

Why young people don't vote Reform

*Across Europe, young voters are offering their support to parties of the right and sometimes far-right. The same isn't happening in the UK, in fact young voters are increasingly voting for parties of the left. **Laura Serra** argues that this aberration can partly be explained by the low voter turnout among young British voters, as well as the policy areas the UK right has been focussing on.*

The run-up to the 2024 British general election saw much speculation over whether [Reform](#) might be able to attract young voters. Reform UK is modelled on the policy platforms of populist-right, Eurosceptic parties, and in Europe this party family is predominately popular across voters who are ethnically white, male, young to middle-aged, and hold low levels of education. Yet, in Britain the likes of UKIP and Reform UK have not traditionally attracted large swathes of young voters. Rather, the British youth appear to be increasingly keen on supporting the parties on the left.

The European context

In September 2022, the Italian right-wing coalition headed by now PM Giorgia Meloni and her “Brothers of Italy”, comfortably won the general election. And while a striking 32,9 per cent of voters aged 18-24 lent their votes to the coalition on the left, the one on the right was supported by 30 per cent of [voters](#) in the same age group – less than a 3 percentage-point difference. Across the under 35s, Meloni's party was the largest at 22 per cent.

Similarly, at the July 2024 [French legislative elections](#), 33 per cent of voters aged under 24 supported Marine Le Pen's far-right National Rally. And although a much larger proportion of voters from this age group supported the “Republican Front” left coalition (48 per cent), far-right support across younger voters in France has been traditionally high.

At the [Dutch general election](#) held in November 2023, the far-right PVV party was the largest among 18- to 34-year-olds, winning 17 per cent of their vote (an increase of 10 percentage-points from the previous election). Likewise, at the [Swedish 2022](#)

[election](#), far-right Sweden Democrats gained 22 per cent of the 18-21 youth vote, also raising their vote-share by 10 percentage-points compared to 2018.

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The UK context

Within this context, the UK picture – where the Labour party has increasingly been the most popular across younger voters – looks rather different. And while in the rest of Europe far-right support appears to be on the rise, in Britain the age-gap in party support between younger and older voters (whereby younger voters skew Labour and older voters skew Conservative) has increased at each [general election](#) since 2015.

This was reconfirmed on the July 4. The Labour party won by a landslide and garnered over 40 per cent of the [vote](#) across 18–24-year-olds, followed by the Green Party at 18 per cent (an astonishing 14 percentage-point increase from the previous election) and the Liberal Democrats at 16 per cent. Reform and the Conservatives, on the other hand, respectively got 9 per cent and 8 per cent of their vote. Similar figures were reported for older groups too, with the parties on the left most popular across all voters aged under 49.

If anything, rather than turning right, the British youth appear to be becoming *more left-wing*. The reasons behind this bucking of the trend are varied, but two particularly convincing areas where to look for explanations pertain to turnout levels and the issues that matter most to voters.

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Turnout and attitudes among young voters

Young adults in Britain vote at significantly lower rates than their European counterparts. In the most recent election, the average population turnout at 60 per cent was one of the lowest ever witnessed – and [youth turnout](#) is estimated to have been just over 40 per

cent. By contrast, at the Italian 2022 general election, 57.3 per cent of citizens aged 18-24 turned out to vote (within an average rate of 63.8 per cent). At the Dutch 2023 [general election](#), 73 per cent of 18-24-year-olds voted. And at the German 2022 election, [youth turnout](#) amounted to 72 per cent. Therefore, while young people espousing right-wing, authoritarian attitudes certainly exist in Britain too, the main difference is that here they tend to abstain from voting.

Those who do vote, on the other hand, are drawn from the more highly educated groups who traditionally hold socially liberal values. In fact, the development of political attitudes in Britain has been characterised by two trends: increasing numbers of [university graduates](#), and the increasing prevalence of [liberal attitudes](#) amongst young adults. Whether changes in education levels *explain* changes in attitudes is still a matter of academic debate, but there is widespread agreement over the notion that graduates skew Labour, and that one of the biggest consequences of the Blair governments' insistence on expanding access to higher education, was to create a generation of [Labour-voting graduates](#).

Moreover, the issues that tend to matter most to populist-right voters, such as immigration, are far from being priorities across the British youth. In the run-up to the 2024 UK general election, the top [electoral issues](#) reported by young voters were the cost of living and housing. By contrast, older voters (who displayed the largest support for Reform), cared most about immigration.

If the new Labour government were to fail in addressing the youth's economic demands, and if the Reform party were to adopt a strategy aimed at tapping into these demands, they may well increase their vote-share across young voters who would otherwise stay at home on polling day.

Youth precarity and ways forward

Across both the UK and the rest of Europe, young voters are most concerned by their economic position in society. The main difference is that in Europe, increasingly [precarious](#) economic conditions meant that these voters have become disaffected with mainstream parties, blame them for their financial struggles, and support anti-establishment fringe parties as a form of [backlash](#) against the "ruling classes".

In Britain, on the other hand, the nature of the electoral system (which tends to favour the two main parties) means that fringe demands have been absorbed by Labour and the Conservatives. So while over the years Labour has increasingly adopted socially progressive stances and pledged economic policies aimed at benefitting [young adults](#), the Conservatives have become more authoritarian on all aspects where young people display disproportionately progressive views (from [immigration and asylum](#), to [climate protection](#), and [sexual minority rights](#)), as well as put little effort in addressing housing affordability or ease the cost-of-living crisis on young adults, focusing instead on attracting older voters with [pension protections](#) and [financial handouts](#).

In this view, if the new Labour government were to fail in addressing the youth's economic demands, and if the Reform party were to adopt a strategy aimed at tapping into these demands, they may well increase their vote-share across young voters who would otherwise stay at home on polling day. Existing trends, however, indicate that it will take significant effort to attract young abstainers to the polls, and even more to counter the prevalence of left-wing liberal ideals across the British youth.

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