

Young people, students and the upcoming General Election

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I've now on the threshold of "middle age", which is a very depressing thought! I've spent my entire adult life classed as a "young person" and have very much felt part of that demographic. In my particular case, that sense of 'being young' was probably extended by the fact that I spent longer than many people in various stages of higher education.

As a result, it feels very strange to comment on the political behaviour of younger voters as an outsider rather than an insider. Yet an outsider I very much am these days. This year I became a father – at exactly the same age as my parents had me – and am no longer the youngest generation in my own house, let alone anywhere else! Even the surveys no longer class me as young.

Yet working in higher education, I am acutely aware of what a privilege it is to work in an environment where young people shape their futures and the huge responsibility we have to help them do so to the best of their abilities. In my view, young people are underestimated by many in society. Far from the feckless gadflies of caricature, today's young people are far more focused, hardworking and engaged with many wider societal issues than my generation (and many of our predecessors) were.

The statistics back this up. Today's students are, on average, considerably better educated than we are. They drink less, they are much less likely to smoke and they are less likely to use many illegal substances than my generation were. Whatever you think about young people, the facts are clear: "Gen Z" are hardworking, focussed and educated like never before. So why are they less likely to vote?

When I was an undergraduate, at no point did I ever register to vote. I didn't have to – my institution was able to do it on my behalf. Today's students no longer have that luxury^[1]: they must all register individually. Moreover, they must do so each time they move (typically annually, given the conditions on rented student accommodation).

It is a misconception that students are able to vote twice: this is not possible and to attempt it is illegal. Students, like everybody else, are able to vote once. However, they may be registered in two different places, since they fall under the jurisdiction of two different councils (one during term time and the other during holidays). For the purposes of a General Election, they are only permitted to vote in one constituency and must choose which they wish to vote in.

Given that they will often spend a substantial portion of the year away from that constituency, there is a significant probability that they will not be able to make it to their polling station on the date of an election. As a result, they might also wish to apply for a postal vote (or to vote by proxy) in order to ensure that they are able to vote.

Bear in mind that this must be done alongside all of the other cornucopia of administrative tasks that must be done every time one moves, as many students do every year. University is also likely to be their first experience of living away from home, and provides an academic challenge quite distinct from school. Not to mention potentially getting a part-time job and budgeting on a very limited income (student maintenance loans are typically modest, particularly relative to rents).

In addition to the day-job of studying, most students want to enjoy a vibrant cultural life (here at BCU, we are very lucky to have the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire as part of the university, which regularly puts on events). All of this is not to mention the usual ups-and-downs of late adolescence (emotions relating to falling in love, acrimonious break-ups, new friendships etc.)

Amongst all of this, can it be any surprise that getting oneself on the electoral register every year (particularly when you have never done so before and need to dig out a national insurance number) often slips down the list of priorities or is forgotten? It's easy for those of us who are familiar with the system, vote at every election and have a stable address. I would love to see what voter registration figures might look like if those of us in older age groups were issued with a brand-new NI number and then forced to move every year (alongside all our other responsibilities).

In spite of all of this, it has been deeply heartening to note the surge in applications to register to vote, particularly from younger voters. We do not yet know how many of these are new applicants and by how much the electoral register will grow because of them. Nevertheless, even in the event that many are applications from people who wish to check that they are registered, the fact that people are keen to ensure that they *can* vote bodes well for turnout next month.

So, what would a surge in youth turnout look like? Firstly, it would be unambiguously positive for the Labour Party (and the converse for the Conservatives). However, much would depend on where this surge took place. A surge in the student vote could swing Southampton Itchen, Stirling, Hendon, Putney and Northampton South away from the Conservatives. Similarly, would help Labour to hang on to Ipswich, Lincoln and Wolverhampton South West.

More broadly, a surge in youth turnout might help both Labour and the “Remain alliance” in various other constituencies (including Brunel University in Uxbridge – the constituency currently represented by one Boris Johnson). Locally, if appropriately mobilised, the student vote might help Labour retain the Warwick and Leamington seat. There are also places, particularly in Scotland, where the youth vote is likely to prove decisive in determining the winner between various pro-Remain parties (such as North East Fife).

Nationally, given that the race in many constituencies is relatively tight, the choices made by the country’s young people will be vital. It will be another 18 years before my son is eligible to vote. However, the choices we all make at this election will affect his future as much as mine. All of us – in every age group – will need to think very carefully about the best interests of his generation, who are the young people of tomorrow, when we vote in this seminal General Election.

[\[1\]](#) The voter registration system was changed in 2014.