

First-Time Voting in the UK 1997 General Election

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ABSTRACT: It is often assumed that "young people" are a homogenous group, and that the current generation of young people are politically disengaged, or, at best, only interested in issue politics. The Q study reported here demonstrated that both of these assumptions are false. The sorts provided by first-time voters produced seven highly divergent factors, demonstrating a wide range of viewpoints on politics, the political process and voting itself.

Disaffected Youth?

In the UK there are two main political parties: Labor (broadly left-wing in policies) and Conservative (broadly right-wing)—with a relatively small number of much smaller parties including the Liberal Democrats, Scottish and Welsh Nationalists, and several parties from Northern Ireland. Unlike the rest of Europe (where elections use systems of proportional representation) UK national elections are based upon a "first-past-the-post" system. This almost always leads to one of the two main parties gaining an outright majority, and forming the government of the day.

In the 1997 UK general election, the vast majority of those voting for the first time could not remember any party in government other than the Conservatives. When Margaret Thatcher entered Downing Street for the first time in June 1979, the oldest of these new first-time

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voters were only four or five years old. Not surprisingly, this factor was played out by the media, as is shown in an interview with the Spice Girls featured in *The Spectator* (Sebag-Montefiore, 1996), one of the best-known "up-market" weekly magazines covering politics in the UK. Television and news programs focused on the activities of another media-friendly individual, the eco-warrior Swampy. Swampy and his group of environmental activists came to fame in a protest over a road-building program which was planned to pass through a previously untouched part of the English countryside. Eschewing traditional politics for direct action, the group built and inhabited tunnels and tree-houses on the site of the new road and, while their actions did not ultimately stop the destruction, they imposed considerable delays and costs. The overall impression that was generated by all this media attention was that young people were disillusioned with conventional party politics, and instead took on issues and methods of expression outside the system. Indeed, a specific charity, *Rock the Vote*, was created to counter the perceived trend for young people to become "increasingly disenchanted with the process of parliamentary democracy" (Rock the Vote, 1996).

However, figures from Butler and Kavanagh's (1992) study of the 1992 General Election (when the Conservatives won, but with a much decreased majority) present a more complex picture. While they found that only 14% of the 18-24 year-olds in their study voted, this was not as striking as the mere 13% of 35-54 year-olds who did. In addition, among 18-24 year-olds the swing against the Conservatives was much less—0.5%—than it was in the other three age groups studied (between 1.5% and 3.5%).

Three models have been suggested to explain why young people vote the way they do. The first proposes a "life-cycle" effect (Denver, 1989) in which people tend to be more idealistic when they are young but, as they acquire responsibilities, they become more cautious. This model is mostly supported by surveys from the 1950s and 60s, which found that younger people were more likely to vote Labor and older people to vote Conservative. However, Crewe (1985, 1987) presents figures from the elections of 1979, 1983 and 1987 which show that a majority of first-time voters voted Conservative. This suggests an alternative, second "political cohorts" model (Denver, 1989) in which voting reflects not age but the period in which individuals first experience politics and decisive political events. The third model proposes that it is parental opinion which influences young people's voting choice (Butler and Stokes, 1969). It seems credible that young

people will be strongly influenced by those from whom they first learned about political issues. Yet a survey by Rose and McAllister (1990) of the 1987 election found that 28% of the electorate did not know the political allegiance of their parent(s), and that four out of seven voters said they voted differently from their parents. Given the extensive use of Q methodology in the field of political science (see, for example, Brown, 1980; Dryzek, 1990) it offers an ideal means to examine these alternative explanations of young people's views of the political process in general, and of voting in particular.

Method

Participants

Thirty four young people (aged between 18 and 23 years—the age cohort of first-time voters) took part in the study. Sixteen were young women, eighteen young men. Although the participants included a high proportion of high school and higher education students, also included were those working full-time, the self-employed, and the unemployed. Attention was also given to reflecting the multiple possible home environments of this age group: participants included those living with parents/family, those living in rented accommodation, either college, privately rented or YMCA, and those buying their own homes.

Materials

The Q set was constructed on the basis of a review of academic and political party literature. Material was obtained from the three main UK political parties (the Conservative Party, the Labor Party, and the Liberal Democrats) as well as from "minority" and "alternative" political groups. Broadcasting material was also reviewed; in particular, news broadcasts as the election approached. In addition, 13 semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with people expected to express a wide variety of opinions on politics and voting; a group interview was carried out with five high school students; and, a discussion forum was initiated on the Internet.

