

Story of a vote unforecasted: Young people, youth activism and the UK general election

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Source: New Statesman

The UK election result which came out on June 9th 2017 was a surprise to even [seasoned commentators](#). Instead of backing a Conservative government with an austerity agenda and a track record of punitive measures against young people and refugees – removal of housing benefits, higher and higher fees, soaring house prices and rents, zero hour contracts – almost half of the British electorate turned instead to the Labour Party with an unashamedly social democratic set of policies in its manifesto. And, given that the UK mainstream media, including rightwing commentators from inside the Labour party, had spent much of the past two years [misrepresenting](#), mocking, belittling, trolling, [undermining and delegitimizing](#) Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters, this seemed like a monumental upset to some, a phenomenal victory to others. So, what accounts for the swing towards Labour?

Although this has been disputed by some commentators, it is now pretty clear that more young people turned out to vote than in any of the previous six elections. [Some](#) put the youth voting figures as high as 72 percent. [Others](#) confirmed that young people voted with the same enthusiasm as other generations. Galvanised by anxiety about the disappearing NHS, rising fees, the impossibility of getting a reliable home, but also by the hopeful message that austerity does not have to affect the poorest, that refugees can be part of our society without detriment to the many, and that big businesses need to pay their taxes, many young people [thoughtfully and deliberately](#) turned away from the conservative messages and fake news stories of the mainstream media. This youth turnout did not, however,

come out of the blue. It was part of the groundwork being laid throughout the UK by a variety of youth activists, in and outside civic and political organisations.

Ethnographic Study

As part of our ongoing ethnographic study undertaken for the Horizon 2020 Project [CATCH-EyoU](#) about the growing gap between young people and institutional politics in the European Union, we are working with two diverse groups [My Life My Say \(MLMS\)](#) and [Momentum](#). Both are youth-centred and youth-led, aimed at involving young people in institutional politics, and use a mixture of online/social media and face to face engagement approaches to encourage young people to be informed about politicians, about their rights, about social justice and to vote in this manner. Albeit each with their own political history and trajectory, they provide vivid examples of youth activism to counter an on-going media myth of young people's [poor track record when it comes to voting](#).

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My Life My Say: A Better Brexit For Young People

MLMS was founded in 2013 by Mete Coban, a local councillor for Stoke Newington in the London borough of Hackney, who was elected in 2014 at the age of 21. MLMS' employees and volunteers are all in their early or mid-twenties. Momentum is a cross-generational group founded in 2015 by four Jeremy Corbyn enthusiasts: Jon Lansman, James Schneider, Adam Klug and Emma Rees. Although the founders have decades of activist experience between them, two of them are under 30, and the majority of staff members and volunteers at Momentum's national offices are also between 18 and 35. At the national conference we interviewed 13 year olds and 16 year olds desperate to get involved. In interviews and observations there was clear evidence that young volunteers were energetically committed to increasing youth participation, using approaches designed to appeal directly to other young people across the country. So, what were their strategies?

Forums For Young People

MLMS' work includes hosting [Democracy Cafés](#), forums for young people to informally talk about politics in coffee houses across the UK. Post-Brexit, they turned their attention to advocating for young people to have a seat at the negotiating table by creating the [All Party Parliamentary Group on a Better Brexit for Young People](#), which is led by MPs and designed to create a forum for the reporting of youth concerns and demands regarding Brexit to the Department for Exiting the EU. Through this parliamentary group and in collaboration with the two of us at LSE, MLMS have spent the past six months conducting over 30 focus groups across the UK: the views of young people are being collated and communicated with parliamentarians; they have already established communication links to the DExEU for future cooperation, creating a direct platform for transmitting evidence on youth views to government. Their social media engagement work included [working with youth 'influencers'](#) to encourage young people to register to vote.

Momentum's work during the recent election campaign focused on two areas: grassroots politicking (canvassing, door knocking, 'get out the vote') and online/social media engagement. They created "[My Nearest Marginal](#)," an incredibly effective and innovative website aimed at encouraging members and supporters to identify the marginal seats closest to them and to volunteer or canvass there. They engaged in traditional daily phone banking, and also text banking, asking Momentum members and supporters in particular marginal constituencies to attend local training and canvassing events. [Bringing in American activists from the Bernie Sanders campaign](#) to share techniques on 'persuasive door knocking' proved to be an engaging and unthreatening way of training first time

activists, while innovating on traditional canvassing approaches. In London these training sessions were so popular that queues formed outside the door, and their final two sessions had hundreds of attendees. [Each weekend Momentum activists were traveling to marginals](#), working with local Labour party campaigners, and adding to the ranks of people on the ground spreading the Labour message.

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Momentum: Tory Britain 2030

Momentum's digital media team were also responsible for creating, curating and editing a [staggering amount of online content](#), much of which was made directly to engage young people. One video in particular predicting life in 'Tory Britain 2030' reached over a quarter of the UK Facebook population, and had more than 7 million views. They even convinced a few co-workers to participate in a Tinder campaign [using a bot to discuss politics](#). Meanwhile arts and creative events held via [The World Transformed](#) in localities such as Croydon, South London and elsewhere broadened the appeal of socialist politics beyond those already on the left of the political spectrum. Importantly, these events departed from an old left routine of (justified) excoriation against the rich to provide a sense of community and hope. Methods like these – art activism, creativity, instant response social media videos on Facebook and Twitter, Tinder canvassing, canvassing through Instagram influencers in the case of MLMS – also display an understanding of the importance of direct communication with young people face to face and on social media platforms.

Did all of this innovation and solidarity work? [Analysis by YouGov](#) suggests that more than two thirds of young voters selected Labour as their party of choice. Having been distrusted as unenthusiastic and standby citizens, or as ignorant and lazy, they exercised a major aspect of their right to citizenship in a critical and effective way. Their party of choice did not win. But it has been given a mandate to fight for the rights of young people, minorities and the lowest paid; and it looks set to win next time round.

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