

Young people's voices went unheard: the Brexit generational divide

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*One thing to emerge both on social media and on the streets after the referendum result was a clear generational divide in how people voted. CoVi ran a [research and analysis exercise](#) looking at why such a divide existed, and how it played out in the public debate during the referendum campaign. **Caroline Macfarland** and **Katy Owen** explain how older, male-dominated personalities dominated the campaign, which did not appeal to younger voters' preference for issues-based political debate. They suggest how younger Remain voters can have a voice in the ensuing Brexit negotiations.*



Polling in the lead-up to the referendum consistently indicated that around two-thirds of those under 35 would opt to remain, whilst with over 55s the picture was almost the reverse. Our own polling with Opinium, conducted after the referendum, has put the percentage shares for Remain at 73% for 18-24 year olds and 59% for 25-34 year olds.



Why did so many young people vote to remain in the EU compared to older people?



Pride 2016 in London. Photo: [Garry Knight](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

Research into the identity, attitudinal and behavioural differences between age cohorts find several relevant differences when it comes to 18-35 year olds or “Generation Y”. This group in general cares more about global issues such as environmentalism, human rights and humanitarian aid. They are less aligned with traditional notions of sovereignty, and more comfortable with migration – both key issues for older voters and drivers of the vote to leave. They are also more risk-averse than previous generations, possibly contributing to concerns that Britain would be less influential in the world outside the EU.

Younger people also “do politics” differently. They are less likely to vote in elections or join a political party, but are more likely to sign a petition, attend a protest and join a campaign on a singular issue.

Given these differences, we decided to analyse the campaigns and general public debate during the EU referendum to see whether the issues and voices that matter to younger people received sufficient coverage and whether the mechanics of the referendum itself worked for under 35s.

The EU referendum should have been the perfect opportunity for younger people to engage more than in a general election because it should have been more directly about issues compared to the usual party politics. Instead, we found the campaigns followed the same old pattern of doing things which does not appeal to many under 35s.

Through open-text questions conducted by Opinium, we looked at reasons why people of all ages did or didn't vote in the referendum, and found that older people are more likely to see the intrinsic value of voting, whereas younger people are more likely to vote in order to have their opinion heard or because they feel strongly about a certain issue, in other words the extrinsic value. This suggests that younger people are more easily deterred from voting especially if they don't think their vote will achieve something. Thus well-conducted campaigns and straightforward voting processes are even more important for under 35s.

Despite a number of varying estimates being released since the referendum, we will never have precise official figures turnout by age in the EU referendum as this data is not released. What seems almost certain is that, while the gap may have narrowed, younger people were still much less likely to vote than older, especially when differences in levels of voter registration are taken into account.

Examining why the campaigns – and in particular the Remain campaign which had the most to gain – failed to mobilise more young people to turn up and vote, we identify several shortcomings.

The negative debate undermined confidence to vote. The official messages, whilst potentially appealing to younger people's perceptions of risk and uncertainty, did not appeal to their optimistic views of the EU or their internationalist identities. Through an analysis of over 4,000 headlines, we find that the tone in media was overwhelmingly negative, with 57% of online news headlines containing at least one negative word compared to just 26% containing at least one positive word. Just 16% of people said in our CoVi/Opinium poll after the referendum that the public debate around the referendum was optimistic in tone. Overall, the issues that mattered most to Gen Y were barely referenced compared to immigration and non-specific references to the economy.

The messengers became the message. The fact that David Cameron's name was mentioned in headlines more frequently than jobs, healthcare, housing, pay and human rights combined demonstrates the extent to which personalities and specific individuals saturated the public debate. The referendum therefore was not clearly distinctive from the terms of a general election where political leadership is the main question. Of over 300 people who were mentioned in the 4,399 online news headlines we analysed, the average age was 58, 79% of them were men and 93% of them were white. This lack of diversity reinforces a sense that politics is overwhelmingly dominated by older, white men.

The referendum logistics excluded young people. Individual electoral registration and a voting day outside term time were factors that were notable in this instance, but more generally the mechanics of voting are optimal to younger people's behaviours and the ways they are used to expressing preference.

Given younger people's frustrations with the result of the referendum, there is a danger of increased disillusionment in politics among millennials and also of further entrenched generational differences. There are several ways these dangers can be mitigated.

Firstly, it's time for the government to **implement a series of measures to fix the mechanics of voting to better suit younger people's behaviours**. This includes considering ways to introduce online voting, holding elections over more than one day, reviewing the rules on referenda and extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds.

Secondly, the new Prime Minister and the government can help to bridge the generational divide by **undertaking a public consultation on Brexit to ensure that negotiations with the EU and other countries take account of**

the values and priorities of younger people. Communication is also key. Theresa May also has a key responsibility to ensure there is a positive and inclusive public debate around the future of the UK's position in the world, whilst other Parliamentarians and the Opposition have an important role in ensuring a balance of interests is represented.

Finally, **young people themselves must also take key steps to ensure they are not left behind by the Brexit process** and politics more generally. This includes talking to elected representatives, joining a voluntary group, campaign or political party, and continuing the conversation without resorting to intergenerational warfare or casting blame on others. Working together is the only way to shape a common vision for the next generation.

The result of the referendum (unanticipated by so many) and the events which have followed have meant that we are facing the most profound political shift in our lifetimes. The decision to break away from the EU will undoubtedly have consequences for decades to come. Insights into why such clear divides in attitudes exist – among generations but also according to geography and education – will be vital in shaping the debates to come and ensuring that such divides do not become further entrenched.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE. Read CoVi's full [report](#) 'A generation apart: were young people left behind by the EU referendum?'

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