Stainton Rogers *et al.* (1995) have found that participants find it easiest to carry out a Q sort when they are divided into three discursive domains: representational propositions about what things are like; theoretic propositions about why things are the way they are; and, policy-directed propositions about what should be done about some-

thing. A Q sort which contains only one of these types of statement "makes more sense" to the person carrying out the sort (Stainton Roger *et al.*, 1995). In consequence, the Q sort for this study contained only descriptive, representational statements (e.g. "It frustrates me that people can be politically apathetic"). Statements about why this should be the case (e.g. "People are politically apathetic because they aren't given information about the issues") or what should be done (e.g. "Teaching political awareness should be part of the school curriculum") appeared frequently throughout the concourse, but were rejected as beyond the scope of the current study. The resulting Q sort consisted of 67 items (see Appendix), structured to cover the following areas which had been identified during the concourse analysis as key sources of debate:

- To what extent do young people prefer direct action and single issue groups as methods of political expression—compared with traditional "party politics?"
- How are young people's views influenced by the views of their parents and wider family?
- What part do morality and religion play in forming young people's political views?
- To what extent can young people be viewed as a homogeneous group?
- Do young people see it as time for a change of government (particularly considering that members of this age group would be very unlikely to remember another party in government)?
- Does voting actually offer any choice in terms of political expression? Is abstaining a valid political choice?
- What do young people think about "the sleaze factor" in politics (i.e. how do they respond to reports about corruption which figured highly in the run-up to the election)?

Procedure

Participants were asked to arrange the items in a scale from +6 (most agree) to -6 (most disagree) and also to record further detailed comments on individual items in a booklet included for that purpose.

Results

The data from the 34 completed Q sorts were analyzed using principal components factor analysis (SPSS-Win v.6). Factors with eigenvalues of more than 1.00 were extracted, rotated to simple structure, and seven interpretable factors identified. The exemplifying Q sorts were merged to produce factor arrays for six of these; the seventh was exemplified by the Q sort of only one respondent loaded highly, but this was the highest loading for any factor. (See Brown, 1979; Kitzinger, 1987 for discussions of interpreting factors based on only one significant loading). The alternative viewpoints were explicated in the usual way.

Viewpoint 1: Radical Activism

This viewpoint is expressed in terms of a deep interest in politics and strong political opinions. It offers the kind of "issue politics" position identified by the media as typical of young people. Young people whose Q sorts exemplified this factor stated they were politically active, involved in radical politics. One was a Marxist, one was involved in environmental protests, one was a pro-lifer. All of these said they "went onto the streets" to demonstrate, sell papers or, in the case of the pro-lifer, attend vigils outside abortion clinics. These respondents attached a great deal of value to direct action, and considered it a more effective method of promoting change than voting. To them, abstaining was a valid political choice. They expressed a belief that neither our current political debates nor our representatives address the important issues, and articulated frustration that people in general are politically unaware and do not grasp the extent of their political power and responsibilities.

The phrase "single issue" was, however, seen as an inaccurate label. From this viewpoint the vote has moral, but not necessarily religious, value. (One respondent was an atheist, another a Catholic). It was striking that the language used by these respondents reflected a moralistic understanding of political activity. One made constant references to "truth," "justice," and "evil." Another spoke in terms of casting one's vote for a party you do not necessarily support as a "betrayal," and the political process as sacrosanct. Throughout this account there was constant reference to an over-arching scheme of morality. While this viewpoint was based upon at least two very distinct sources (the Augustinian Christian Platonic tradition within Catholicism

and Marxist historical materialism) the result was the same: a discourse of moral absolutism which emphasizes the fundamental nature of certain issues. (Augustine, 1990; Plato, 1974; Marx, 1977).

Viewpoint 2: Responsible Voting

The viewpoint identified by this factor was more surprising. It reflected many of the concerns of the center-left and can be characterized as "modern liberalism," based upon a strong commitment to the democratic process. The central theme is the individual's responsibility, within a democracy, towards other members of society. This is a moral (and, for some, a religiously-informed) responsibility, indicated by endorsing item 25, which focused on spiritual belief (this is the only factor where item 25 gained a positive response). Individuals are seen to have a duty to carry out these obligations to the best of their ability. Hence, from this viewpoint, it is important not only to vote, but to vote in a considered, well-informed manner. This viewpoint expresses faith in the mechanics of the political process, and the centrality of voting to its success. Not voting is seen as a dereliction of one's duty to society. The young people expressing this viewpoint are far from disaffected from the party-political process: quite the opposite. They see it as the best means of bringing about the social change which they fervently desire.

