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Young People and Electoral Registration in the UK: Examining Local Activities to Maximise Youth Registration

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Using data and written feedback published as part of the UK Cabinet Office's evaluation of 24 UK local authority projects aimed at maximising registration in under-registered groups, this article explores the potential of electoral registration activities when designed to encourage a more electorally active youth. Focusing on six cases from the evaluation—covering examples of intensive canvassing, partnership work and publicity campaigns—it considers the relative effectiveness of traditional duty-based canvass activities versus more informal, less administrative initiatives. In doing so it develops wider thinking about youth engagement and finds that despite the notable contribution of those activities which are less overtly connected to formal politics and electoral administration, much can still be gained from the direct recruitment techniques found in canvassing.

Keywords: Canvassing, Electoral Administration, Electoral Registration, Political Recruitment, Youth Participation, Young Voters

1. Introduction

Young people's involvement in UK politics currently occupies a prominent position in wider discussions of political participation and growing voter abstention. Most recently, the UK Political Studies Association Youth Politics Group report 'Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission' (Mycock and Tonge, 2014) has explored barriers to participation and presented a series of recommendations aimed at encouraging a more active youth constituency in formal politics. Simultaneously, ideas such as lowering of the voting age are rising in salience among political actors (BBC, 2013) as increasing efforts are made to stem the tide of youth turnout decline.

This article examines the effectiveness of youth engagement strategies in electoral registration. Registration is a necessary precursor to voting and often individuals' first direct involvement with electoral politics. What can local authorities (LAs) and valuation joint boards (VJBs)¹—which have a statutory duty in the UK to maintain complete and accurate electoral registers—do to encourage young people's registration? To what extent should they continue to rely primarily on established canvass techniques versus more alternative publicity and partnership-based strategies which are increasingly favoured by third-sector organisations working in this area? Using evaluation evidence from LA pilot projects in England, Wales and Scotland published by the UK Cabinet Office, this article assesses the relative potential of intensive canvassing, partnership work and publicity campaigns (Snelling, 2014). Doing so provides insight into which components might be key in ensuring success in youth-focused registration strategies.

The article begins by discussing young people's political participation, how electoral registration in the UK operates, and how this impacts on the youth electorate. Attention then turns to arguments surrounding young people's political participation preferences. In particular, consideration is given to whether duty-based activities, which might be seen more in canvassing, are inappropriate for young people if they favour a more engaged form of citizenship, or whether there remain benefits to using the better-established canvass methods when registering this group. Using empirical results and feedback from six LAs, the article demonstrates that while publicity- and partnership-style activities might contribute to raising youth registration, direct recruitment inherent within canvassing can be more effective and thus should not be discounted, rather developed.

2. Youth electoral registration

A leading factor driving and sustaining interest in youth participation is young people's consistently low turnout. For the 2015 General Election, estimates have placed only 43% of young people, aged 18–24 years, as having voted versus the 66% average (Ipsos-MORI, 2015). With voting often a habitual act (Plutzer, 2002), fears might arise that if the proportion of young people abstaining continues to rise, generational replacement will see the legitimacy and representativeness of the UK's democracy increasingly questioned.

Electoral registration figures demonstrate further age-based variation in political participation; latest assessments suggest only 51% of 16–17 year olds, 76% of 18–19 year olds and 70% of 20–24 year olds are registered (The Electoral

¹In Scotland, ten Valuation Joint Boards exist as groups of LAs organised to maintain council tax valuation lists and electoral registers.

[Commission, 2014d](#)). This compares to a national rate of 85% and one as high as 95% for those over 65 years. Young people are unquestionably under-registered yet registration remains a necessary stage in becoming electorally active. Without encouraging and supporting young people to register, the impact of many participation strategies, particularly those led by political parties and/or focused on making a voting decision, such as voting advice applications, is limited to only a proportion of young people. Therefore even if not the ultimate goal—in most instances that remains turnout—registration arguably demands attention.

Recent registration changes in Britain moreover may have important implications for young people. Historically, registration was a ‘head of household’ responsibility, annual canvasses conducted by electoral administrators in LAs/VJBs requesting confirmation of resident eligible electors from each and every household. While individual registration was possible through rolling registration forms, under Individual Electoral Registration (IER), introduced in England and Wales in June 2014 and Scotland in September 2014, this has become the only option.

Innovations here could present opportunities yet also obstacles to youth electoral registration. For the first time, a new registration can be completed online. This offers flexibility and freedom to groups in the electorate which may be more likely to regularly use online channels, such as young people. However, there is evidently variation among young people. Those who engage in politics online are typically already politically active and so more likely to be registered while those who do not follow politics on the Internet are less active and so more likely to be unregistered ([Livingstone et al., 2007](#)). Furthermore, the individual responsibility component and new requirements to provide personal identifiers—normally, date of birth and National Insurance number—may present challenges. Whereas previously young people could be registered by a parent or housemate, they must now register individually. They therefore require practical knowledge and understanding of how to register as well as motivation to do so. These challenges posed by IER and young people’s under-registration—and apparent disengagement from formal politics as indicated by low turnout—reaffirm the need for further investigation into how to encourage their registration.

