

Youth Quake:

Young people and the 2017 General Election

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About the Intergenerational Foundation

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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Foreword

That we are living in momentous times is in no doubt. Young voters, who for years have been ignored, derided, and even excluded from the democratic process, have finally woken up. They want a stake in the political process and politicians who underestimate their call will suffer.

As this report demonstrates, the re-engagement of young voters in the political process is causing a very real 'youthquake' in political circles. Political parties are waking up to a new dawn; one that means that they cannot sideline the key issues affecting younger generations such as: housing, student debt, declining living standards, and the withdrawal of the welfare safety net for the under-25s.

Our rapidly ageing population, with more centenarians alive than ever before, demonstrates the great strides forward our society has made. Pensioner poverty has never been so low, now running at 15%. But, it seems the pendulum has swung too far in favour of wealthy retired households, many of whom have higher incomes than the working population, enjoy pensions that younger generations will never receive, and own high-value properties that so many under-40s have lost hope of ever affording. Older generations are at risk of occupying more than their fair share of the housing stock as well as preventing the building of new housing.

The interests of older generations have been over-prioritised because of their power at the ballot box, courted with Pensioner Bonds, an annual 2.5% uplift in the State Pension during a period of record low inflation, and unaffordable universal benefits such as the Winter Fuel Allowance.

While the Conservatives have scraped through to form a government in the recent General Election, Labour appears to have won the younger generation's vote. How the Conservatives, LibDems, and other political parties respond to the demands of young people is yet to be seen.

Angus Hanton

Intergenerational Foundation



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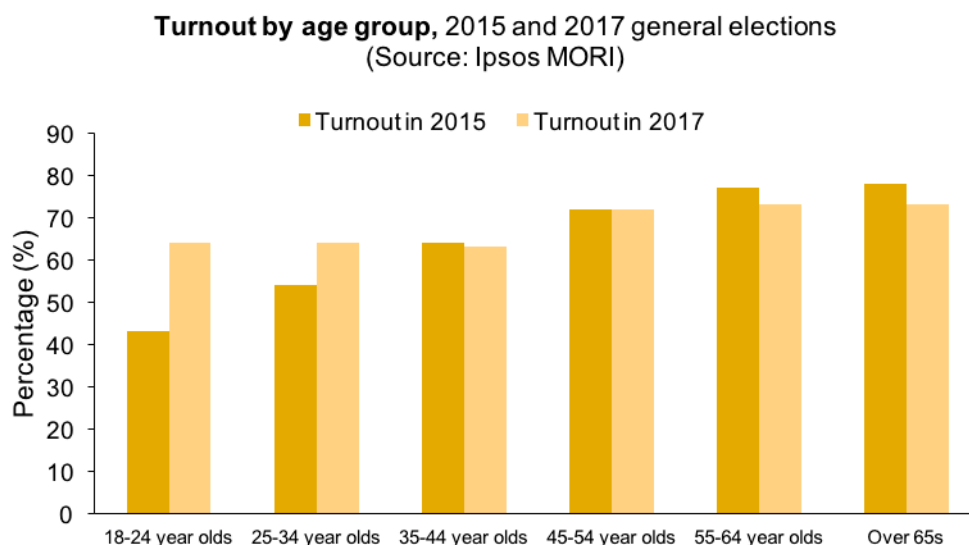
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Introduction

The 2017 general election result was described as a ‘youthquake’¹ – a shock result founded on an unexpected surge in youth turnout. And, since the vast majority of 18–24 year olds supported Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party, the increase in youth participation directly resulted in the loss of the Conservative Party’s majority in the House of Commons. Our analysis of the polling data shows the following:

- Youth turnout in the election increased dramatically – the participation of 18–24 year olds was up from 43% to 64% - to levels not seen since the early 1990s.
- The difference between the participation of 18–24 year olds and all citizens shrank from minus 23 points in 2015 to minus 4 points in 2017.
- Youth turnout was, however, highly dependent upon a young person’s social grade, occupational status and ethnicity: 68% of 18–24 year olds of a high social grade (AB) voted, compared to just 50% of those of a low social grade (DE).

Fig.1



Academic studies have pointed to falling youth participation in electoral politics.² In the UK, the turnout of 18–24 year olds in general elections fell from 63% in 1992 to an average of 40% from 2002 to 2015 (the lowest rate in Western Europe). Younger citizens have become increasingly driven by issues and are less likely to identify with a political party.³ In this regard, they can be characterised as ‘stand-by’

¹ The Guardian, 9 June 2017, ‘The Youth for Today: How the 2017 Election Changed the Political Landscape’. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/09/corbyn-may-young-voters-labour-surge>

² M. Franklin, 2004. *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945*. Cambridge University Press.

³ P. Norris, 2002. *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge University Press.



citizens, who engage in politics from time-to-time in issues that bear some meaning for their everyday lives.⁴

This report argues that Brexit energised young people, and they were motivated also by their anger with austerity politics (which has hit younger cohorts the hardest),⁵ and by the appeal of Jeremy Corbyn. Youth turnout in the June 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union was much higher than in the general election one year earlier.⁶ We designed a Populus poll in the run-up to the 2017 general election,⁷ which confirmed the increased interest of young people in electoral politics since the EU referendum:

- 57% of 18–24 year olds stated that they were certain to vote (compared to 46% at a similar point before the 2015 election).
- 18–24 year olds were as certain to vote as 25–34 year olds and 35–44 year olds (though still well behind over-65s of whom 79% were certain to vote).
- 81% of young people were following the general election closely, compared to an average of 80% for all age groups (only topped by the interest of the over-65s).
- Furthermore, 88% of 18–24 year olds stated that they were following Brexit negotiations closely (more than any other age group).

One of the most prominent features of the 2017 general election was the importance of age in predicting the party someone would vote for. Ipsos MORI data, 'How Britain Voted in 2017' (released after the election) revealed some dramatic changes:

- A remarkable 62% of 18–24 year olds voted for the Labour Party, contrasting with 27% for the Conservative Party.
- The gap in support for the two parties among young people was unprecedented in size – 35 percentage points!
- This was largely achieved by the Labour Party's capture of youth voters from third parties, i.e. Liberal Democrats and Greens, and success in bringing out non-voters.
- The highest levels of support for Labour came from young black and minority ethnic (BME) citizens (77%), women (73%), and those of a low social grade (70%).
- Interestingly, these large differences in party allegiance by gender and class were not present within the population as a whole (adults of all ages).

⁴ E. Amna and J. Ekman, 2014. 'Standby citizens: diverse faces of political passivity'. *European Political Science Review*, 6(02), pp.261-281.

⁵ According to the Resolution Foundation and Institute for Public Policy Research, young people have faced an unprecedented attack on their socio-economic conditions in recent years, as resources have been transferred to older cohorts. See M. Henn and J. Hart, 2017, 'The generation election: youth electoral mobilisation at the 2017 General Election', *UK Election Analysis 2017*, p.25.