Viewpoint 3: Democratic Liberalism

The viewpoint expressed by this factor articulated the doctrine of liberalism in its traditional, nineteenth-century sense. In contrast with viewpoint 2, this one was much more sensitive to the status of the individual within the wider society. The young people whose Q sorts expressed this factor held strong opinions, but were adamant that these opinions resulted from their own choices, not from religious or family influence. Politics was seen here as instrumental—voting and being well-informed were seen as means of achieving one's own ends. Hence, although apathy, abstaining or voting for a smaller party were not frowned upon from this viewpoint, they were seen as not advisable: if you do not vote, it is your own fault if you do not feel represented. Within this viewpoint politicians were viewed as self-interested—but no more or less than the rest of us. Fundamental to this viewpoint was a sense of participation in a process in which one's own interests are balanced against those of other people. Direct action was thus considered something of a threat to the stability of democracy, which is the

best way to balance society and enable us all to try to fulfil our goals. This viewpoint expresses the traditional concern of liberalism: the relationship between individual and collective interest, "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (Mill, 1859).

Viewpoint 4: Young Conservative

Of all the other viewpoints that gave indication of a specific voting intention, only the young people whose Q sorts exemplified this factor were Conservative voters. The viewpoint articulates strands in Conservative thinking from Burke to Thatcher. There was a Burkean emphasis on the need for stable government (Burke, 1790), so that the limited impact of the vote was considered something of a virtue. There was also respect for the way that our political process works. Responsibility for one's own actions was considered important, and the influence of the family was stressed, reflecting Conservative thinking that was given currency by Thatcher. Self-interest was considered the main driving force behind people's political choices and behavior (Hobbes, 1651). Nonetheless, this account also contained views which are not traditionally Conservative. There was a strong denial of the influence of religion, for example. Perhaps most interestingly, the young people articulating this viewpoint saw some validity in taking direct action, somewhat in contradiction to the concern for stability which is also expressed.

Viewpoint 5: I Am Not a Number!

This viewpoint was articulated around a theme of strong individualism. The young people whose Q sorts exemplified the factor saw themselves as out of the mainstream and disliked being categorized. For them, the vote is part of a wider strategy of self-expression and of being true to oneself. They emphasized the importance of minority voices, and rejected the idea of there being recognizable groups such as "politicians" or "young people" or "voters" into which people can be pigeon-holed. They are often frustrated that conventional means of political expression are insufficient to allow their opinions to come across, and hence they were sympathetic to different means of getting one's views across, such as abstention, voting for minority parties, and direct action. Moreover, from this viewpoint, voicing one's opinion should not be limited to voting in an election—there should be other opportunities to exert political influence.

Viewpoint 6: Disaffected Communitarianism

The young people whose Q sorts exemplified this factor expressed a strong sense of alienation from most of society's institutions—including the incumbent government—and disaffection towards politicians in general. They conveyed a sense of disconnection: from religious and family ties, from the election in particular, and from politics in general. These respondents felt marginalized and unrepresented. The main sense of "belonging" for these young people was with their wider community. This viewpoint sees the community, as a whole, having an impact on politics and elections, for good or ill, leaving individuals only limited ways to express themselves. From this perspective the vote is the means whereby the community can express its opinion. Therefore the vote must not be wasted, and should be cast with care. Communitarianism of this kind echoes the writings of Rousseau (1762), who argued that individuals, in order to protect themselves from each other, need to surrender their own interests to good of the whole community: "Each of us puts into the community his person and all his powers under the supreme direction of the general will; and as a body, we incorporate every member as an indivisible part of the whole."

Viewpoint 7: Frustrated Altruism

This viewpoint was defined by the Q sort of just one person. Frustratingly, they provided little additional information, so interpretation was more difficult. The viewpoint regards voting as needing to take account not just of one's own benefit, but also the interests and needs of others. It is cynical about politicians, seeing them as purely motivated by self-interest; but it is not politics itself which is corrupting. From this perspective young people are a distinct group, whose motives are less selfish than those of their representatives, but who are alienated from politics by the selfishness of politicians. Above all, this viewpoint expressed the need for a change, not just in government, but in the political system as well, since it stifles choice and denies a voice to minority interests.