Despite this, registration receives relatively little attention as a research topic in its own right ([Wilks-Heeg, 2012](#)), particularly with regard to specific demographic groups and what drives some to register and others not. More frequently registration is included within wider research on electoral mechanics, administration, performance and quality with work drawing on the electoral ethics and public administration literatures ([Birch, 2008](#); [James, 2013](#); [Clark, 2014](#)). It also features in studies as a determinant of turnout. For example, registration ‘costs’ present barriers for some electoral groups when calculating the benefits of voting ([Highton, 2004](#); [Ansolabehere, 2005](#); [Neiheisel and Burden, 2012](#)).

This is starting to change to some degree. In the UK, [Mycock and Tonge \(2014\)](#) raise the issue of school-based registration activities while research in America has considered the effectiveness of university campus registration drives in registering students ([Ulbig and Waggener, 2011](#)). Equally, the Electoral Commission has undertaken considerable research into the completeness and accuracy of the UK's electoral register. While a principal aim has been assessing the extent of under-registration, testing various methodologies in the process, they have also highlighted barriers to registration, most notably home movement and living in a more urban setting, as well as noting further demographic variation by age and socio-economic status ([The Electoral Commission, 2010, 2011](#)). Registration nevertheless remains relatively under-explored with regard to young people specifically and on the evaluation of engagement strategies. Alongside the transition to IER in which new approaches might be required, it is timely to start extending this body of work.

3. A new youth participation approach?

In the absence of more developed research on youth registration and adopting the view that '[o]ne would suppose [...] that most of the factors that encourage or discourage voting also encourage or discourage registering to vote' ([Kelley et al., 1967](#), p. 361), we can first turn to the youth turnout literature to explore these issues. Youth turnout is not only consistently lower than for any other constituency but also falling at a far faster rate with the gap between young and old now growing ([Sloam, 2012](#)). Thoughts of generational change effects therefore emerge. In particular, a growing body of work internationally suggests today's young people no longer feel bound by duty-based conceptions of citizenship ([Inglehart, 1990](#); [Norris, 1999](#); [Dalton, 2008](#); [Martin, 2012](#)). Instead, each successive generation is thought to be moving away from formal politics to prioritising a more engaged form of citizenship in which they seek to interact with and play a direct role in the political processes which affect them. This is believed to be the result of social modernisation, educational expansion and the subsequent growing confidence in their personal autonomy. Individuals want to exercise greater control over their engagement with politics while questioning the nature of their role in it.

Although these ideas have typically been applied to participation repertoires, they are also potentially of relevance for electoral registration. The idea of simply completing an administrative form as required during a canvass may have little appeal for individuals who, in the mould of the emergent critical citizen ([Norris, 1999](#)), are increasingly tempted to question how, when and why they become politically active. Canvassing is grounded in notions of obligation and requirement. As an almost entirely administrative procedure, it also affords little opportunity for wider political dialogue through which individuals can interact. Young people

may instead feel more motivated to register if they are targeted by campaigns and activities where they can debate ideas and come to their own decision of whether they want to register or not. It shifts their involvement from citizen duty to engaged citizenship (Dalton, 2008). With this in mind, initiatives among third-sector organisations already demonstrate the increasing popularity of this view, for example National Voter Registration Day (Bite the Ballot, 2015), which has used social media channels and events to promote registration among young people.

Alternatively, a life-cycle approach, in which first-time voters are presumed to face greater start-up costs upon entering the electorate, presents another view. While again, life-cycle position may encourage young people to adopt a less duty-bound approach, for example a lack of electoral habits weakening their ties to the electoral process itself, it also implies a perceived 'youth disadvantage'. Here, young people face informational costs in learning how to register and vote. Studies suggest that where such knowledge is lacking, individuals feel ill-prepared to participate and subsequently withdraw from electoral politics (Gallego, 2009). Canvassing could therefore still be useful in supporting young people through the registration process, minimising these costs of becoming informed and accessing a registration form (online or otherwise). Equally, recruitment has a long history of playing an important role in political mobilisation, suggesting simply being asked to participate can often shift the balance towards doing so (Verba *et al.*, 1995). Thus there are questions as to whether LAs/VJBs need to diversify their activities more to appreciate perhaps many young people's preference for more informal methods of engagement which are less bureaucratic or hierarchical, or whether they can continue to focus primarily on canvass-based activity which may support young people through minimising practical obstacles and inviting them into the political arena.

