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SARAH HARRISON\*

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# Young Voters

The non-participatory and participatory aspects of the electoral behaviour of young British people have attracted considerable attention. The discussion of young citizens in elections has mostly focused on their chronically low levels of mobilisation. However, in the context of the General Election 2017, young people were under the spotlight for different reasons, including the party preference gap between young and other voters. Differences in youth voting compared to older voters were also evident in the 2016 Brexit Referendum. The Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 brought new salience to the debate on giving 16 year olds the right to vote—they were allowed to in the UK for the first time—as most exercised their newly-awarded franchise in that campaign and many appeared to be politically engaged. The estimated turnout of 75% for 16 and 17 year olds compared to 54% of 18–24 year olds. It was unsurprising that, in the weeks leading up to the unanticipated General Election of 2017, the intentions and expected turnout of young people were closely scrutinised. Indeed, discrepancies between pollsters' forecasts were even largely attributed to the question of whether young people would vote in as high numbers as they were promising.

This chapter examines the role of young people in the 2017 General Election. In order to provide an insight into their perceptions and motivations, I look at the specific context of this election for young people, and notably the implications of the Brexit result on the attitudes of young people leading up to the 8 June Election. Using new survey data<sup>1</sup> drawn from the responses of thousands of voters (young and old) I then explore the important role played by young voters in the election, notably those aged 18–24, from the first indications regarding their registration and turnout to the motivations behind their electoral choice, and the

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<sup>1</sup>Survey data fielded by ECREP-Opinium. Data are used from two separate panels: (i) Panel study survey conducted during the 2016 EU Referendum was fielded in 3 waves: wave 1: 22–28 April 2016 (3008 respondents), wave 2: 17–19 May 2016 (2111 respondents), wave 3: 24–30 June (2113 respondents) and was weighted to reflect a national representative audience; (ii) Survey conducted after the 8 June General Election 2017. The sample consisted of 2004 British respondents between 13 and 16 June 2017. The data were weighted for demographic and social variables but also to match the actual turnout and vote choice of the population.

analysis of a number of cases where their mobilisation seemed to change the outcome of a constituency vote. I assess the extent to which young people used their vote to claim their electoral weight within the polity, their ability to shape their future, but also to express a clear desire for change and significant levels of democratic frustration.

The challenge of engaging young people in politics has exercised all democracies. Young citizens report particularly high levels of distrust of political systems, institutions, and social elites, leading to claims of a contemporary ‘crisis of democracy’ (see for example Newton, 2001; Mishler and Rose, 1997). A growing sense of dissatisfaction towards political systems has been associated with young people (Torcal and Montero, 2006). This has been accompanied by a distinct shift away from many traditional modes of political participation, often evidenced by low turnout in elections (LeDuc *et al.*, 1996, 2002; Franklin, 2004) and the collapse of membership levels of political parties and unions (Scarrow, 1996; Katz and Mair, 1994; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). Whilst such trends are not confined to young people, for this age group, the evidence is most acute. Specifically, Norris *et al.* (2002) found that the participation of young voters has declined across many democracies, and Henn *et al.* (2002) refer to a general trend of youth disengagement from all forms of traditional political activity. Nonetheless, there is ample debate concerning the interpretation of this decline in youth participation. Cammaerts *et al.* (2014, 2016), for instance, question the existence of widespread youth apathy. They suggest instead that there is a genuine appetite for involvement, underlining that young people insist that elections remain the key to democratic participation but often feel the political offer fails to address their concerns.

## **1. An unusual focus on the youth electorate: From the Brexit Referendum to the General Election 2017**

In the aftermath of the result of the Brexit Referendum, much debate ensued concerning the participation and preferences of the youth electorate. Young people were criticised initially for their low turnout in the Referendum. Participation was reported to be only 46% for the 18-24-year-old electorate (Sky Data, 2016). However, on closer inspection this figure of 46% was in fact an estimate based on previous data concerning voting regularity in the 2015 election. Yet, we know that young people are much less likely to be registered to vote. In July 2014, the Electoral Commission confirmed that ‘younger people (under 35) are considerably less likely to be registered’ with only 70.2% of 20-24 year olds present on electoral registers, against 95.5% of 65+ year olds (UK Electoral Commission, 2014). Therefore, an estimation of turnout based on an overall proportion of the total population can be misleading particularly in the case of young people.