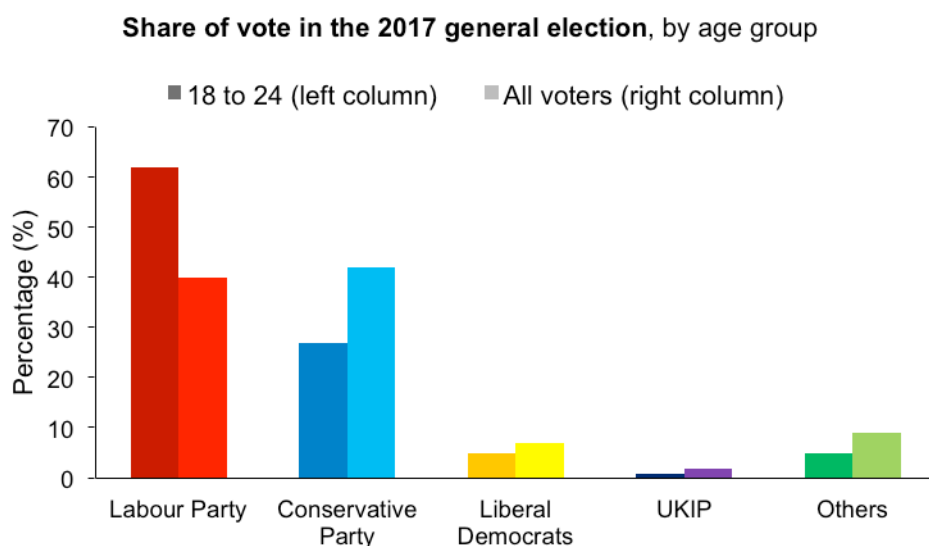
⁶ S. Fox and S. Pearce, 2016. Survey evidence: the EU referendum had a clear positive impact on young people's political engagement. *LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog*.

⁷ Our Populus poll was commissioned by Freud and Bite the Ballot, involving 2,007 UK citizens. The fieldwork was carried out on 10–11 May 2017.

In 2017, age replaced class as the key predictor of voting intention.⁸ We propose two explanations for the large difference in voting for parties across age cohorts:

- 1) The redistribution of resources away from younger citizens and youth-oriented public policy over the past ten years has persuaded more young people to favour state intervention and increased public spending.
- 2) Cultural differences across generations have deepened. Young people are more approving of cultural diversity, welcoming of European integration, and less concerned about immigration than older cohorts.

Fig.2



Younger voters were, therefore, attracted by Jeremy Corbyn’s opposition to austerity, his internationalist outlook and acceptance of immigration and cultural diversity (in stark contrast to the nationalist-authoritarian populism of Nigel Farage, Donald Trump and elements of the Leave campaign).

However, the narrative of Corbyn’s appeal to young voters must be treated with some caution. Youth support for the Labour Party might also be viewed as a protest vote against the political establishment in general and the economically precarious position of the Millennial generation. Indeed, our previous research into youth opinion during the 2016 referendum revealed that well over half of 18–30 year olds (58%) believed that none of the most prominent politicians at the time (Jeremy Corbyn, Boris Johnson, Caroline Lucas, Tim Farron, Nigel Farage or David Cameron, in descending order) ‘best understood young people’.

This report also examines the relative importance of political issues among young people. According to Lord Ashcroft polling, the ‘most important single issue’ for young people during the election

⁸ YouGov, 2017. *How Britain Voted in the 2017 General Election*. <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election/>

campaign was: healthcare (27%), the future of Europe ('Brexit') (15%), austerity, poverty and economic inequalities (13%), education (10%), and jobs (8%).⁹ In our Populus poll, where 'housing' was offered as a choice of issue, it was also highly rated by 18–24 year olds.¹⁰ And, in these areas, the Labour Party offered more tangible policies aimed at young people, e.g. the abolition of university tuition fees, extra funding for the NHS, and the reinstatement of housing benefits for the young.

Conversely, the Conservative communication strategy aimed policies (successfully) at Brexit-supporting older voters.

Finally, this report looked at how politicians communicated with younger voters and how those voters consumed news about the election. It is well known that young people are increasingly using online and social media sources to gather news about politics. Our Populus poll found that:

- 56% of 18–24 year olds consumed news through online sources, such as the BBC or BuzzFeed, compared to 40% for all age groups, and 28% of over-65s.
- 48% gathered news through social media, compared to 22% for all age groups, and 6% of over-65s.
- 42% watched TV news, compared to 66% of all age groups, and 85% of over-65s.
- Only 9% consumed news about the elections through print versions of newspapers, compared to 24% of all age groups, and 40% of over-65s.

It is, therefore, obvious that traditional sources of political communication were less likely to appeal to, or be heard by, younger voters.

The Labour Party was more effective at communicating its messages among younger voters. Boosted by celebrity endorsements and the emergence of left-leaning, online news platforms (such as The Canary), Jeremy Corbyn achieved about three times as many Facebook likes and Twitter followers as the Prime Minister, Theresa May. And Corbyn, unlike May, was more popular than his party in these social media. The Labour social media communications strategy – pioneered during Corbyn's party leadership bid by the grass-roots campaigning group, Momentum¹¹ – provided an effective means of reaching out to younger voters through attractive, interactive content.

The higher youth turnout in 2017 showed that young people could be mobilised if politicians addressed the issues they cared about with concrete policy proposals. On the other hand, the engagement also reflected disillusionment and anger with the impact of public policy on younger generations in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Despite the unprecedented levels of youth support for Labour in 2017, this state of affairs is not inevitable. In 2010, the proportions of 18–24 year olds voting Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat were almost identical (about 30% apiece). So there is no reason why political parties other than Labour could not successfully tailor their policies to younger generations.

The full report looks, in more detail, into youth voter turnout, party support, policy preferences, and political communication and consumption during the 2017 general election. It investigates *both* general patterns of youth participation in electoral politics *and* differences within today's generation of young people.

⁹ Lord Ashcroft Poll, 2017. *General Election Day Poll, 2017*. [file://localhost/](http://localhost/), <http://lordashcrofthpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/GE-post-vote-poll-Full-tables.pdf>