4. Registration activities

Registration itself will ultimately always be in part a formal process—legislation dictates the procedure and information required of electors. The methods through which it is encouraged, however, can vary in closeness, both perceived and real, to traditional electoral administration and political processes. Using data published by the UK Cabinet Office in its Maximising Registration Fund evaluation (Snelling, 2014), this article assesses the potential effectiveness of registration activities aimed at young people across three featured methods pursued by the funded LAs: intensive canvassing, partnership work and publicity campaigns.

Given the small N and non-random nature of the evaluation sample, hypothesis testing is not feasible. Findings are clearly not generalizable, and the results need to be assessed with this caveat in mind. It is nonetheless possible to consider the

potential of contrasting approaches to youth political engagement through these pilots, specifically the effectiveness of formal versus informal engagement strategies. To what extent are youth registration activities more successful, if at all, when they move away from electoral services' established channels?

The first approach, realised through intensive canvassing, tests a view that young people are still best targeted through traditional recruitment methods well-established in LA/VJB work and believed to be effective for all age groups. It offers an extension of the UK's annual household canvass so is closely related to LAs' and VJBs' statutory duties. It differs primarily in its provision of targeted information for specific under-registered groups, for example canvassers trained in atypical registration eligibility as seen in students (with home- and term-time addresses) and attainees (aged 16–17 years turning 18 during the life of the electoral register). Additionally, it involves LAs/VJBs making contacts and visits beyond their statutory requirements as extra to those already made during the household canvass.

Conversely, publicity and partnership activities adopt a logic that young people today are more responsive to activities perceived as beyond the realm of formal electoral politics and administration and which permit greater interaction and engagement opportunities. Examples of partnership work test an idea that engaging young people requires incorporating registration into non-political channels with which they already interact, for instance targeting young people through school programmes and working with youth services. Publicity campaigns present large-scale communications activities utilising a range of media to raise awareness and build interest and momentum around key registration (and political) messages. While clear differences exist between these latter two approaches, if successful both would support views that under IER increasing emphasis should be placed on developing and strengthening more informal engagement strategies for young people.

5. Methods and data

The data are drawn from evaluation reporting provided by 24 LA projects to the UK Cabinet Office. This followed their completion of funded activities designed to maximise registration among under-registered groups, including social renters, private renters and young people. Activities were conducted between October 2013 and February/March 2014² in England, Wales and Scotland. Of these, 14 focused some of their activity on young people (Snelling, 2014).

Using standardised forms, written feedback was collected for how activities were planned, designed and delivered, reflecting on what went well and where

²End dates coinciding with electoral register publication: England (17 February 2014), Scotland and Wales (10 March 2014).

improvements could be made. LAs also reported quantitative data including financial costs and registration numbers as requested, although variability existed in how these were recorded. From subsequent reports and additional data published online in the evaluation annexes,³ the following analysis reviews in more detail the potential impact of activities aimed at young people. The reported ‘success’ measure refers to the number of new registrations achieved through the activity as a proportion of the total target group of unregistered potential electors in the LA area:

$$\text{Success rate (\%)} = \left(\frac{\text{number of new youth registrations during activity}}{\text{total unregistered youth population}} \right) \times 100.$$

The new registrations were recorded by LAs themselves. While they could not control for all other influences likely to affect registration decisions, in many cases we can be fairly confident that the registration was in large part influenced by the funded activity. For instance, forms for funded initiatives utilised unique identifiers to distinguish them from registration forms being distributed within the simultaneous household canvass. Recording did, however, vary across the LAs and as such this article can provide only an indication of likely potential, the evaluation data not being wholly comparable across cases. The data correspond to all registrations achieved in the target group, attributable to the activity, between receipt of funding in the autumn of 2013 and publication of the new electoral registers on 17 February 2014 (England) or 10 March 2014 (Wales and Scotland).

For this article, two youth cases within each activity type have been selected for examination ($n = 6$). This decision to limit the sample was taken partly due to apparent instances of missing and/or estimated data which are less easily compared. Additionally, in some cases disaggregation between electoral groups so as to isolate young people is unavailable. Cases have subsequently been chosen based on the most complete youth data. Obviously this restricts possibilities to generalise the findings to other LAs/VJBs. Equally the sample was self-selected, being based on applications and the awarding of funding through a competitive process. It is undoubtedly possible that LAs/VJBs in receipt of funding—and thus included in the sample—had more experience in this area prior to commencing work and/or groups identified as especially under-registered, so contributing to any measured success. However, the analysis can start to assess the *potential* of the different engagement approaches and thoughts about their suitability for young people.

The six cases targeted a range of groups within the overarching category of ‘young people’. ‘Young people’ were variously defined to include attainers (16–17 year olds),

³<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/maximising-electoral-registration-evaluation-of-local-activities>.