Allowing for low registration which has to be taken into account, turnout for the younger population was in fact substantially higher than previously reported. It was 64% for the 18-24 age group, only eight points below the national average. Whilst still below that of older voters, turnout for young people was probably closer to the national average than in any other national election in recent memory.

Traditionally, when thinking of the fracture lines that have split the vote of the British electorate over the years, the impact of social class (Butler and Stokes, 1974; Butler and Kavanagh, 2002), the North South divide (McMahon *et al.*, 1992) or the differences between cities and the country (Jennings and Stoker, 2017) have been considered as the most important cleavages in explaining voter behaviour. However, the youth vote drew exceptional attention in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit Referendum. The result reflected a substantial generational divide with an overwhelming majority of young people voting for the UK to remain in the European Union (Skinner and Gottfried, 2017). The exposition of a stark divergence between the preferences of young and older voters in relation to Britain's place within and relationship with the European Union is not a particularly new phenomenon. Indeed, it was previously highlighted by a series of questions that we included in a survey which probed implicit and explicit associations with the EU (Bruter and Harrison, 2016). When asked to compare the EU to an animal, older Brits chose a representation of an elephant, whilst younger respondents preferred to associate the EU with a lion. When asked to compare the EU to a painting, older Brits chose Guernica and the young a Dance by Matisse. Similarly, when we asked for a human trait, the top answer amongst the old was stupidity and amongst the young intelligence. The symbolism of these contrasted visions should not be dismissed as they offer a real insight into the juxtaposed visions that British citizens hold. These perceptions of the EU shed light upon the divisions within British society and how differently the younger and older generations perceive the EU. In line with this stronger sense of identity association with Europe and a stronger attachment to the cultural aspects of the shared community, young people also showed higher levels of emotion in the wake of the Referendum result. 46% of those aged 18-24 admitted to having tears in their eyes when they discovered the result of the Referendum, and 51% felt anger and 46% disgust at those who had voted differently from them (Bruter and Harrison, 2017).

## 2. Registration and voting at the General Election

Efforts to increase voter registration were again prioritised during the run up to the election in June 2017. An enthusiastic registration drive from social networks including Facebook and Snapchat that encouraged their users to register to vote

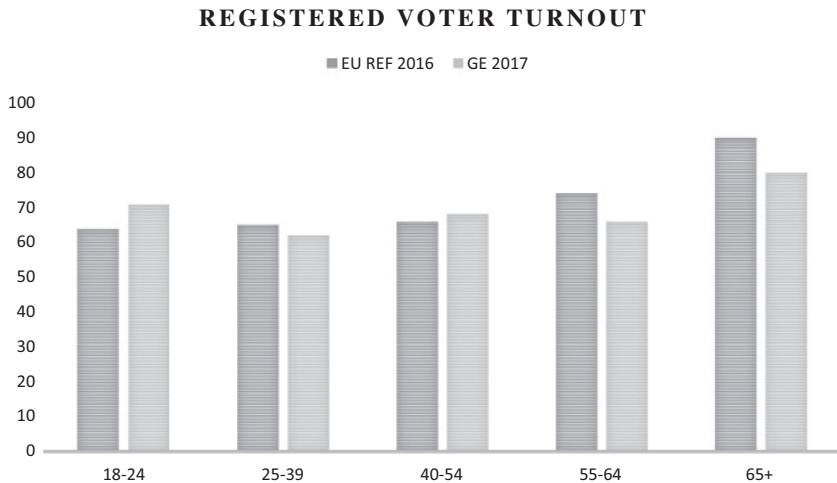
contributed to the efforts of getting more young people engaged. Similarly, campaigns led by 'Bite the Ballot' and #TurnUp encouraged young voters to register and to turnout on Election Day, echoed by contemporary musicians ranging from Pink Floyd frontman David Gilmour to Grime artist JME. A website 'mynearestmarginal.com' also encouraged tactical voting from students suggesting that they register at the address where their vote would count the most. Furthermore, the Labour Party made explicit efforts to mobilise young voters by implementing digital technology and media communication tools that targeted specific messages to local electorates, and more notably by promising to abolish university tuition fees should they form the next government.

The Cabinet Office reported that 246,000 young people under the age of 25 (compared to just 10,000 people over the age of 65) registered on the last possible day before the general election. This was the first tangible indication that young people's stated intention to mobilise should be taken seriously by all involved in the election. In addition, the question of whether the young would seek their 'revenge' after being marginalised in the Referendum was one of the most anticipated issues concerning the election. In this context, it is not surprising that young people were seen as a potential target by some political parties and a threat by others. Most parties from the so-called 'progressive camp' (Labour, Liberal-Democrats, Greens, SNP) tried to address young people and the resentment that many expressed over the Brexit result.