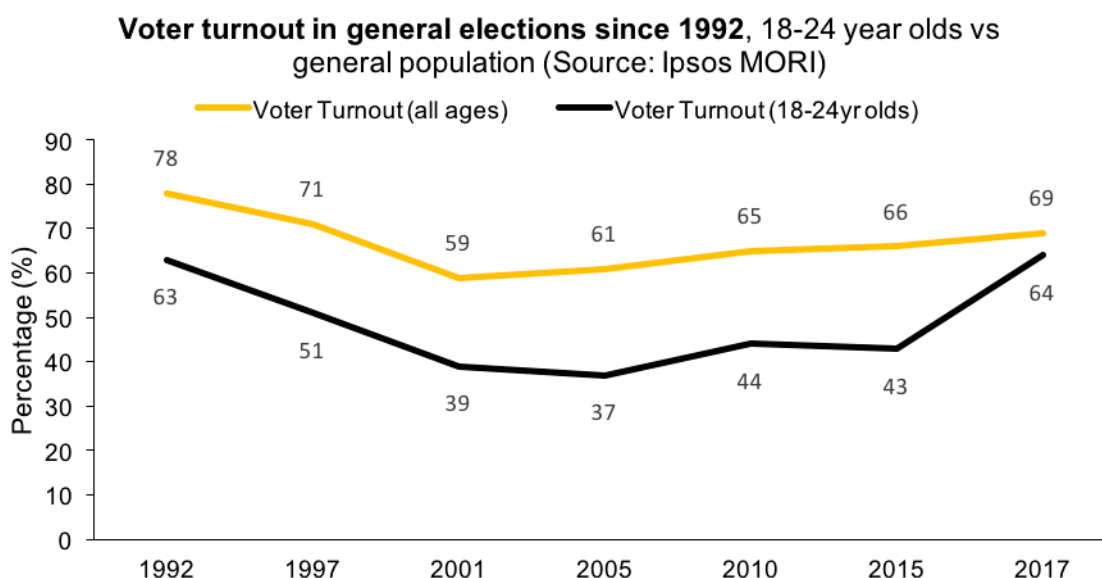
¹⁰ The issues of Europe and immigration were interesting in that, although young people considered them to be important for the country (24% and 13%, respectively), in our 2017 Populus poll they were much less convinced that these issues were personally important for them and their families (33% and 10%, respectively).

¹¹ Momentum was, interestingly, helped through input from activists who had supported Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party Nomination for the US presidency in 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-40850882/inside-momentum-s-campaign-hackathon>

1. Turnout

Since the 1980s, we have witnessed a sharp fall in youth participation in electoral politics.¹² Membership of political parties has more than halved during this period (notwithstanding the recent increase in membership of the Labour Party). Turnout in general elections has fallen dramatically since the early 1990s, which reflects a slow-burning crisis in political participation. Over 60% of 18–24 year olds voted in the 1992 election compared to an average of 40% between 2002 and 2015 (see Figure 3). The problem is particularly pronounced among young people of low socio-economic status. According to European Social Survey figures, only a quarter of those who leave school with no qualifications vote, compared to three-quarters of young university graduates.¹³

Fig.3



It is, obviously, too early to say whether 2017 was a watershed, where a new generation of young people became engaged in electoral politics or if this year's election was simply a one-off. Nevertheless, it was clear that the Labour Party in particular was much more successful in mobilising young people in 2017 than in previous polls.

Youth turnout in the UK and elsewhere in Europe

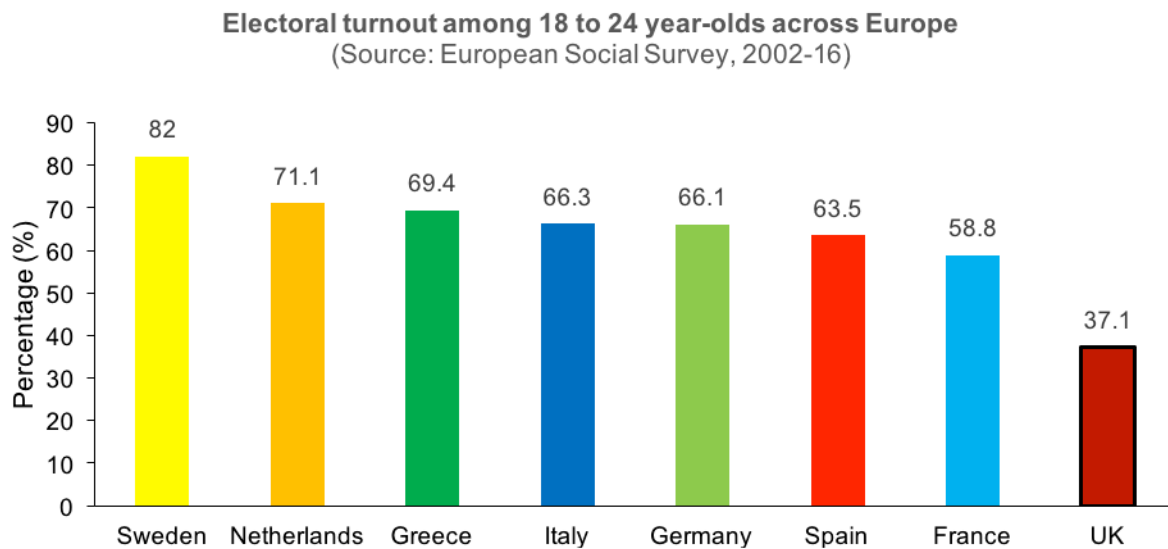
Whilst the trend in declining electoral participation has been common to most established democracies, youth electoral participation in the UK over the past two decades has been the lowest

¹² See I. Van Biezen, P. Mair and T. Poguntke, 2012. 'Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe'. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), pp. 24-56.

¹³ J. Sloam, 2016. Sloam, 'Diversity and voice: The political participation of young people in the European Union'. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(3), pp. 521-537.

out of all the old 'EU15 countries' (the 15 members before Eastern enlargement in 2004).¹⁴ Between 2002 and 2016, youth participation in national elections in the UK was 27 points below the average of the eight large EU15 states. More than double the proportion of 18–24 year olds vote in Swedish national elections (see Figure 5).

Fig.4



However, there is overwhelming evidence to show that young people in the UK are interested in 'politics' (more broadly defined) and engage in a whole multitude of civic and political activities: from demonstrations against university tuition fees, to the boycotting of products that damage the environment, to campaigns against the closing of parks or youth clubs in local communities. So young people are often interested in, and engaged in, key issues (as interested as their peers elsewhere in Europe), but have tended to be put off by politicians and political parties.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, the disillusionment with mainstream political parties increased noticeably among citizens of all ages. The outrage felt by many young people manifested itself in an international wave of youth protest, as illustrated by the Occupy Movement and the 2011 university tuition fee demonstrations. Jeremy Corbyn, in his bid for the Labour Party leadership in 2015, successfully capitalised on this widespread resentment and renewed activism among younger citizens.

¹⁴ The 'EU15 countries' are: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK.

Youth turnout and the EU Referendum

These developments also fed into youth engagement in the June 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union, when an estimated 60–70% of 18–24 year olds turned out to vote.¹⁵ However, most young people were disappointed by the result. Around three quarters of 18–24 year olds (and 82% of full-time students) voted for the UK to remain in the EU.

Before the general election, we argued – on the basis of our Populus poll – that younger voters had been energised by Brexit, and that deep resentment with the referendum result had further fuelled support for the Labour Party. The poll confirmed the increased interest of young people in electoral politics since the EU referendum:

- 57% of 18–24 year olds stated that they were certain to vote (compared to 46% at a similar point before the 2015 election).
- 18–24 year olds were as certain to vote as 25–34 year olds and 35–44 year olds (though still well behind the over-65s – of whom 79% were certain to vote).
- 81% claimed that they were following the general election closely, compared to an average of 80% for all age groups (only topped by the interest of the over-65s).¹⁶
- Furthermore, 88% of 18–24 year olds stated that they were following Brexit negotiations closely (more than any other age group).