18–24 year olds and students (predominantly undergraduate student communities). In some cases, combinations of these groups were targeted. For our purposes, these three electoral groups are classed collectively as ‘young people’ and studied together.

Clearly, there is some loss of standardisation. Young people are not a homogeneous group, and the relative effectiveness of interventions will likely vary according to the barriers faced by different youth constituencies. Students—of whom 72% are assumed to be registered in England and Wales, 64% in Scotland⁴ ([The Electoral Commission, 2014a](#))—already vary from attainers in registration (51%) and may also vary in propensity for political participation. Nevertheless, each group arguably experiences factors associated with both higher and lower participation potential. Attainers more often than not live at home so are susceptible to parental influence which can encourage turnout ([Bhatti and Hansen, 2012](#)), yet they are perhaps also unaware of their eligibility to register before they are 18 years. Students, contrastingly, may be more aware of voting rights and, through their university experiences, knowledgeable and interested in politics ([Henn and Foard, 2014](#)). However, they are often more residentially mobile which is negatively associated with registration ([Highton, 2000](#)).

Given the small sample size and exploratory nature of this analysis, it is appropriate to group young people together since we might also assume some similarities. They are all likely to be lacking in political and registration experience given their age, may share common interests such as education funding and employment opportunities ([White et al., 2000](#), pp. 6–10) and importantly for this research be more inclined to favour alternative political participation approaches ([Quintelier, 2007](#); [Martin, 2012](#)). While education is often linked to the adoption of alternative political values, there appears to be some consensus in the literature that given increases in absolute education young people are increasingly likely to respond more positively to activities which are less overtly connected to the processes and mechanics of formal politics ([O’Toole et al., 2003](#); [Dalton, 2008](#); [Martin, 2012](#)).

6. Results

Figure 1 presents the average success rate achieved by the LAs during the period for each activity type, judged against the overall findings from the Cabinet Office’s original evaluation. All three had some positive impact on youth registration rates, intensive canvassing being the most successful in securing new registrations. On average 28% of the young people targeted by the activities registered as a result. Publicity and partnership activities registered just 19 and 10% of their target

⁴Scottish registration figures for students are likely now to be higher, registration as a whole for Scotland rising to its highest ever figure and increasing by 6.7% from the European Parliament elections of May 2014 prior to the referendum on Scottish independence ([The Electoral Commission, 2014c](#)).

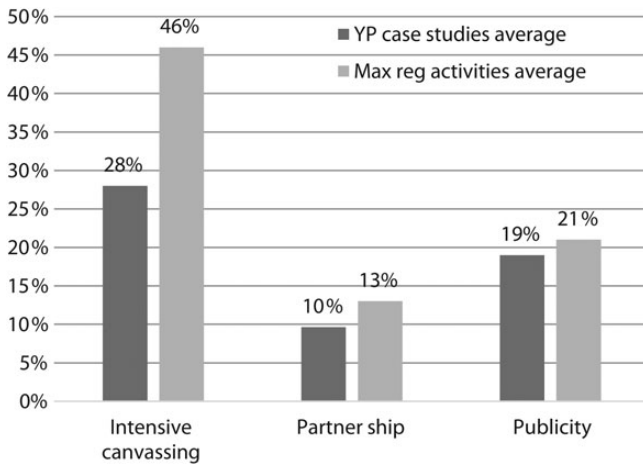


Figure 1. Maximising registration activities: success rates by activity type.

electors. The initial implication is that contrary to views that young people may be better engaged through less overtly political processes and put off by duty-based requirements inherent in canvassing, the possibilities it offers through direct recruitment may still be more effective in securing a new registration.

The single most successful activity of the six cases was nevertheless publicity-based (Welsh county council), registering 2720 previously unregistered young people, 35% of their target group (Table 1). Interestingly this pilot targeted various young people suggesting that it was not necessarily the result of working with one particular youth demographic more so than another. Suggestions are that publicity campaigns may also offer an incentive to register. Clearly, however, as a single case this may not be reflective of publicity campaigns’ potential impact elsewhere. For instance, the second publicity activity secured only 3% of the registrations needed to achieve a 100% youth registration rate. It is also telling that one of the most effective components of the Welsh county council’s activity was a ‘student drop’ in which publicity materials were mailed out to student properties. While still being publicity-oriented and not simply an extension of the annual household canvass this undoubtedly draws on ideas of direct recruitment through canvass-style communications. It resulted in 817 new registered electors, just under a third of the LA’s total registrations. Removing this elements from the publicity campaign would see its success rate (24%) falling below the intensive canvass average. Moreover, another strand of activity used direct email communication through university email accounts which again shares similarities with canvass-style activity.