On election night, it soon became clear that young people's promised mobilisation and coordinated effort to oppose the incumbent Government had gone beyond everyone's expectations in shaping the outcome of a hung parliament. As Figure 16.1 shows, turnout (after controlling for registration) of 18-24 year olds was a remarkably high 71%, which was not statistically significantly different from that of the overall British population. This indeed suggested an unprecedented level of youth mobilisation in the General Election and amplified the previous record engagement of young people in the June 2016 EU membership Referendum.

As the 2014, 2016 and 2017 contests illustrated, young people can be motivated to participate when the stakes are perceived to be high. The emphasis on optimistic plans and prognoses for the future seem to echo particularly well for young people. In light of these various motivations that often underpin young people's choice of vote, we now turn to the specific details of the election result.

In terms of party choice, young voters aged 18-24 voted in higher numbers for the Labour party (63% compared to 40% for the overall population) and much less for the Conservative party (24% as opposed to 42% for the overall population). Support for the Liberal Democrats amongst young people was higher in some constituencies with large student populations, and in particular where the Liberal Democrats were the main adversaries of the Conservatives. These results



**Figure 16.1.** Turnout by age amongst registered voters in the 2016 EU referendum and the 2017 General Election.

Sources: Please see Note 1.

raise some critical questions. Was the youth vote predominantly a vote ‘for Labour’ or ‘against the Tories’? Did it vary according to local context and battles? And what were the key motivations behind it? Before turning our attention to the electoral motivations of young voters and how they differed from those expressed by the rest of the British population, we will now briefly examine a few key constituencies where young voters—and notably students—represent a prominent segment of the electorate to identify their effect at the local level.

### 3. Three key constituencies: Cardiff North, Sheffield Hallam, and Oxford West

An interesting picture emerges when we look at the results from these three constituencies with traditionally large populations of young people. At the local level, large young and student populations typically benefited Labour, including against the Liberal Democrats in Sheffield Hallam, but could also benefit other anti-Conservative candidates, including the Liberal Democrats in constituencies such as Oxford West, Eastbourne, Twickenham and Bath.

In 2015, Cardiff North was identified as one of the top ten constituencies with the largest proportions of student population in the country, and one which Labour critically needed to win. They failed to do so and the Conservatives increased their majority to over 2,000. But in 2017 the fortunes of the two parties were reversed and, with a 6% swing, Labour won by over 4000 votes. Sheffield

Hallam has been in the spotlight for several consecutive elections as the seat of former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. In a constituency where a very large number of students from two different universities vote, Clegg surprisingly resisted the Liberal Democrat collapse of 2015 to hang on to his seat. However, in 2017 the former leader, who broke his promise to scrap tuition fees at the outset of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, finally lost his seat. Nonetheless, the outcome of the Oxford West and Abingdon constituency, another student-heavy Parliamentary seat, illustrated that the punishment for the broken promise on tuition fees did not preclude Liberal Democrat success. Their victory over the Conservatives with a swing of 9% and a majority of 816 owed something to young people being keen to support whichever member of the ‘progressive block’ might defeat the Conservative incumbent who had held the seat since 2010. This mobilisation of young voters rallying behind a Liberal Democrat primary contender against a Conservative incumbent in that student-heavy constituency was reminiscent of other similar marginal seats such as Twickenham and Bath (both seats were taken from the Conservatives).

The electoral results of these three constituencies (where the weight of the youth vote was substantial) raise important questions regarding the motivations underpinning the preferences of young citizens who voted. Why did young people choose to mobilise so much more than usual and why did they vote the way they did and what did they try to achieve? The next section explores the motivations behind the youth vote by examining the responses to a selection of questions from our survey conducted in the aftermath of the election.