Youth turnout in the 2017 General Election

The increased youth turnout in 2017 can be seen as something of a success story. According to Ipsos MORI data, the participation of 18–24 year olds was up by 21 percentage points to 64% – from 43% in 2015 and a low of 37% in 2005. Figure 3 illustrates that youth turnout returned – for this election at least – to the levels of the early 1990s. The turnout in 2017 was most definitely a youth surge rather than a general increase in electoral participation. Figure 1 shows that the increase in turnout was confined to younger cohorts – 18–24 year olds and 25–34 year olds (the latter of which rose by 10 percentage points). By contrast, electoral participation in all other age groups declined by a small amount. So the difference between the participation of 18–24 year olds and all citizens shrank from 23 points in 2015 to 4 points in 2017.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that youth turnout does still remain well below (10 percentage points beneath) the turnout rates of 55–64 year olds and over-65s (both 73% in 2017).

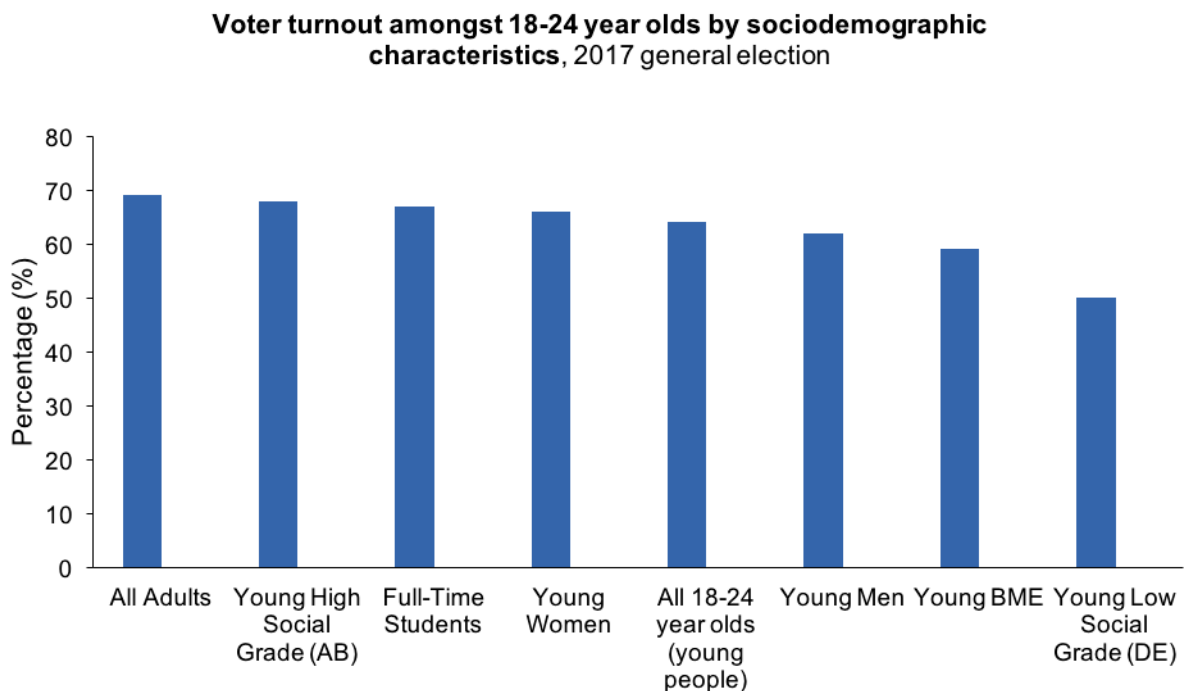
It should also not be forgotten that there are some important intra-generational differences in voting patterns. Figure 5 displays the turnout levels for 18–24 year olds by social grade, student status, gender and ethnicity. It is immediately apparent that social grade has a significant bearing upon electoral participation. 68% of 18–24 year olds of a high social grade voted, compared to just 50% of those of a low social grade. As expected, full-time students were also more likely to turn out to vote than the average young person (at a rate of 67%). So we can say there is no turnout gap between young people of high social grade or in full-time education and the average UK citizen. The problem,

¹⁵ M. Bruter, 2016. 'Did Young People Bother to Vote in the EU Referendum?' <http://www.ecrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Did-young-people-bother-to-vote-in-the-EU-referendum.docx>

¹⁶ Younger voters were following the general election and Brexit negotiations much more closely than the most popular entertainment programmes: 34% for 'Game of Thrones' and 32% for 'Britain's Got Talent'. These figures illustrate that the popular claims – that younger citizens are apathetic about and uninterested in politics, yet immersed in their own leisure pursuits – are plain wrong.

more precisely defined, involves the non-participation of young people from deprived backgrounds or of low socio-economic status.

Fig.5



The unexpected gap in participation between young women and young men (66% to 62%) is statistically small and may be explained by the strong support of young women for the Labour Party in 2017 (see the following section). The lower-than-average participation of young BMEs (at 50%) is a cause for concern, but the results are hard to interpret without splitting the BMEs up into separate ethnic minority groups (which was not possible given the size of our sample).

Summary

The higher youth turnout in 2017 showed that young people could be mobilised if politicians addressed the issues they cared about with concrete policy proposals. On the other hand, the engagement of young people also reflected disillusionment and anger with the negative impact of public policy on younger generations in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Despite the unprecedented levels of youth support for Labour in 2017, this state of affairs is not inevitable. In 2010, the proportions of 18–24 year olds voting Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat were almost identical (around 30% apiece). So, there is no ideological reason why political parties other than Labour cannot (successfully) tailor their policies to appeal to younger generations.

We should also continue to pay attention to low electoral participation among certain groups of young people – particularly those of a low social grade or low levels of educational attainment. And the voting patterns of young BMEs needs to be disaggregated further, to understand the (non-) participation of young citizens from particular communities.

In the UK, the first-past-the-post electoral system is problematic with regard to youth participation. Young people in the UK have fewer viable parties to vote for, and many constituencies can be seen as ‘dead rubbers’ where only one party and candidate have a realistic chance of winning. In other countries, with proportional systems of representation, turnout rates tend to be much higher, and resources for party campaigning are spread more evenly across the country.