Partnership activities were least successful, although additional figures provided by both suggest these may have more potential than first indicated. Each LA reported additional registrations which were not classified as ‘new’, in that the

Table 1 Maximising youth registration project descriptions and successes

Activity type	LA descriptor	Target group(s) (as defined by LA)	Activity description	Number of registrations during activity period	Success rate (new youth registrations as proportion of target population)	Cost per registration
Intensive canvassing	A borough council in the South East of England	Students	Student canvassers visiting known student accommodation (with some promotion at university freshers' fair).	753	25%	£9.15
	A metropolitan council in the North East of England	Attainers	Personalised letters to parents/guardians (identified by education data) with two reminders and a third letter directly to attainer. Mail-out included informative colour flyer.	149	31%	£16:05
Partnership	A metropolitan council in Yorkshire and Humber	Attainers	Working in partnership with youth service to deliver detailed discussion and interactive sessions with attainers through existing youth service channels.	1188	11%	£5.06
	A city council in the East Midlands	Young people	Engagement and outreach activity with Young People's Council supported by Youth Services. Outreach canvassing events in schools, colleges, town centres and youth service activities. Young People's Council featured on local radio and promotional material displayed across council services, e.g. leisure centres, and libraries.	1054	8%	£18.80

Publicity	A county council in Wales	Students, young people, attainers	Public awareness campaign through social media, direct communications (e.g. email), poster competition, and a 'student drop' mail-out exercise for disseminating promotional materials.	2720	35%	£0.90
	A cross-LA project, led by a city council in the South of England	Young people	Digital marketing campaign promoted through bus advertising, social media and mobile app and video advertising. Linked to bespoke website with focus on a viral campaign. Supported with live sign-up events.	719	3%	£140.06

Source: [Snelling \(2014\)](#).

individuals were already registered and so not in the target group. If we include these the average success rate for partnership work rises to 18%, almost matching the success of publicity campaigns.⁵ While for the sake of comparison these cannot be included in the final reported figures, not being new registrations, they arguably remain notable. In the feedback from these LAs, it was assumed that in many instances these registration forms were completed by young people unaware they were already registered, hence a duplicate registration (Snelling, 2014, p. 23). They were most likely registered through the annual canvass by parents and/or guardians. Under IER they will now register individually, the results suggesting partnership activity may still contribute to registration efforts, even if to a lesser extent than intensive canvassing.

When compared with the full maximising registration evaluation (Figure 1), it is noteworthy that all three activity types were more successful in registering older under-registered groups than young people. While similar patterns are observed—intensive canvassing most successful and partnership least—the overall success rate in the full evaluation was 32% (Snelling, 2014). In the six cases explored here, the average was just 19%. This is consistent with findings in youth participation research where young people are some of the most difficult individuals to mobilise in formal politics, even with funded and targeted interventions.

For example, the success rate for intensive canvassing activities (where data were available) was 18 percentage points higher in the original evaluation (thirteen LAs) than the average calculated for the two youth-focused canvasses when they are studied alone. The method was instead particularly successful registering social and private renters at an average rate of 51% ($n = 7$). Evidently these demographic groups might include young people and yet the contrasting results imply the effectiveness of intensive canvassing varies across potential constituencies, any hesitation about or obstacles to registration perhaps being different and therefore requiring different interventions. Among young people, intensive canvassing does not appear to realise its full registration raising potential. Moreover, variations in success for the activity types were less pronounced for young people. Even though canvassing appears consistently more successful than the other activities, it does not stand out to the same extent as in the wider electorate evaluation where its success is 25 and 33 percentage points higher than publicity and partnership. For young people, the distances are just 9 and 18 points.

Additional financial information—cost per registration (Table 1)—equally does not favour one method above another. Where successfully implemented, indications are that partnership and publicity activities can be more cost-effective in

⁵Metropolitan council in Yorkshire and Humber, a further 816 youth registrations (total = 18.70%); City council in East Midlands, a further 1442 youth registrations (total = 18.06%).

registering young people than intensive canvassing.⁶ Start-up costs may be high in the production of new resources and materials yet this is perhaps offset against canvassing's more ongoing staff costs relating to additional visits canvassers are required to make.

7. Discussion

Despite focusing on only six cases, the results suggest that intensive canvassing has the most potential for securing new youth registrations. Even if success rates are lower than when it is used to target other under-registered groups, it performs much better than publicity and partnership. Beyond it being arguably methodologically easier to record registrations in canvass-based projects—registration forms can be attached directly to the activity which is not always possible in publicity campaigns—so perhaps inflating the recorded successes, written feedback alludes to why the more traditional intensive canvassing approach might have enjoyed relatively more success.