#### **4. Motivations of the youth vote: Desire for change and a rejection of ‘hard Brexit’**

Whilst the youth vote was clearly far more important than most commentators had expected, and whilst it clearly benefited Labour and in some specific cases the Liberal Democrats, a number of possible hypotheses can be offered to understand what motivated the electoral choice of the young. A first possibility is that the young were seduced by specific policies proposed by the Labour Party, notably the abolition of tuition fees directly targeted towards the young electorate. This is particularly relevant as the Conservative Party failed to address the preferences of the young electorate and largely underestimated their weight in the result. Whilst the Conservative Party failed to address young people in their manifesto, in contrast, young voters may have been indeed seduced by the personality and direct appeals of the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Yet the Labour Party had accepted the result of Brexit and pledged to implement the democratic decision of the voters, an acquiescence regarding the result which perhaps ought to have disappointed most young people. The election was perceived as an opportunity for

young people to express their discontent about the Brexit result and their frustration towards the way politics is conducted.

To arbitrate between those conflicting explanations, we asked respondents about the specific motivations underpinning their choice of vote. These motivations included all of the following: the wish to express their frustration at the current political situation; the desire to express their enthusiasm for the programme of the party that they chose; the desire to position themselves against a version of Brexit that would be unacceptable to them; the wish to express their enthusiasm at the leader of the party they voted for; a vote for change; a vote for stability; or a desire to be better represented even if it did not influence who governed the country. On the whole, all of those motivations proved highly relevant to young citizens and the population in general alike. However, the most interesting finding concerns the nature of the differences between the prominence of given motivations for 18-24 year olds as compared to the rest of the sample.

Four key reasons provided the main motivations uniquely characteristic of the youth vote: (i) the expression of democratic frustration; (ii) the positioning against Brexit; (iii) the desire for change; (iv) and the support for the party programme. By contrast, enthusiasm for the party leader, stability, and representation were not significantly higher amongst young people compared to their older counterparts. These findings and the comparison with other voters are summarised in Table 16.1.

Specifically, young voters were found to be 16% more likely to be motivated by a desire for change than the average voter; 12% more likely to use their vote to express their opposition to a certain vision of Brexit; 11% more likely to express frustration at the current political situation; and 11% more likely than the average voter to express their support for the programme of the party that they voted for. All four of those motivations were mentioned by over 80% of young people aged

**Table 16.1** Differentials in voting motivations of 18-24 year olds compared to other voters, 2017 General Election

| <b>Electoral Choice Motivation</b> | <b>Differential (young-average)</b> |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Desire for change                  | +16                                 |
| Opposition to form of Brexit       | +12                                 |
| Frustration                        | +11                                 |
| Support for party programme        | +11                                 |
| Support for party leader           | +6                                  |
| Representation                     | +1                                  |
| Stability                          | 0                                   |

Sources: Please see Note 1.



18-24. By contrast, there was no major difference between respondents aged 18-24 and the rest of the population when expressing the desire for stability, better representation, or expressing enthusiasm for the leader of the party they voted for, all of which were largely in line with the answers of the rest of the population. It is noteworthy that in contrast to the prominent narrative in the media in the aftermath of the election, the personality of the party leader does not seem to be a notably higher motivation for young people compared to the rest of the population.

The most striking aspect of these findings is that they highlight the specificity of motivations amongst young people, in particular those with a negative connotation. Indeed, the first three motivations for vote choice were: (i) desire for change, including a rejection and negation of the status quo expressed as a direct desire to depart from the existing politics; (ii) strong opposition to the Brexit process and the necessary changes that it would bring in terms of the reformulation of vision and identity of the UK; and (iii) a sense of frustration with the current political situation. Insights gained from additional qualitative details provided by young voters themselves highlighted that the desire for change also included negativity towards the introduction of widespread austerity measures (of which young people were often seen as the victims), and the desire to express support for party programmes and policies with prominent references to youth-specific measures such as the promised abolition of tuition fees, which became a central part of the Labour manifesto during the campaign.

In summary, the motivations expressed by young voters seem to encapsulate their desire to oppose a certain direction and vision for the future of the UK. This sense of negativity expressed towards the political system is also illustrated by findings that confirm differences in levels of frustration between younger and older age groups, as Table 16.2 shows. Overall, 18-24 year olds claim to experience significantly higher levels of frustration with the democratic system than people aged 25 and over. The largest differences between younger and older citizens concern frustration towards the political system. Within the indices, items that were particularly salient within the dominant political dimension were, for example, the perception that politicians do not fight for the socio-tropic interest but only for their own, the feeling of not being listened to, and the lack of long-term vision from politicians. These three items featured in the highest difference of means between the young and older age groups. Whilst lower differences existed between younger and older voters for frustration expressed towards the institutional framework such as the criticism concerning the absence of democratic involvement for all citizens. In terms of ideological frustration, young people reported that the existing political offer does not truly correspond to their true preferences.