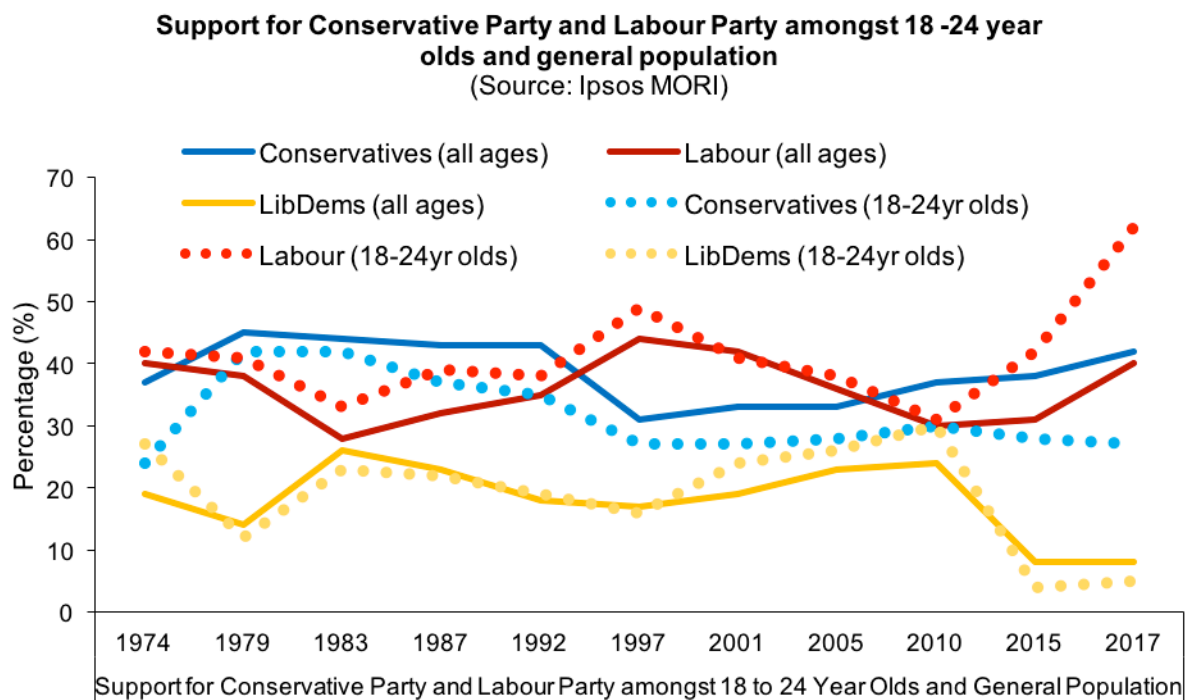
Another factor that inhibits higher turnout among young people is the prioritisation of older generations in public policy in recent years, e.g. the triple lock on pensions versus the trebling of university tuition fees. If young people already feel detached from mainstream electoral politics, this is likely to make them even less inclined to vote. If this happens, politicians are even more likely to ignore them. And the vicious circle continues. In Germany, by contrast, public policy after the financial crisis managed to prevent the worst effects from harming young people, for example youth unemployment actually fell during this period. Partly as a result, Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Party remains relatively popular with younger voters.

In the UK there is also the additional issue of voter registration. With the introduction of Individual Voter Registration in 2014, over a million citizens (disproportionately young people) fell off the electoral roll.

2. Party support

One of the most prominent features of the 2017 general election was the importance of age in predicting which party an individual voted for. The Ipsos MORI data reveal some dramatic changes (Figure 7). A remarkable 62% of 18–24 year olds voted for the Labour Party, contrasting with 27% for the Conservative Party.¹⁷ The gap in support for the two parties among young people was unprecedented in size – 35 percentage points. It is common to assume that the Labour Party is always more popular among younger voters, but this is not the case.¹⁸ In 2015, 18–24 year olds supported Labour over Conservative by only 42% to 28%. In 2010, the two large parties were locked together (in this age group) with the Liberal Democrats on around 30%.

Fig.6



Another feature of the 2017 general election was the Labour Party's capture of third party support among young people – particularly from the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. The Liberal Democrats failed to improve on their disastrous performance among younger voters in 2015 (where it collapsed from 30% to 4%). Although the Liberal Democrats managed not to lose further support among 18–24 year olds in 2017, tactical voting and a further weakening of student support, led to damaging defeats for Liberal Democrat incumbents in the university constituencies of Sheffield

¹⁷ The Labour Party also had a lead over the Conservatives of 29 percentage points in the 25–34 age group – 56% to 27%.

¹⁸ The next largest gap between the two main parties, from 1974 and 2015, was 22 percentage points in 1997.

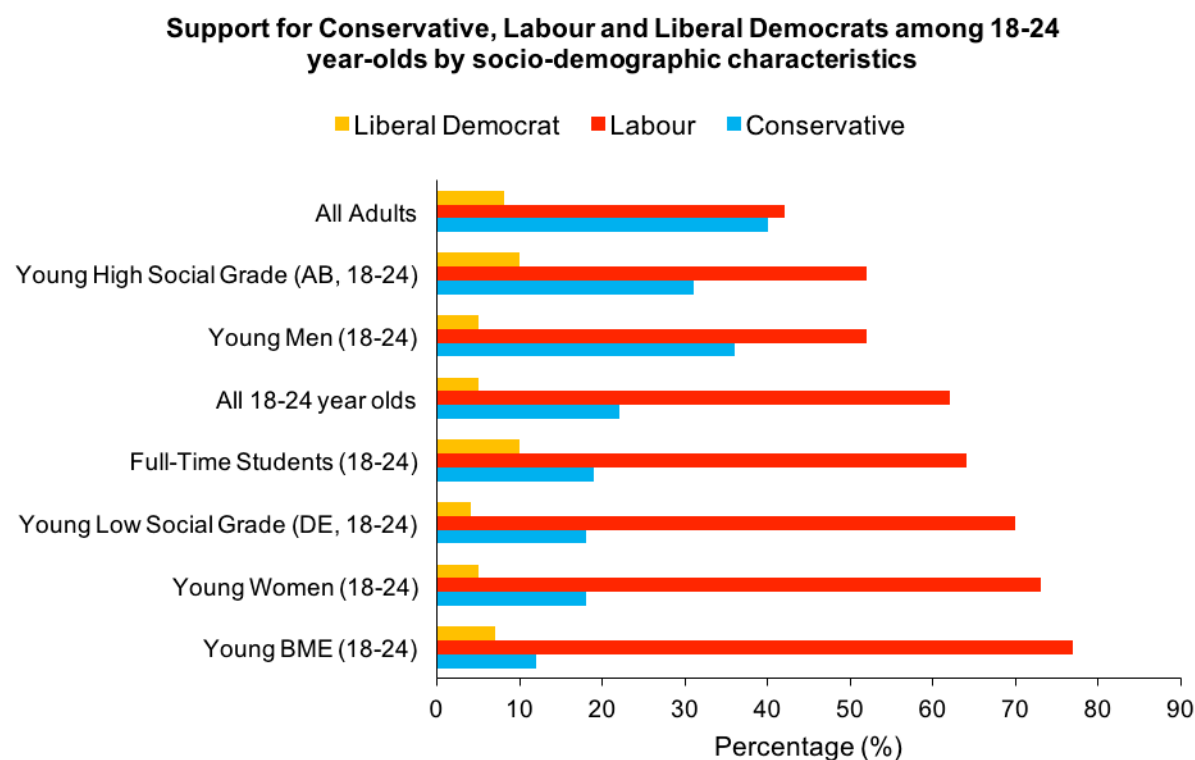
Hallam (Nick Clegg) and Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland). Labour also gained significantly from the Green Party, whose share of the youth vote fell from 8% in 2015 to just 2% in 2017.