7.1 Direct recruitment

Feedback suggests that recruitment is key for engaging young people. This is perhaps unsurprising. Ideas of recruitment have been forwarded by Verba *et al.*'s civic voluntarism hypothesis and are found to have large, significant, and positive effects on voter turnout (1995). Put simply, people participate when they are asked to. While typically such research has concentrated primarily on social network interactions and political party campaigning, this thinking can be extended to these targeted registration activities.

For example, a key feature of intensive canvassing is its ability to target potential electors directly. Data matching was utilised to identify non-registered individuals and their home residence, allowing LAs to reach out to potential electors rather than waiting for electors to seek out the registration process. In the two youth examples, intelligence techniques included identifying properties through local education department data in which unregistered attainers were resident as well as working with universities and private landlords to identify areas of known student accommodation (Snelling, 2014).

Not only does this support efficiency by targeting only the unregistered rather than blanket publicity coverage, it also presents opportunities for personalised communication. Here this included named letters, a break from traditional 'Dear Occupier' style contacts, with data matching identifying specific individuals.

⁶The high cost per registration for the cross-LA project is likely influenced by issues encountered when recording registrations and the low 'official' success rate.

It also ensured tailored messages and delivery. For instance, one LA targeted parents alongside attainers and provided additional attainer-specific information on registration eligibility. This meant encouraging young electors directly but also indirectly through additional social pressures exerted by family members, something which research has consistently shown to have a significant influence on young people (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2012; Neundorf *et al.*, 2012). The second utilised student-specific canvassers equipped with information on term-time and home-time registration eligibility. While detailed comment on the impact of these specific initiatives is not provided in the evaluation, suggestions from the wider feedback of the 24 LAs are that without these elements of personalisation and tailoring, registration activities will under-perform and do under-perform for under-registered groups during the annual household canvass. This is supported by voter turnout research which has shown direct face-to-face, personal and tailored recruitment to be one of the most important methods for ensuring an individual goes to the polls (Gerber and Green, 2000). Personal communications directly to their door, either face-to-face or through mail-outs, are hard to ignore or dismiss. The results here imply this can be true for young and old alike, although to a lesser extent among young people.

Comparatively, it is harder to identify and recruit particular individuals through publicity campaigns. Ultimately they rely on their being acknowledged, absorbed and engaged with by an individual who is reached while they cannot guarantee a specified audience. As such they are less recruitment and more awareness raising, and only for those individuals who come into contact with them, more often than not those who are already politically active. They may perhaps be more effective in a reinforcing capacity when working alongside more direct interventions, for instance the Electoral Commission publicity drives ahead of elections which can support any additional canvass activities run by LAs/VJBs as well as those of political parties during this period.

To be successful, publicity campaigns must also engage a larger number of people than an intensive canvass generally would. Regular 'pushes' are required to maximise the number of unregistered individuals reached. The potential for inefficiencies is perhaps therefore higher. Notably the cross-LA publicity project recorded a cost-per-registration of £140.06, the highest of any LA in the entire evaluation (Snelling, 2014). While the remaining publicity activity costs only £0.90 per registration suggesting publicity need not be so expensive, as discussed above, the Welsh county council benefited from adopting elements more akin with direct recruitment.

Thinking about new methods of engagement and youth channels of communication, some are also relatively inexpensive, for example online social media. This is increasingly considered a route into youth audiences, despite contrasting views on effectiveness here (Baumgartner and Morris, 2010). However, there was also little successful engagement with social media reported by the publicity campaigns:

Social media does not make the topic of registering to vote any more appealing. Direct contact with URGs [Under-registered groups] elicits the best response, be that direct mail or direct email.⁷ (Welsh County Council)

Although we could drive traffic to the site [...] the barriers to them actually registering remain significant and they would not register on the site without face to face persuasion. (Cross-LA Project)

Suggestions are that while digital and promotional activity could generate interest and awareness among young people, it is not necessarily successful in reaching the unregistered and politically disengaged, nor in converting interest into new registrations. The cross-LA publicity campaign, for example, secured only 719 registrations despite 17,200 unique visits to its website. Thus publicity campaigns which are overly reliant on digital and social media are at risk of promoting more passive engagement, which does not necessarily lead to active participation by under-participative individuals. They could, however, start to play more of a role with the introduction of online registration which can link.

Partnership activities similarly found it was easier to secure registrations where young people could be directly targeted. For example, attainers reached and contacted by working with schools and colleges recorded higher registration rates than other young people who, being over 18 years, tend to be more dispersed. Partnership activities require targeted young people to be already actively involved and responsive to the organisations and groups with which the LA chooses to partner. Without this, the activity can only reach so many. This is particularly true for those not in education, employment or training. By definition, these young people do not interact with mainstream organisations and groups making it hard to reach out to them through methods which will not involve some form of residence-based data matching and intensive canvassing. For example, in the East Midlands city council, 43% of previously unregistered attainers were registered through their partnership activities versus just 3% of 18–24 year olds. As they reported:

Attainers are a suitable group for targeted activities as there are readily identifiable channels to engage with them [...] 18–24 yr [sic] olds are a harder group to engage with as there are fewer readily identifiable channels.

