youngest voters reached a similar level to that of the oldest ones, it is worth contemplating what impact a relatively small, and hopefully more achievable, increase in turnout among the youngest voters could have on the outcome of the upcoming election.

Where could higher turnout among young voters make a difference?

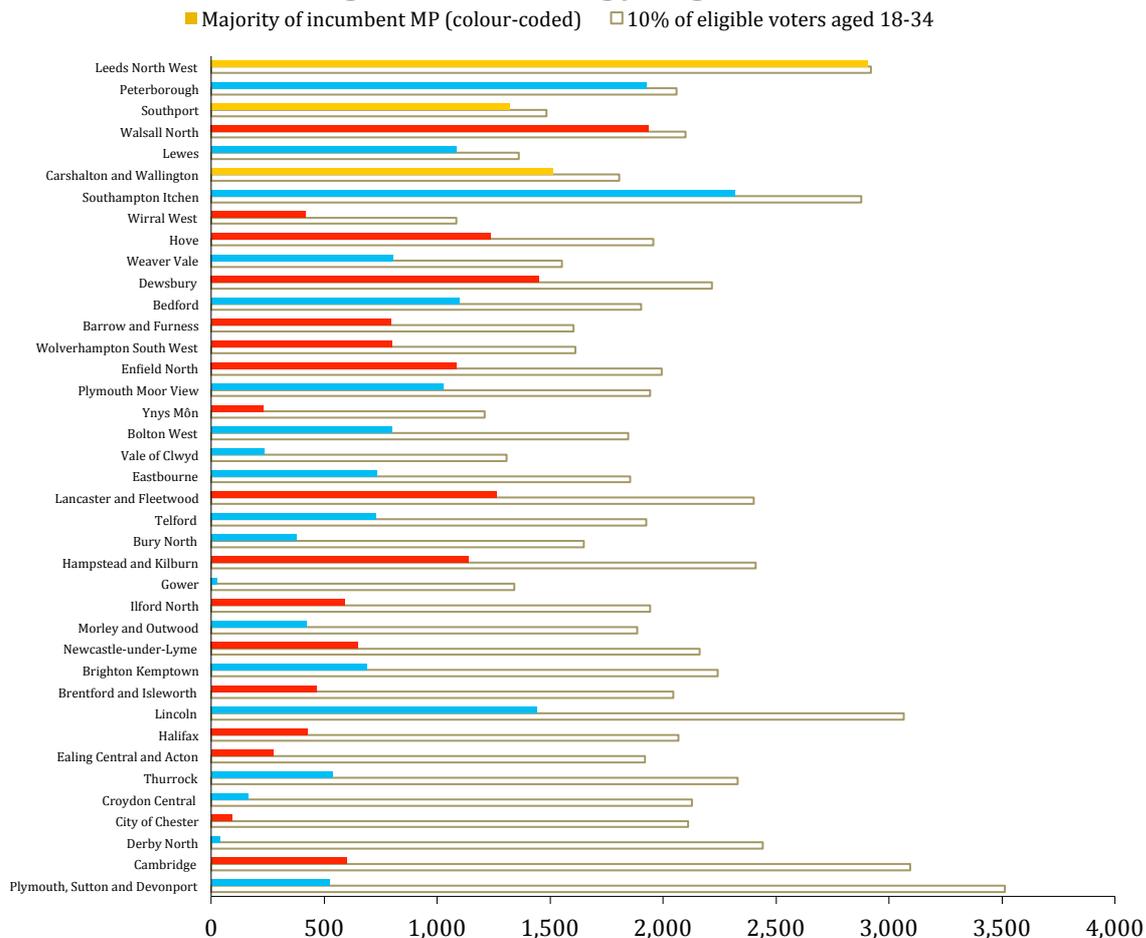


Fig.4 Marginal seats in England and Wales where 10% of eligible voters aged 18 to 34 would be larger than the majority of the incumbent MP

There are a total of 39 marginal seats in England and Wales where the incumbent MP’s majority is less than 10% of the populated of eligible voters aged 18 to 34. As in Fig.3, these vulnerable seats are distributed fairly evenly between the different parties: 19 are currently held by the Conservatives, 17 by Labour and 3 by the Liberal Democrats. As you would expect, there is significant overlap between the two lists of seats identified in Figs.3 and 4: 37 constituencies are present on both, while only six seats appeared in Fig.3 which are not in Fig.4 (Birmingham Northfield, Corby, North East Derbyshire, Richmond Park, Thornbury and Yate, and



Twickenham) and only two seats appeared in Fig.4 which are not present in Fig.3 (Leeds Northwest and Southampton Itchen). It is worth noting that unlike in Fig.3, the most marginal of these seats are more evenly divided between the two largest parties. Of course, the same caveats apply to this analysis which were mentioned in relation to Fig.3: the specific dynamics of the vote will vary from seat to seat, and it is very unlikely that all young voters would line up behind the second-placed candidate in any of them.

Overall, the results of the research suggest that there are sufficiently large concentrations of younger voters for them to play a decisive role in the outcome of 45 of the 573 seats in England and Wales – almost one in ten of the total.



4. Conclusion

The purpose of this short report is to demonstrate that the youngest members of the electorate can play a much larger role in the outcome of the upcoming general election than it's probably either they, or indeed the politicians themselves, have realised. A large body of evidence appears to suggest that Millennial voters have become disillusioned with electoral politics because they don't believe it's an effective conduit for driving change around the social issues which are important to them. Hopefully, the findings of this research will prove to young people who are thinking of voting that doing so could potentially make a big difference to the outcome of this election.

Britain needs more young people to vote if we want our representative democracy to carry on enjoying the wide support of the general public. Conversely, young peoples' disengagement from politics places the future health and sustainability of our political system at risk.



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