Youth support for parties by class, gender and ethnicity

The Labour Party was emphatically ahead among 18–24 year olds. But this varied across different groups of young people (Figure 7). Labour gained greatest support from young BMEs (77%), young women (73%), and young people of a low social grade (70%). Whilst we might expect, from previous elections, that social grade and student status have a large impact on party support, the scale of the Labour appeal among young women and young BMEs was surprising. These results might be attributed to the Brexit effect and the Corbyn effect (both of these groups were very likely to vote Remain, and sympathise with the Labour leader’s views on economic inequality and international relations).¹⁹ Interestingly, these large differences in party allegiance by gender and class were not present within the population as a whole (adults of all ages).

The influence of socio-economic status on voting intention has become more complex. In 2017, young people of a high social grade were more likely to support Labour than Conservative (by 52% to 31%), but to a smaller degree than the average 18–24 year old. But full-time students were considerably more likely to vote Labour (by 64% to 19%).

Fig.7



¹⁹ On the other hand, the much weaker support for Labour (52%) and stronger support for the Conservatives (36%) among young men may in part be attributed to higher than average levels of Euroscepticism.



Summary

It is clear that the increase in support for the Labour Party among young people came from a combination of the following factors: disillusionment with the Conservative Government over Brexit and austerity, and support for a Corbyn-led Labour Party over its opposition to cuts in public spending. The Labour Party also presented a package of policies that were clearly designed to be attractive to young people (as discussed in the following section). Although some Conservative policies may have aimed to ease the burden on younger generations (see following section), the benefits for younger voters were not articulated clearly enough to resonate with this demographic.

In 2017, age replaced class as the key predictor of voting intention. We propose two explanations for the large difference in voting for parties across age cohorts. First, the redistribution of resources away from younger citizens and youth-oriented public policy over the past ten years has persuaded more young people to become favourable to state intervention and increased public spending. Second, cultural differences across generations have deepened in recent years. Young people are more approving of cultural diversity, welcoming of European integration, and less concerned about immigration than older cohorts. Thus, younger voters were attracted by Corbyn's opposition to austerity, internationalist outlook and perceived acceptance of immigration and cultural diversity (in contrast to the nationalist-authoritarian populism of Nigel Farage and Donald Trump).

It is, furthermore, clear that the gap between youth attitudes and those of older voters has grown: from the Iraq War, to student tuition fees, to immigration, to Brexit. Indeed, the Labour Party under Ed Miliband managed to significantly increase its share of the vote among 18–24 year olds in 2015, while losing ground among older voters. These trends were even more pronounced in 2017.

Although we cannot say for certain that the EU referendum encouraged young people to engage more actively in the general election, we can say that those who supported Remain in last year's poll had a very similar demographic profile to those who voted for Corbyn: young, highly educated, female and supportive of cultural diversity in Britain. According to the public opinion researcher ICM, 75% of 18–24 year olds who voted Remain in the EU referendum voted for the Labour Party.²⁰

²⁰ ICM 2017, *ICM General Election Microsite* <file://localhost/Microsite> <http://ge2017.icmunlimited.com>:

3. Policies and issues

To better understand why young people overwhelmingly voted for Labour, a closer look at party policy and the issues prioritised by younger cohorts is needed. The 2017 manifestos provide an insight into what the political parties were offering young people. What is clear from the outset is that Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party made a concerted effort to engage with younger parts of the electorate. The Conservatives and UKIP languish some way behind in terms of articulating a clear vision for improving the lives of young people.

Previous analyses of party manifestos for the 2015 general election revealed a different picture. Labour and the Greens again made overtures to younger voters. But the Conservative Party was not too far behind on this front. Under the leadership of David Cameron, the party fashioned a narrative of progression and betterment which included the popular Help To Buy scheme for young first-time house-buyers.

The Labour manifesto: colonising the “left” vote

From the moment Theresa May called a snap election on 18 April, Corbyn’s and Labour’s core intention was clear: energise and win over the youth vote. The 2017 Labour manifesto successfully articulated a vision for improving the living standards of young people, based on a number of key policy proposals. This included addressing the increasingly unaffordable costs of housing, reversing the abolition of housing benefit for 18–24 year olds, investing in early stage intervention in young people’s mental health, creating a justice system which helps to re-integrate youth offenders into society, the abolition of tuition fees, the banning of zero-hour contracts, and stamping out discrimination towards young LGBT people.

The Liberal Democrats tied the future well-being of young people to the country’s uncertain future surrounding Brexit and its relationship with the European Union. The party placed considerable emphasis on young people’s mental health, and environmental protection, and pledged to reverse housing benefit cuts for 18–21 year olds. The Green Party’s ‘promise to young people’ included the restoration of Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), reinstating housing benefits for those aged under 21, the scrapping of university tuition fees, tackling the nation’s ‘housing crisis’, and protecting the environment.

Despite making a clear pitch for the youth vote, policy proposals made by both the Liberal Democrats and the Greens were ultimately matched in the Labour Party’s ‘For The Many, Not The Few’ manifesto. This effectively neutralised the possibility of a considerable number of young voters seeking a non-Labour alternative offering a radical progressive policy agenda. Indeed, the appeal of the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn to younger voters resulted in significant gains from these two smaller parties.

The Tory manifesto: the failed appeal of an intergenerational contract

The Conservative Party, which was widely expected to win a handsome parliamentary majority, fared poorly among young voters. Much of the blame for this can be directed towards a manifesto that fell some way short of inspiring young people and engaging with their primary concerns.

The party's 2017 manifesto, 'Forward, Together', had at its core the idea of 'a restored contract between the generations'. This intergenerational contract was based on the promise of providing the elderly with security against illness whilst ensuring opportunity and prosperity for Britain's young people. But to the neutral observer, the Tory preference for consolidating the 'grey vote' (over the past two decades, over-65s have turned out at approximately double the rate of 18–24 year olds) rather than seeking to broaden its electoral appeal among voters of all ages was evident through much of the manifesto.

The Conservative Party's policy prescription for the betterment of young people was based on boosting youth employment and apprenticeships – a restatement of existing policies. There is shared ground between the Conservatives and the progressive parties with regard to young people's mental health and giving young people more rights in terms of having past social media material removed. However, there was no direct engagement with young people's potential surrounding issues, such as the affordability of housing and university tuition fees.

The Conservative Party's attempts to restore some element of intergenerational fairness in public policy through the increased means-testing of social care for the elderly – derided in the media as the 'dementia tax' – and the removal of the 'triple lock' on pensions were not articulated as policies that would benefit young people (even though they would inevitably have gone some way to rebalancing resources in favour of younger citizens). Conversely, young people clearly did not view the Labour Party's opposition to these policy changes as something that would be to the detriment of younger generations.

Key policy areas for younger voters

Figure 8 shows the percentage of young people who perceived various policy areas to be of primary importance for young people (18–24 year olds), the average UK citizen, and over-65s. For the youngest cohort of voters, healthcare is considered to be the most important issue (27%). This would naturally place Labour at an advantage over the Conservatives, with the former traditionally holding ownership of issues surrounding the NHS (and also promising extra funding for the health service). The second most important issue for young people was Brexit (15% of younger citizens prioritised this policy area) – another issue where younger voters were more closely aligned to the official Labour position of a 'soft Brexit' through the maintenance of close relations with the Single Market. The third most important area for 18–24 year olds was that of austerity, poverty and economic inequalities (13%). The fourth priority was education (10%), followed by the economy and jobs (8%). In our Populus poll, 'housing' also emerged as a key theme for young people.²¹ Whilst many of these issues may be long-term problems that have persisted for several decades, the polls suggest that young people associated austerity, economic inequalities and the increasingly unaffordable costs of housing with seven years of Conservative-led government.