7.2 Registration support

Another important theme is that while canvass activities are directly linked to the act of registering and provide opportunities for detailed guidance and assistance—

⁷All LA quotations taken from Cabinet Office evaluation report and via author's being granted access to original feedback documents.

given it is essentially an administrative method—publicity and partnership activities can struggle to provide necessary support for completing a registration. In the East Midlands city council, for example, 199 18–24 year olds did not correctly complete their registration forms. This led the LA to recommend the provision of clearer instructions and guidelines. Publicity campaigns can similarly require young people to register completely by themselves, for example having seen a poster on a billboard or after reading a social media message. These more informal activities place greater onus on the individual to navigate the registration process. Only with more interactive elements were the publicity and partnership activities found to deliver more positive results, where registration could be explained and overseen. The cross-LA project used tablet technology, for example, to share their campaign messages while also allowing staff to help young people register during their outreach events. Informational participation costs can therefore be significant and any strategy designed to increase registration will likely achieve more success where it can mitigate young people’s inexperience in formal electoral processes.

7.3 *Business as usual*

A further practical advantage associated with intensive canvassing is its being an extension of activities already undertaken by electoral services staff. Within the annual monitoring process of the Electoral Commission’s Performance Standards for Electoral Registration Officers, LAs/VJBs are expected to demonstrate their working towards as complete and accurate an electoral register as possible. However, while this means increasing under-registered groups’ registration rates, the three standards relating to this objective and against which they are assessed are principally related to canvass-style activity: (i), using information sources to identify potential electors; (ii), maintaining the property database; and (iii), house-to-house enquiries ([The Electoral Commission, 2014b](#)). Thus using data matching techniques to identify missing electors (and confirm existing electors) and making at least one visit to a non-responding property are activities LAs/VJBs are already required to conduct. Hence they possess existing experience and resources applicable to intensive canvassing. Staff are already practised in writing standard registration materials for mail-outs while canvassers are trained in the art of completing registration forms with disengaged and/or uninformed individuals on the doorstep. As explained:

Similar schemes have been carried out in the past and we felt we could build on that experience and enhance the anticipated results.

(North East Metropolitan Council)

Staff within the team who had previous experience of the difficulty of registering students were required. (South East Borough Council)

The partnership and publicity activities contrastingly required additional staff, time and resources which impacted on the speed at which delivery could start so reducing the activity period. While not entirely new, the Electoral Commission, for example, having supported a number of third-sector organisations to deliver innovative registration activities in partnership ([The Electoral Commission, 2008](#)), these activities exist outwith the day-to-day administration of the annual canvass for LAs/VJBs. Responses from partnership activities, for example, referred to detailed planning meetings with relevant partners to build relationships previously not in place and to establish roles within the activities. Members of staff from partner organisations or departments also required elections training before being able to deliver activities. Similarly, LAs running publicity campaigns reported additional training needs, for instance in social media, as well as having to work with third parties to produce promotional materials and websites where their own capacity was limited. It was arguably more difficult for these activities to deliver similar returns to intensive canvass activities in the relatively short delivery period. We must recognise the possibility that while not delivering 'quick wins', these activities may have longer-term potential. However, it also brings into question whether maximising registration activities which extend beyond canvass-based initiatives should be the responsibility of LAs/VJBs or whether third sector and civil society organisations, such as youth parliaments, may be better placed to take this on in a complementary role.

7.4 Lessons from publicity and partnership

Intensive canvassing evidently enjoyed the most success of all the activity types yet these did under-perform for young people when compared with their use in older electoral groups. Just because intensive canvassing is akin to existing work does not mean more attention should not be paid to improving how it is delivered for different groups. The success of the Welsh county council especially shows how canvass-style methods can be developed by using publicity techniques and situating mail-outs within a wider registration campaign. Therefore, while suggesting that publicity and partnership activities should look to include opportunities for more direct and targeted recruitment and provide greater practical registration support there are also lessons to be learnt for intensive canvassing.

Where publicity and partnership activities used more face-to-face elements, there were more opportunities to engage in debates, focus on the issues particular groups of young people were interested in and allow for greater interaction between electoral services and potential electors. As the cross-LA campaign reported, politics, whatever the channel taken to promote it, is a negative word for many young people and, as such, face-to-face activity provides an opportunity to counter these opinions.

