



Just how powerful is the student voice? Listening to students after the General Election

Tuesday 12th September; 10:00am-11:00am
Committee Room 10, House of Commons, Westminster, SW1A 0AA

Introduction

In the lead up to the General Election on 8th June, politicians campaigned across the country on issues such as Brexit, student funding, NHS provision, and national security. As was well documented, students and young people engaged with this election to an extent unprecedented in recent years. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Students is committed to raising the concerns facing students and brings together MPs and Peers across the political spectrum to encourage students to actively participate in politics. At this critical point for student political engagement, this APPG hopes to question what the General Election meant for the power of young people in Parliament and beyond.

Key Statistics

- Youth turnout in the 2017 election increased to 64%, up from 43% in 2015.
- Overall turnout between the 2015 and 2017 election increased from 66.1% to 68.7%
- Students, young people and millennials registered to vote in droves:
 - 1,051,245 18-to-24-year-olds registered to vote
 - 972,680 25-to-34-year-olds registered to vote

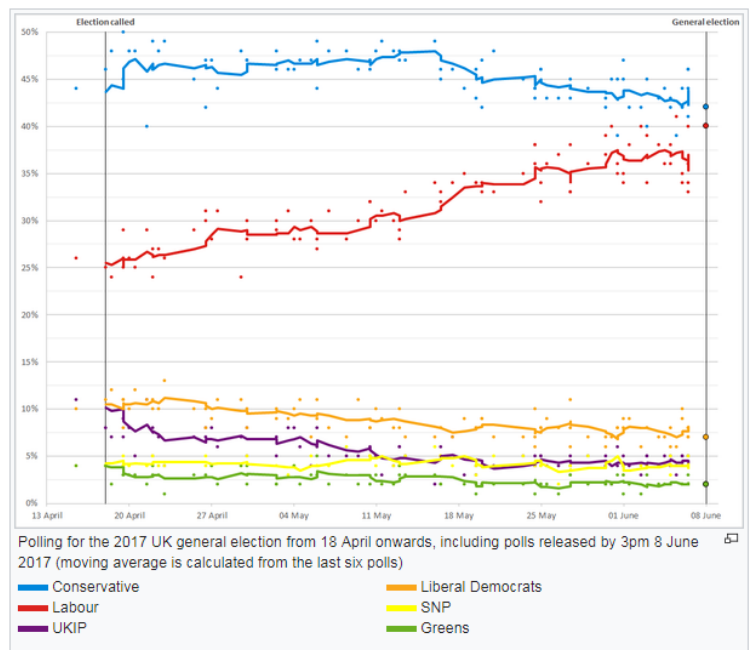
Background

On the 18th April 2017, the Prime Minister announced her intention to hold a snap General Election. Whilst polls and commentators forecast an initially clear result, in the end the result was, famously, far closer.

When we look at vote share, Conservatives secured 42.3% of votes, while Labour secured 40%. This is the closest vote share since 1974 and the highest opposition party vote share since 1970. In part, the inaccuracy of the polling and final result can be attributed to polling companies underweighting the responses of young people.

The youth impact

In the run up to the election, 1,051,245 18-to-24-year-olds registered to vote, along with 972,680 25-to-34-year-olds. This amounts to over 2 million 'millennials' between 18 April and 22 May. A quarter of a million young people registered to vote on the deadline day alone, an increase from the 2015 election which saw fewer than 150,000 young people register on the last day.



Throughout the election campaign, a number of high profile youth and student organisations led prominent campaigns to connect young people with politics, and encourage them to register to vote. Students' unions were amongst these, running engaging projects from voter registration stalls, hosting events, to organising door-knocking and leafleting.

Elsewhere, organisations like Bite the Ballot and British Youth Council launched a number of campaigns in the lead up to the Election, also encouraging young people to register and get out and vote. Bite the Ballot launched their #TurnUp campaign, a creative brief created to inspire young people to register to vote.¹ The British Youth Council launched an online #VotePower campaign which put forward the organisation's top five issues they wanted politicians to commit to in the General Election.²

Uniting much of this activity was an overarching sentiment that registering to vote – and using that vote – is a critical form of self-expression. Organisations such as these routinely champion civic engagement and participation amongst young people. The success in registering students and young people ahead of

¹ <http://www.jellylondon.com/news/view/turnup-join-the-movement>

² <http://www.byc.org.uk/news/young-voters-use-your-votepower>



June 2017's Election demonstrates young people's appetite to engage with this narrative and with these processes.

