

Could the Conservative Party have more to gain by enfranchising younger voters?

Using the 2017 and 2019 waves of the British Electoral Study, [Alexandra Weir](#) and [Luke Temple](#) explore potential differences between the political attitudes of young voters and those of young non-voters. They discuss why a strategy of engaging disenfranchised young people could have more electoral pay off for the Conservatives.

There are two main stories when it comes to younger voters in the UK. Firstly, their political attitudes [diverge dramatically](#) from older age groups. [In the 2019 General Election](#), 56% of 18-24 year-olds voted Labour, down to 46% for the 30-39-age-group and then only 14% for 70+. We saw [this rift with Brexit too](#): under 25s were more than twice as likely to vote Remain than those over 65. Secondly, 18-24 year-olds are the [least likely age group to vote](#).

This makes younger voters a strategically complex group. At the time, the boost in electoral fortunes for Labour in the 2017 General Election became wrapped up in a '[Youthquake](#)' narrative – the idea that youth turnout had risen dramatically to support Jeremy Corbyn and the party. But this has since been scaled down to a '[tremor](#)'. In 2019, Labour continued to target younger voters, whereas the Conservative Party were accused of '[writing off](#)' the demographic in their campaign.

Despite caution about the 2017 Youthquake, it's still often assumed that improving [youth voter turnout favours the Labour Party](#). But this treats young voters rather homogeneously and presumes voters and non-voters share the same political attitudes. Due to low turnout, [research](#) on youth politics has tended to shift focus to engagement with informal or activist politics. Fewer attempts have been made to explore potential differences between young voters and non-voters and their political attitudes.

Using the 2017 and 2019 waves of the [British Electoral Study](#) and binary logistic regression, we unpack these differences for the 18–24 year-old group, with comparison models with the rest of the population. Binary logistic regression calculates the probabilities of certain characteristics predicting the outcome we're interested in – in this case, being a non-voter. A range of demographic and attitudinal variables were chosen based on [previous research](#) on voting behaviour. Here we discuss headline results ([see the full table](#)). This analysis comes with the caveat – we are working with smaller sample sizes than we would like for the younger voters. Every effort has been made to make sure variable categories are big enough and results are robust. The issue of sample size is one we return to.

From the 2017 data, it's hard to decipher the characteristics of a 'typical' non-voter compared to a 'typical' voter. General political interest was not statistically significant – those who were interested in politics were as likely as those who were not interested in politics to not vote. Party identification, left-right scale, and engagement with petitions were insignificant. Those who identify with Labour are just as likely to be non-voters as those who identify Conservative. Level of education had no impact either.

Brexit vote, however, was statistically significant – Leave voters were less likely to turnout than Remainers. Indeed, there was no difference in probability between Leave voters and those who did not (or could not) vote in the referendum when it came to then voting in the 2017 election. Therefore part of the 2017 youth 'tremor' could be an engagement-boost on the back of the referendum and in [particular Remainers voting Labour](#), whether it was to prevent a No Deal, or with aspirations for a second referendum (which picked up as a campaign later). The Liberal Democrats still [remained toxic to the young](#).

In 2019, there might have been a continued increase in youth turnout, [but the picture is not clear](#) and if there was it was likely small. But our results do suggest a clearer picture of young non-voters at this point in time. Respondents who perceived themselves as middle class were more likely to be a non-voter than those who identified with no class. Those who refused/didn't know where they were on the left-right scale were more likely to be non-voters than those who were left-leaning. Those with GCSE or below qualifications were also more likely to be non-voters than those with degree level or above qualification, whilst students were more likely to turn out than those who were unemployed. Leave and Remain voters were more likely to be voters than those who didn't or couldn't vote in the referendum (it's worth considering the increasing size of 18-24 years who in 2019 would have been too young to vote in 2016). Therefore, the characteristics of the younger voting cohort crystallized around students and graduates – [those we know overwhelmingly vote Labour](#).

So, what might this mean for party strategy to engage young non-voters? Well, perhaps counter-intuitively, we wonder if a strategy of engaging disenfranchised young people could have more electoral pay off for the Conservatives. The reason being is that for Labour, students are already voting in Labour-majority seats: [Labour secured 55 out of 77 student seats](#). Any increase in Labour vote in student areas would not change the electoral map; they're stockpiling in these safe seats. Therefore, when it comes to boosting youth turnout, to also make a strategic difference Labour would need to target demographics who are already more likely to vote, whilst appealing to student voters *to vote at home*. Arguably, the optics of this to boost voter turnout are not as appealing as a blanket drive to enfranchise younger people.

In contrast, in many ways the Conservatives have little to lose by seeking to enfranchise young non-voters from 2019. These voters perceive themselves as middle class, are not especially certain where they stand ideologically, and have lower educational qualifications. In the wider population, support for Conservatives is now [higher for the less qualified population](#). And so any strategy aimed at such young people [could shore up](#) future Conservative results in 'Red Wall' areas. The effect might be small, but at the very least it will do little damage elsewhere whilst having the positive optics of engaging the disenfranchised young.

We finish on a plea. Our analysis suggests it's difficult to identify the characteristics of non-voters. They're frequently under-represented in datasets. This is doubly true for younger people. We need richer survey data – and larger sample sizes – on young people to be able to dig deeper into these issues (alternative surveys, like Understanding Society, are useful to an extent, but have limited political-orientated questions asked consistently over time). And, whilst existing research on young political engagement acknowledges low voter turnout, it often quickly moves into painting a more positive picture of engagement in informal politics. But this can overlook, excuse even, the longstanding problem of youth disenfranchisement in our elections.

Note: The above draws upon research conducted as part of the Sheffield University Research Experience Scheme which supports second year students to conduct research with an academic supervisor.

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