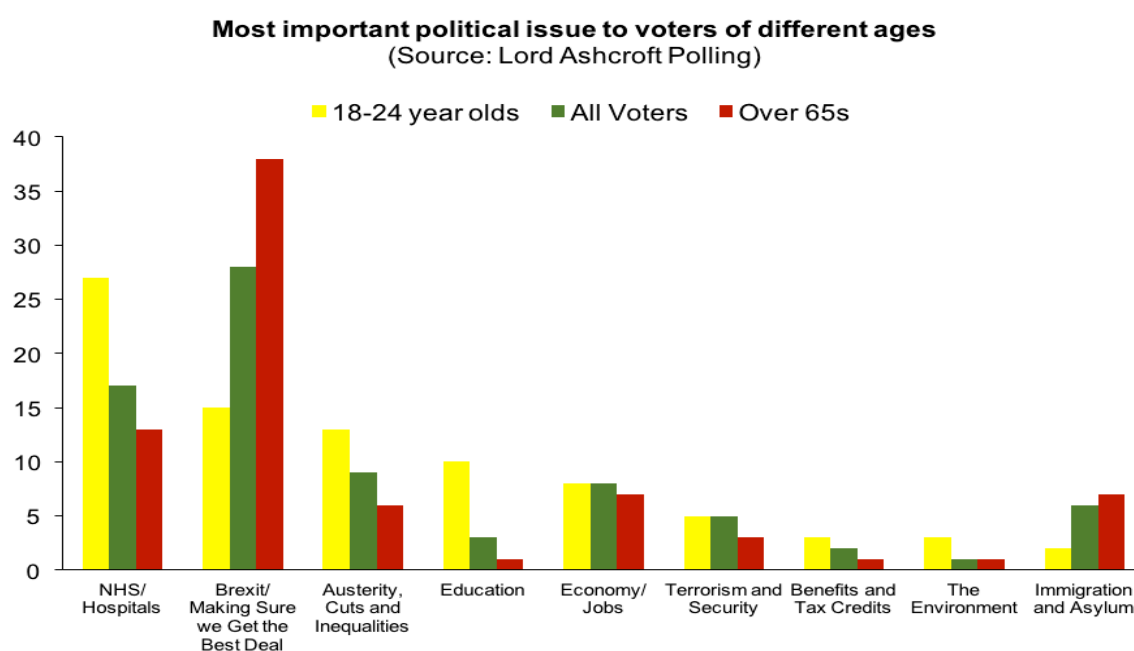
The perception of the 'most important political issue' clearly varies across generations. The differences between young and old were largest in the areas of Brexit (minus 24 percentage points), the NHS (plus 14 points), education (plus 9 points), and austerity, cuts and inequalities (plus 7 points), and immigration and asylum (minus 5 points).

It is worth paying attention to, in particular, the issues of Brexit and immigration, where there were sharp intergenerational differences. These policy areas were seen as much more important by older

²¹ Unfortunately, 'housing' was not classified as a separate category in the Lord Ashcroft Polling data.

generations. The views of over-65s and 18–24 year olds were diametrically opposed on these two issues. From this we can conclude that the (successful) pursuit of UKIP voters by the Conservative Party (with regard to positions in favour of a 'hard Brexit' and reducing immigration) were naturally repellent to younger voters.

Fig.8



Summary

Labour’s manifesto policy pledges managed to achieve two crucial objectives when it came to young voters: they made the Conservatives appear out-of-touch with the main grievances and concerns held by young people; and they prevented the party from being ‘outgunned’ by other progressive parties on youth issues. Labour adopted policies that had clear appeal to younger voters: from university tuition fees to the proposed public investment in social housing, and the reintroduction of rent controls in the private sector. Conservative efforts to restore some measure of intergenerational justice through social care reforms and removal of the triple lock on pensions did not communicate what the benefits of these changes might be to younger generations through any clear pledges or resources (e.g. in the areas of healthcare or housing).

With healthcare being seen as the most important issue facing the country, Labour’s historic ownership of public services issues and Jeremy Corbyn’s passionate anti-privatisation stance on the NHS also placed the party at a major advantage among younger voters. The controversial passage of Health and Social Care Bill and the tense relationship between Jeremy Hunt and medical associations (e.g. over contracts for junior doctors) may have further undermined trust in the Conservatives over healthcare.

Whilst, in the 2017 General Election campaign, the mainstream media honed in on classic Tory issues such as immigration, tax and security, these issues ranked relatively low when young people evaluated the various policy issues which were important for them and their families.

4. Communication: political news and political contact

Electoral campaigning – the way parties and voters communicate in the democratic process – is a continuously evolving phenomenon. The most recent general election revealed the continuing rise of new styles and methods of political communication and news consumption. These trends have important implications for political parties and their campaign strategies.

News consumption

Survey data show that young people increasingly avoid traditional forms of media. This is partly a result of believing that the ‘old media’ do not sufficiently represent their views. So they have turned to *alternative* forms of media for both news consumption and political expression. Figure 9 confirms these trends. It finds that online news is the most popular source of information for young people: 56% of 18–24 year olds consumed news through sources such as BBC Online or BuzzFeed, compared to 40% for all age groups, and 28% of over-65s. Social media was the second most common way of gathering political news: for 48% of young people, compared to 22% for all age groups, and 6% of over-65s. TV news continues to be a common source of information, but this is much less the case for younger generations than for older generations: 48% of 18–24 year olds watched TV news, compared to 66% of all age groups, and 85% of over-65s. Finally, it is now quite rare for young people to read the print versions of newspapers: only 9% of 18–24 year olds, compared to 24% of all age groups, and 40% of over-65s.

It is, therefore, clear that traditional sources of political communication are less likely to appeal to, or be heard by, younger voters, and that online and social media strategies should form a central component of political parties’ communication strategies with young people.

Labour and Conservative online communications

There is growing evidence to suggest that social media is increasingly trusted and consumed by young people when it comes to accessing political information. Figure 10 specifically looks at the social media following for the official accounts of the Labour Party, Conservative Party, Jeremy Corbyn and Prime Minister Theresa May across three platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. For Twitter and Instagram, this is measured in the form of ‘followers’, while for Facebook, it is in the form of ‘likes’.

The Labour Party was more effective at communicating its messages among younger voters. Boosted by his celebrity endorsements and the emergence of left-leaning, online news platforms (such as The Canary), Jeremy Corbyn achieved about three times as many Facebook likes (1.4 million) and Twitter followers (1.42 million) as Theresa May. And, Corbyn, unlike May, was more popular than his party in these social media (by 400,000 Facebook likes and almost a million Twitter followers).