Similarly, voter turnout amongst 18-to-24-year-olds is estimated to be 64%, a large increase from 43% in the 2015 election. Overall turnout increased from 66.1% in 2015 to 68.7%. At a national and local level, this increase was particularly pronounced in marginal seats with high student populations; it has been argued that students' votes had a demonstrable impact on the result.³ With larger numbers of young people registering and voting, it is clear that young people played an important part in swinging a number of seats. With such large proportions of young people currently in education, students had a powerful voice in this election.

The student voice: what motivates students' political engagement?

Evidence shows that students are not a homogenous group when it comes to voting habits and motivations. As individuals with independent experiences, it is clear that – just as with the rest of the population – there is not one key issue that will dictate the way a student will vote, or whether they will vote at all.

However, in this turbulent political time, it is clear that students and young people have an increasing awareness of the ways in which politics affects the world around them. For instance, last year's EU referendum result was at odds with the majority of young people's preference, with polling showing that around three quarters of 18-24-year-olds voted to remain in the EU.⁴ This contrasts with the majority of those in the 65+ category who voted to leave. It has been argued that the referendum vote has been seen to have politicised a generation of young voters,⁵ and according to surveys leading up to the election, Brexit was noted as a factor in students' voting decisions.⁶

Another issue that received intense interest during this election was student funding, and the answers that the main parties had to the increasingly high levels of student debt. It is estimated that students' are now leaving higher education up to £57,000 in debt, and this sparked much public debate.⁷ However, a survey run by NUS ahead of the election showed that this was far from the only issue of interest. Topping the poll was the NHS, followed by cost of living, education and finally Brexit.⁸ The sheer breadth of concerns facing students were considerably high and vastly ranged. Overwhelmingly, however, students demonstrated their desire to be listened to and have used their vote to change this. This same NUS survey showed that only 12% of students felt that politicians *do* value the views of young people.

Barriers to engaging

Despite the massive engagement of students in June 2017, it is clear that barriers to young people's civic engagement still exist. As has been raised by the Votes at 16 Coalition, a live debate surrounds the lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16 to energise young people's political engagement at an earlier point. A poll run by NUS in 2016 found that 76% of 16 and 17 year olds said that they would have voted in the EU referendum had they had the chance.⁹ Similarly, the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 saw 109,593 16 and 17 year olds register to vote, with 75% of young people claiming to have voted.¹⁰

Elsewhere, the introduction of the system of individual electoral registration (IER) in 2014 may be a barrier to the active political engagement of students and young people. The switch knocked thousands of people in the UK, including students who would have previously been block registered by their institution, off the electoral register.¹¹ The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 now requires universities to explore options to facilitate student voter registration – with Sheffield University, for example, having already demonstrated an effective model of integrating electoral registration at the point of course enrolment. However, since the passing of the legislation to advise universities on how to introduce similar systems, details and guidance have not yet been published.

For details of our next event or to receive more information about the APPG on Students, please contact the Secretariat to the APPG on Students: info@appg-students.org.uk.

³ <http://www.if.org.uk/2017/06/12/much-younger-voters-affect-general-election/>

⁴ See YouGov exit poll: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted/>

⁵ <http://www.if.org.uk/2017/06/12/much-younger-voters-affect-general-election/>

⁶ <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/05/04/4081/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jul/05/poorest-students-will-finish-university-with-57000-debt-says-ifs>

⁸ <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/press-releases/only-12-per-cent-of-young-people-agree-that-politicians-value-their-views-nus-poll-finds/?load=33&top=7126>

⁹ <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/eu-ref-16-and-17-year-olds-are-being-denied-a-say-on-their-future>

¹⁰ https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179812/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2015/feb/05/missing-voters-individual-electoral-registration-disaster>