

'Oh Jeremy Corbyn': what GE2017 taught us about the link between music and politics



Does music have an effect on politics? Using the involvement of musicians in the 2017 general election campaign, [Patrycja Rozbicka](#) explains why we should start viewing music as a form of engagement with politics, not merely of political expression.

The phenomenon of mixing music and politics together is not new. We are familiar with New Labour using D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better' as their 1997 anthem, the Conservatives Party launching their 2010 manifesto to David Bowie's 'Changes' and Keane's 'Everybody's Changing', while the Liberal Democrats used Brian Eno's 'An Ending (Ascent)' in their party election broadcast that same year. Musicians were accordingly deployed to seek the popular vote ahead of the 2017 election, and Labour were definitely the ones to have exploited music for political communication most effectively.

How did Labour do it?

Late in May 2017, Jeremy Corbyn gave a short talk about austerity and the NHS at the Libertines concert at Penton Park. As soon as he finished his speech, the crowd spontaneously erupted into the now well-known chant 'Oh, Jeremy Corbyn!' to the melody of the White Stripes' 2003 hit 'Seven Nation Army'. And that is how the phenomenon started. The recording of the original 'performance', uploaded on Twitter by Former Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, [received 8.000 re-tweets](#). While the chanting follows a certain crowd logic, the tune was so persistent that even after Labour lost the election, the crowd at Glastonbury was more than happy to evoke it after Corbyn gave a speech from the main stage.

This was by no means a unique phenomenon. Labour deployed a similar campaign technique to the one used by Bernie Sanders in the 2016 US election. While Sanders had '[Artists for Bernie](#)', and Tony Blair before him had the Britpop musicians, this time Corbyn had endorsements from Run the Jewels, Billy Bragg, Lily Allen, and Rag'n'Bone man. [Grime stars](#) (Stormzy, JME, Novelist, Akala) who had confessed never to have voted before were this time campaigning on the streets for Corbyn.

With [celebrity endorsements](#) known to have a [significant impact](#) on young people's [decision to vote](#), the above was arguably a new form of recruiting voters who engaged because their idols did. This kind of politically-charged information was also able to reach hundreds of young adults across nearly the country through social media. So, 2017 made us witness music's potential as a political force in the UK.

Another element of Labour's campaign was that it used festivals – the majority of events attended by Jeremy Corbyn were followed by gigs and concerts. The Libertines concert at Penton Park is a good example, and so is the grand finale of the campaign on 6 June which resulted in outdoor rallies taking place simultaneously in London, Birmingham, Glasgow, Barry, Warrington, and Brighton. Labour stepped outside the microcosm of politics and used music to deliver its political message to the young.

Why doesn't it work for the Conservatives?

Would the same method have rallied Conservative supporters? The Conservatives' support at festivals and gigs is minimal as their programme does not support liberal arts. This lack of support is particularly evident following the austerity cuts affecting the arts, as introduced by the coalition government in 2015.

There is also a lack of celebrity artists who could be directly identified as Conservative supporters, meaning that the party simply lacks the base to reach from. Instead, the response from artists is rather negative. Cassette Boy, South London comedy and music duo, made '[Mo'May Mo'Problems](#)' reaching over a million hits.

[An analysis](#) of voting in the 2017 general election tells us that of the roughly 72% of young people who voted, between 63% and 66% supported Labour. The young voters (18-29), supported the Conservatives only in [19-23%](#). Of course, Labour's support among the young cannot be fully credited to the use of music per se – the point here is that it was rather the drafting of musicians and celebrities to show their support that may have had an impact.

Why is the debate about music and politics so important?

There is an ever-present scepticism in contemporary politics to recognise and respond to non-traditional forms of political engagement, viewing them instead as [non-legitimate political acts](#). There is also a failure to recognise alternative forms of engagement as a feedback loop – a way through which politicians can take voters' views on board.

Music can be a [powerful tool](#) for political emancipation, [community building and maintenance](#), as well as a form of political expression. It can also be a political statement or the [expression of political values](#). The discussion on how to define the link between music and politics, and the effect of each on the other, is ongoing. But, instead of focusing on the definitions, we need a broader perspective on what that link means and what forms it can take. Instead of viewing music as a political act, or merely a form of political expression, we need to view it as a form of engagement with the political discourse – both on the side of the performers, as well as of the audience.

Note: The author would like to thank Michael Conroy, Greg Smith and Connor Hemming for their help in researching this article.

About the Author



Patrycja Rozbicka is Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Aston University.

Image credit: [Splitshire](#) Pixabay/Public Domain