Barriers to registration were quite politically sophisticated [...] We found that events worked well as you could provide an argument as to why to vote as there were often barriers to overcome. (Cross-LA Project)

This demonstrates the importance for young people today of being able to discuss political issues and make up their own minds as to whether they wish to register. The Cross-LA project, for example, ran a campaign which allowed young people to share their political concerns through uploading photographs holding their political messages on to a website. This enabled connections to be made between registration and issues affecting young people. Intensive canvassing, even where targeted information was produced, still rests on a concept of civic obligation and administrative requirements. It may be more successful for young people where it attempts greater dialogue with potential electors.

Given the pursuit of largely untried methods and activities, both publicity and partnership LAs described conducting considerable market research and consultation. While reducing the time available for delivery within the confines of the Maximising Registration Fund period, this was considered an important and beneficial stage in ensuring activities and materials were relevant, attractive and comprehensible to young people:

Focus groups were held with 18–24 year-olds before and during the design of the microsite and the campaign strategy to ensure both appealed to our chosen URG. (Cross-LA Project)

Having young people themselves design and front the campaign was successful [...] This very much made it a campaign designed and delivered by young people, for young people. (East Midlands City Council)

Intensive canvassing could therefore benefit from more research into the development of the materials to be used when it is carried out. This might include designing youth-specific registration forms which were seen in three of the non-canvassing cases and included brighter colours and altered language designed to simplify the process. Presently there is no option available to LAs/VJBs to change the design and language of the online registration channel for IER, but it may be that canvassing could be conducted through tablet technology, as was seen in the cross-LA project to improve the user experience. Paper forms are still available so could also be adapted to have a youth-specific option when canvassing these groups. Equally, within intensive canvass mail-outs, the experiences of the Welsh county council suggest that it might be beneficial to include alongside the standard registration forms and personalised letter copies of promotional posters designed from the market research and information on competitions connected to the completion of each registration form.

Another option may be to contact young people not through their postal address—young people often being residentially mobile—but through their email address, something which for students can be accessed through negotiating and working with universities. Data matching to target unregistered young people may also be extended with support from partners, it already being seen in one intensive canvass LA working with a university to identify student accommodation. This could extend to working with local colleges, community centres and housing associations for other youth groups.

Finally, young people could even be involved in carrying out an intensive canvass themselves. In the East Midlands city council, peer-led activities were considered one of the biggest successes of their pilot initiative. Students, for example, could therefore canvass halls of residence rather than existing canvassers who may be much older and less able to relate to young people's questions and concerns about registering and voting. This would also present greater potential for situating registration within young people's political discussions.

8. Conclusion

The evaluation evidence is to some extent inconclusive as to which strategy is best for encouraging young people's registration. There remain benefits in more traditional canvass-based methods, even if young people are seemingly moving away from more duty-bound notions of citizenship. This is particularly due to its ability to directly recruit and support young people through the registration process. It appears not enough to focus only on informing young people about the reasons to register; individuals must be asked to do so directly, recruitment still a powerful political mobiliser and informational costs a potential barrier. Given LAs/VJBs already possess skills and expertise in administering canvassing, it would equally be difficult to move away entirely from these established practices which are also required by law. However, intensive canvassing was not an overwhelming success, especially against the comparatively more successful results it obtained for non-youth groups, nor is it especially more cost-effective for young people. Simultaneously, partnership and publicity activities demonstrated some successes, providing lessons for improving canvass activities, for example, market research to tailor activities and resources, peer-led activities and locating registration within wider political discussions. Where funding is available, elements of the formal and informal might therefore be better combined when devising registration activities.

Further research is nevertheless needed to track the longer-term impact of publicity and partnership activities. Shifting from purely canvass-based activities to the more innovative engagement strategies undoubtedly takes time yet it is possible that over a longer period they may yet encourage more young electors to join the

register while requiring less manpower than year-on-year, purely canvass-based activities. Moreover, online registration may present more opportunities for these activities, something only introduced following the completion of the activities studied here. The research is clearly also based on a limited evidence base. It makes initial suggestions as to the potential of the different approaches, but a larger randomly selected sample could establish the likelihood whether results could be replicated elsewhere. Equally, more experimental methods using control groups within LAs/VJBs would help to strengthen claims about activity impact and their specific elements.

What can be seen, however, is that LAs/VJBs will still likely find registering young people a difficult task, even with targeted and funded interventions. If they are going to succeed, this initial analysis suggests they will need to draw together elements of all three activities and combine the strengths of each to devise a holistic approach to youth electoral registration. Thus, there is a need for continued funding in this area within any national-level initiative aimed at supporting local-level democratic engagement. Where there is consensus across the six activities, it is in direct recruitment being a crucial component of any strategy and as such, where funding is minimal, the analysis here would recommend intensive canvassing where resources already exist and direct recruitment is possible, while trying to develop this using some of the practices more closely associated with publicity and partnership work.

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