**Table 16.2** Frustration indices amongst young and older voters in the 2017 General Election

| Frustration Indices                     | 18-24              | 25 and over        | Difference  |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| <b>Political</b>                        | 53.9 (27.9)        | 50.1 (28.1)        | +3.8        |
| <i>Absence of socio-tropic interest</i> | 59.2 (31.6)        | 52.5 (31.8)        | +6.7        |
| <i>Not listened to</i>                  | 53.0 (28.7)        | 49.1 (30.2)        | +3.9        |
| <i>Lack of long-term vision</i>         | 52.2 (29.9)        | 48.5 (30.1)        | +3.7        |
| <b>Institutional</b>                    | 45.4 (26.1)        | 43.2 (26.6)        | +2.2        |
| <i>Lack of inclusive democracy</i>      | 43.7 (27.6)        | 40.2 (27.5)        | +3.5        |
| <b>Ideological</b>                      | 44.2 (26.6)        | 41.8 (24.9)        | +2.4        |
| <i>Lack of political offer</i>          | 46.4 (28.4)        | 42.5 (28.0)        | +3.9        |
| <b>Overall</b>                          | <b>48.9 (25.5)</b> | <b>45.9 (25.2)</b> | <b>+3.0</b> |

Sources: Please see Note 1.

This insidious feeling of frustration also tainted young people's perceptions of the atmosphere of the General Election. When asked to characterise the atmosphere of the campaign election, the main adjectives mentioned by young people aged 18-24 were tense (38%), democratic (31%), aggressive (28%) and fractious (27%). By contrast, only 9% of young citizens described the atmosphere of the election as constructive and only 8% as respectful. Even more importantly, however, when asked how they felt towards people who voted differently from them, young people felt more hostility than the rest of the population. While 71% expressed anger at people who voted for the party they liked least (in contrast to 45% for the national average), 75% expressed frustration (versus 62%), 66% expressed distrust (versus 57%), and 57% even described feeling some disgust towards those people who voted for the party that they liked least (versus 44%). This persistence of negative feelings towards what is perceived as an opposing part of the electorate is critical, not only because it emphasises how politically isolated many of the young feel in British society, but also because it is, in all likelihood, one of the main factors that led to a much higher mobilisation of the young than originally expected: to ensure their voice would no longer be unheard. Such inter-generational hostility may not necessarily be seen as healthy for the polity.

## 5. Conclusion: A 'youthquake'?

When the 2017 General Election was announced, many observers expected that young voters would be largely irrelevant to the final outcome of the election due to their lack of enthusiasm for politics, accompanied by poor mobilisation and perennial low levels of turnout in elections. Instead, young people became possibly the most featured demographic group of the election. Turnout rose to a level

not hugely different from those of the overall population, and the youth vote contributed to the denial of a Conservative overall majority. Young voters were keen to express their desire for change, demonstrate opposition to Brexit a year after the Referendum, and indicate frustration at the perceived current political situation. Yet the extent of youth support for Labour, a party committed to Brexit, indicated disjuncture between the ambitions of many and the willingness of their electoral choice to articulate their political position.

The General Election showed that young people are not disengaged from political debate. Young people, perhaps more so than any other age category, have ideals and aspirations about what democracy should be and how their political system should deliver those expectations. It is clear from their discourse that they are eager to hear messages of positive transformation and are willing to support ambitions that will help create solidarity and social cohesion. Many young people tend to be suspicious of elites and politicians, yet they find it easier to get passionate about an issue than they do about a party. In this context, we witnessed high turnout among 18-24 year olds in the Brexit Referendum.

Our findings reveal that young voters—those between the ages of 18 and 24 years old—were significantly more motivated by a desire for change, a rejection of the vision of Brexit promoted by the Government and frustration with the current political climate than the rest of the voting population. It is clear that Brexit has left many young people feeling marginalised and that their identity has been redefined by older generations. They decided to embrace the next available opportunity to have their voice heard and try to correct the trajectory of a future which the Brexit vote had made so divergent from their own overwhelming preference—whatever the illogicality of supporting Labour in this context. The perception that Labour might offer a softer Brexit or even reverse the exit policy may have prevailed. The question begged is whether the referendum-based engagement, sustained in a Brexit-dominated election, will be maintained in future elections. The current level of political turmoil suggests the answer is probably yes.

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