

Young voters and their “never Tory” mindset: the making of a Labour generation?

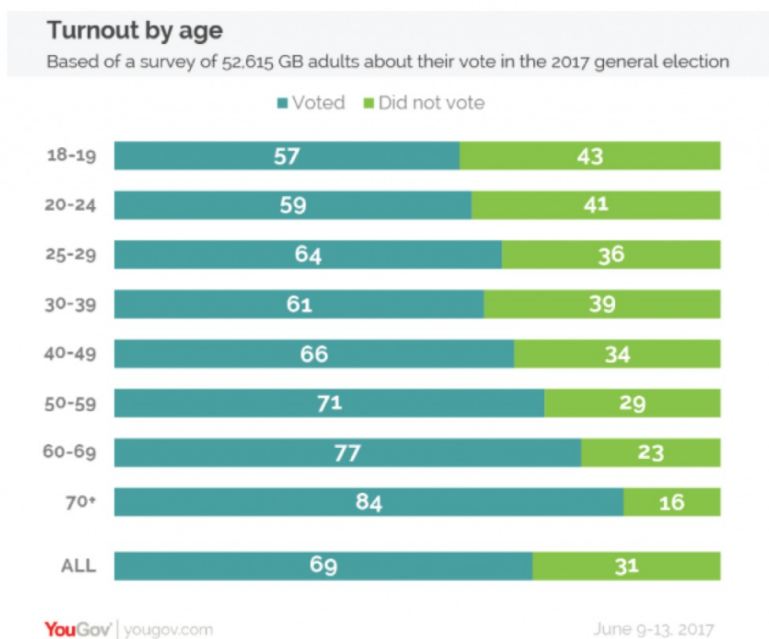


The last general election brought a number of new voters into the electorate, especially younger ones who having voted for the first time, are more likely to turn out in future contests. [Anja Neundorf](#) and [Thomas J. Scott](#) argue that although Labour cannot take their support for granted, for many of them the Conservative option is permanently off the menu.

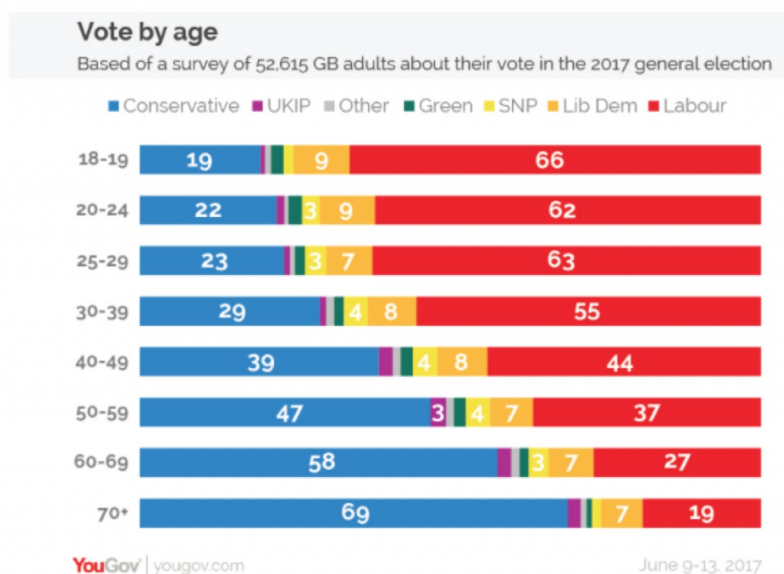
Beyond the tallying of votes, elections serve as important events which heighten the importance of politics in the minds of many citizens. For young people, the event of their first election can leave behind an enduring mark on their future voting behaviour. Given the apparent increased mobilisation and massive Labour support among young voters, we speculate here about what to expect from this generation in future elections.

The 2017 election and young voters: a recap

Who gets mobilised by specific elections varies considerably. Emerging polling data from the 2017 general election paints a picture that [a segment of young voters](#) were very much motivated by Jeremy Corbyn’s anti-austerity message. Estimates of turnout for 18-24 year olds varies between 58% ([YouGov](#)) and 73% ([Ashcroft](#)), far surpassing the 40% that became the norm from 2001-2015.



The second striking preliminary result of the 2017 election is the distribution of votes for different age groups. [According to YouGov](#), about 64% of 18-29 year olds voted for Labour and just 1 in 5 voted Tory. [In 2015](#), the split between the two main parties was 36% versus 32% in favour of Labour among this age group. Due to cheap membership fees and an anti-austerity message that resonated with students, Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party brought many into the political fold and to the polls for the first time. Seeing a surge of young voters will have consequences for the voting behaviour of this generation in future elections.



Loosing the youth: the consequences

The stark difference in support for Labour over the Tories in 2017 will serve to magnify the folly of the Prime Minister’s decision to call an early election – an election than could actually mark the making of a new Labour generation, or at the very least of an anti-Tory generation.

Our [own work](#) in the field of voting behaviour suggests the election will serve as a formative event for younger voters. In both the [United States](#) and the [United Kingdom](#), research suggests that voting is habitual. Work by political scientist [David Cutts and his colleagues](#) theorizes that once people realise how easy it is to get to the polls and cast a ballot, psychological barriers to voting decline dramatically. Voters with records of activity also are easier to mobilise via contact in subsequent campaigns, and this may be particularly true for Labour whose direct membership numbers continue to grow. Once an individual makes the choice to go to the ballot box, they are more likely to do the same in future elections.

Will the youth remain loyal to Labour?

Churchill famously said that “If you’re not a liberal when you’re 25, you have no heart. If you’re not a conservative by the time you’re 35, you have no brain.” Voters who enter the electorate at different ages bring to the ballot box different concerns and this affects the menu of parties they are willing to consider. A student who votes at 18 may have university tuition rates first on their mind and would consider voting for Labour and the Greens. A first time homeowner who is 36 may favour the Tories and fear Labour. The issues citizens feel to be important change over the course of the life cycle, but identification and non-identification persists much as the players on a football team change but fans’ loyalty to the team does not.



Traditionally, researchers view partisan identification as an affective orientation to a particular party, but [our research](#) shows that many Britons move into and away from identification with a party. Empirical results from our research using data from the British Household Panel Study from the early 1990s to early 2000s shows that fewer than half of all people who said they supported Labour at one point in time did so *every* time they were asked the party support question. Many moved in and out of having an affinity for the Labour Party but the most common temporary move away from Labour in this group was to *no identification at all*.

What we do not witness is many of these floating Labour supporters moving towards any type of support for the Conservative Party. We call this “[bounded partisanship](#)”. In short, people are more likely to be stable in telling survey researchers which political party they will *never* support than consistent supporters of a particular political party.

An outlook

Although it is an oversimplification to frame the 2017 General Election as [solely a contest between the young and old](#), Theresa May and her campaign team badly underestimated the appeal of Jeremy Corbyn’s message to young voters. Labour seemed to have a leader who proved to have a passion and talent for mobilizing the young. The gamble the Prime Minister made in calling an early election will likely have ramifications for the Conservative Party that go well beyond the loss of their parliamentary majority.

The implications of the research cited above suggests that the action likely brought a number of voters into the electorate. Not only are more 18-24 year olds coming into the electorate than ever before, our work also suggests that many are doing so with a “never Tory” mindset. These voters may move to new parties or to non-identification, which means that Labour cannot take their support for granted, but for most, the Conservative option is permanently off the menu.

About the Authors



[Anja Neundorf](#) is Associate Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of Nottingham.



[Thomas J. Scotto](#) is Head of the School of Government and Politics at the University of Strathclyde.

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