

Did the EU Referendum boost youth engagement with politics?



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The Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 was for many a watershed moment in the ongoing debate about youth political engagement. Against a backdrop of declining electoral turnout amongst young voters, and evidence that today's young people are the most politically apathetic to have entered the electorate in the last century, the 85% turnout among 18-24 year olds in the Scottish Independence Referendum – and 75% turnout among newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds – became proof that if elections were based on issues that young people care about and can connect to, they will participate in politics. While it is still far too early to know whether the 2014 campaign led to a sustained increase in political interest amongst Scottish young people, there is little doubt that their political engagement was at least temporarily boosted. A reasonable expectation, therefore, is that we should see a similar boost in youth political engagement as a result of the EU Referendum, given that this, too, was on an issue which young people care passionately about – EU membership – and was a contest in which their votes could have been crucial in stopping a Leave victory as a result of high turnout among their more Eurosceptic elders.

We could reasonably expect, therefore, that young voters would be receptive to campaign efforts to mobilise them to vote in the EU Referendum, and that they may become more engaged with politics as a result. To explore this, we surveyed two groups of voters about their attitudes towards the EU Referendum and their engagement with politics – one in March before the formal campaign began, and another around polling day – allowing us to see how the political engagement of young voters changed throughout the course of the Referendum campaign (for our methodology visit the project website). The data (summarised in Table 1) indicates that the under-30s' interest in politics was boosted by the Referendum, and this translated into greater participation on polling day.

Respondents to our survey were asked, for example, how interested they were in politics on a scale from 0-10 (with 10 meaning 'very interested'). In March, 7% of the under-30s said that they had no interest at all (i.e., gave a score of 0), while 40% were highly interested (i.e., gave a score of at least 8). By June, the proportion of uninterested young people had fallen slightly to 5%, and the proportion with low interest in politics (giving a score of 1-3) also fell by 4%, while the proportion highly interested rose to 45%. While there is little indication that completely disengaged young people become interested in politics as a result of the Referendum, there is evidence of an increase in interest among those who were engaged to at least some extent. This boost in political interest also appears to have increased the chances of many under-30s' voting in the Referendum, with the proportion who were certain that they would vote rising from 48% in

March to 71% by polling day. While voters have a tendency to over-estimate their chances of voting in surveys, there is clearly a marked increase in the number of young people expecting to vote, and the figure compares favourably with the fewer than 60% of under-30s who said that they were certain to vote in the 2010 and 2015 general elections (according to the British Election Study).

There are also indications that younger voters became more trusting of the messages they heard from the Remain and Leave camps as the campaign progressed. In March, 44% of under-30s said that they trusted one or both of the campaigns to at least some degree, whereas by June this proportion had increased to 55%. This is perhaps surprising in light of the effort the two campaigns spent attempting to smear and undermine the credibility of their opponents. But it is nonetheless positive from the perspective of youth engagement, as higher levels of trust are associated with greater political participation. 86% of voters (and 81% of under-30s) who had at least some trust in a campaign (either Leave or Remain) reported being certain to vote in the Referendum, compared with 73% of voters (and 68% of under-30s) who did not trust either campaign.

There is little question, therefore, that the Referendum campaign, and the issue of EU membership itself, has stimulated the political interest of Britain's young people to an extent not seen for some years. Whether this proves to be lasting remains to be seen, and will no doubt require a sustained effort from politicians and the media to keep young people interested despite the Referendum result, particularly because the majority were not on the winning side when results came in – as was the case in Scotland. What also remains to be seen, however, and is beyond the scope of this research to address, is whether there is any lasting effect on the faith of these more engaged young voters in our political elite and democratic debate following the most negative, personal and hostile political campaign for many years.

Table 1: Changes in Political Engagement, March – June 2016

Political Engagement	March				June			
	18-30	31-50	51-60	65+	18-30	31-50	51-60	65+
No interest in politics	7%	9%	5%	5%	5%	6%	7%	5%
Low interest in politics	20%	18%	14%	16%	16%	18%	19%	18%
Some interest in politics	33%	33%	30%	30%	35%	31%	27%	32%
High interest in politics	40%	40%	51%	49%	45%	45%	47%	46%
Certain to vote in EU Referendum	48%	56%	69%	74%	71%	75%	81%	84%

Source: Young People and the EU Referendum surveys