The Labour social media communications strategy – pioneered during Corbyn’s party leadership bid by the grass-roots campaigning group Momentum – provided an effective means of reaching out to younger voters through attractive, interactive content.²²

Fig.9

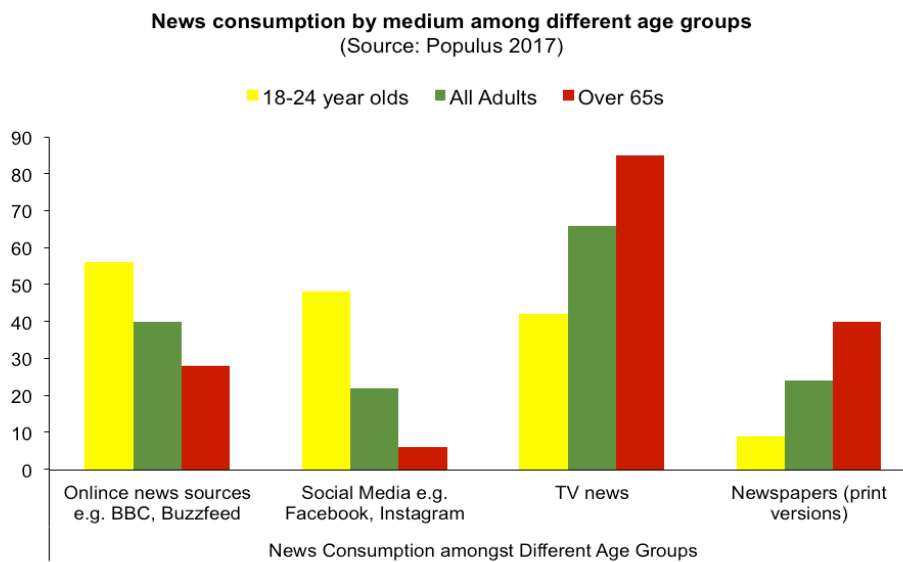
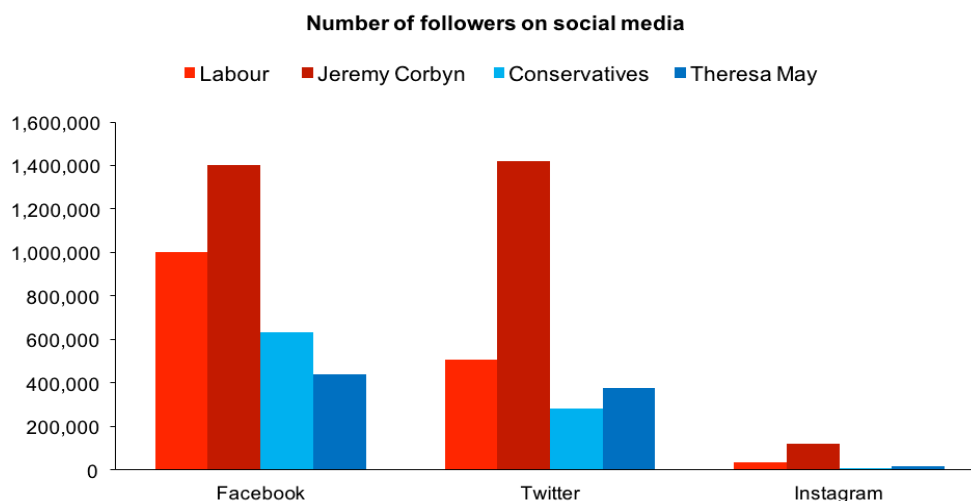


Fig.10



It should also be mentioned that Momentum’s successful campaign in support of Corbyn and the Labour Party involved a combination of both online and offline engagement, for example online

²² See D. Lilleker, 2017. ‘Like Me, Share Me: the People’s Social Media Campaign’, *UK Election Analysis 2017*, pp. 94-95; and, R. Fletcher, 2017. ‘Labour’s Social Media Campaign: more posts, more video, and more interaction’, *UK Election Analysis 2017*, pp. 92-93.



contact and offline meetups or activism. The existing literature shows that online interactions are most effective when coupled with engagement in the real world activism.²³

Summary

It is clear that the Labour Party – particularly its leader Jeremy Corbyn – dominated a social media space where political information is well-trusted and relatively highly consumed by Britain's young people. The party certainly enjoyed a comfortable advantage over the Conservative Party on this front. This led Conservatives, such as Robert Halfon, a former Minister for Education, to argue for a Tory-affiliated version of Momentum, to counter Labour's domination in the digital space.²⁴

In contrast, the Conservative Party appeared to be extremely reliant on traditional forms of media that are much less used and trusted by younger generations. So, they were unable to communicate a narrative on policies that might have appealed. This might have enabled the party to develop a more positive story – to younger citizens – on how savings to the social care and pensions budgets could benefit their generation.

Labour deliberately appealed to and specifically targeted Britain's younger voters – and with social media being an increasingly important source of information for young people, it formed a key part of Labour's electoral strategy.²⁵ The enthusiastic supporters of Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party he leads consumed substantial amounts of Facebook content in the build-up to the election.²⁶ Based on this evidence, if the Conservative Party wishes to be more competitive when courting the votes of younger people, it must take the phenomenon of 'clicktivism' far more seriously.

²³ See A. Chadwick, 2017. *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power*. Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Speaking to City AM, Halfon dismissed Tory grassroots infrastructure as 'either ageing or non-existent'. He called for campaign schools to be established, where party activists would be trained in 'modern campaigning', and the creation of a social media rebuttal unit to counter 'fake facts' and news put out by opponents.

²⁵ R. Fletcher, 2017. 'Labour's Social Media Campaign: more posts, more video, and more interaction'. Op.cit.

²⁶ M. Walsh, 2017. 'The Alternate and the Influential World of Political Parties' Facebook Feeds'. UK Election Analysis 2017, pp. 96-97.

5. Conclusion

In 2017, Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party politically energised younger voters. In an echo of the 1960s, they expressed themselves as left-of-centre cosmopolitans, reacting both to austerity politics and the cultural conservatism found in older generations and embodied by the Leave campaign in the EU referendum. The mobilisation of younger voters and their increased turnout in 2017 means that all political parties, particularly the Conservative Party, need to try harder to develop a package of policies that can appeal to young people if they want to build a majority in future parliaments.

Young people were clearly attracted to Corbyn's perceived authenticity and policy programme, but this was a two-way street. In 2017, the Labour Party appealed directly to this demographic through proposed investment in education and housing, and guaranteeing workers' rights. By contrast, there was little for young people in the Conservative Party manifesto beyond vague references to intergenerational justice.

Although, at first glance, it may seem that the political views of younger and older citizens are diametrically opposed – and this is most clearly the case with the issues of Brexit and immigration – there is also much common ground on economic issues. And investment in areas like housing and education – that benefit younger generations – need not be seen as a negative sum game. Just as many young people support high levels of state pensions, many older citizens have children and grandchildren, and so can see the benefits of spending more money on apprenticeships and housing.

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