Discussion

The viewpoints which could be explicated from this study are extremely diverse, and frequently mutually exclusive. There were a full range of

party-political affiliations, and the vote was accorded very different meanings and significances. For some it was a crucial means to effect change in society; to others it was the best way to achieve one's own aims. Some dismissed voting as ineffective compared with taking direct action; to others it was just a waste of time. Political activity was similarly imbued with many different meanings—or with none at all. The kind of diversity that can be discovered using Q is unusual. Most commentary on research about young people's politics depicts them as an homogenous effectively "of one mind." For example, this is how Peter Preston describes them in *The Guardian* (the UK's national "quality" left-wing-leaning newspaper):

[Young people] are not ideologues; rather the reverse. They are pretty skeptical of, and pretty bored by conventional politics ... They have scant connection with organized religion, or indeed with any multi-disciplinary organization. But they aren't remotely selfish—on the contrary, they throw themselves into causes where something may be accomplished. They care, but not to order. They are individuals, not party hacks. There is no easy word to describe them. But let us try: Future Pragmatists. That is because they look to the future with hope and curiosity. (Preston, 1995)

Wilkinson and Mulgan (1995), in a report prepared for Demos, a "think-tank" influential upon Labor policy, justified giving it the title *Freedom's Children* by arguing that "the members of this group are, more than any before them, the inheritors of freedom. They value it deeply." Monbiot (1997) suggests that: "[y]oung people ... are in many ways the conscience of the nation. ... Young people's agenda tends to be more selfless, it tends to be the sort of agenda which encourages a broader-based society." Park (1994) asks "[c]ould young voters now be plumbing untold depths of indifference towards and distrust of contemporary politics?"

The view of young people with which we are repeatedly presented, and which comes out strongly in the quotations above, contains two strands. Firstly, young people are to be understood as disaffected from the political *status quo* and disillusioned with the political process. The second strand can be called "The Swampy Factor." As increased media attention is given to young people involved in direct action, various commentators give us to believe that while young people reject traditional politics, they are selfless individuals who are committed to specific, "youth orientated" causes, such as environmentalism, or animal rights. The results from this study refute this analysis. Although

many of the viewpoints saw direct action as a valid means of political expression, it was only given strong endorsement by the *Radical Activism* viewpoint (1). Three viewpoints (2, 3, and 6) expressed concern about the instability which may follow such protest. Equally, several viewpoints emphasized the importance of the vote to successful political activity, and for the *Responsible Voting* viewpoint (2) the vote was seen as crucial. Only the *Frustrated Altruist* viewpoint (7) came close to the accepted wisdom about "young people," going along with the idea that the young are a discrete group, who vote unselfishly and who are disillusioned with the political status quo. The notion of "young people" as a distinctly separate group is more often rejected, especially by the young people expressing the *I Am Not a Number!* viewpoint (5).

Just as children are increasingly expected to behave and be behaved towards in a certain manner (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992), so, it would seem, the political expression available to an entire generation is—if we are to believe academic and media commentators—constrained. Young people are expected to espouse certain well-defined causes, be concerned with certain carefully limited issues, and limit themselves to certain kinds of political action. They are allowed to "play at politics" but not to become "political players." It is hoped that this paper can contribute to the challenge that needs to be mounted against the exclusion of the young from politics.

Appendix

Q sort items

1. People have collective power to change things, even if they don't realize it.
2. In general, politicians look out for their own interests rather than for the interests of the people that elected them.
3. The issues that matter most are more or less ignored in this election.
4. The more people vote, the better it is for the country.
5. There are certain issues which are particularly emphasized by young people.
6. It's irrelevant that I can't remember another party being in Government.
7. You betray yourself if you vote for someone who doesn't really represent you.
8. You can have too much of a say in how the country is run.
9. Getting active in a political party has about as much style as train-spotting.
10. I don't think you can get on in politics without being corrupted by it.
11. The only choice you have in an election is between one of two parties in

Government.

12. We really need a change of Government.
13. What my family says about politics has had a great effect on me.
14. The idea of being a voter doesn't really relate to me at the moment.
15. Most direct action (e.g. anti-road protests) is ineffective.
16. If you don't vote you can't really complain if you don't like how things turn out.
17. Politicians are only interested in hearing from voters when they need your vote.
18. Our Parliament is an outdated institution in need of serious reform.
19. Young people's political agendas tend to be less selfish.
20. My best choice may be to choose not to vote.
21. The vote is a privilege that people fought, and died, for.
22. Although there are ultimate issues of "right" and "wrong," you can't necessarily run our society that way.
23. Having a vote gives me a say only in the loosest sense.
24. It's possible for a country to make a disastrous mistake and vote in the "wrong" Government.
25. Spiritual belief is of great importance when I make my choices about voting.
26. Anything outside the mainstream is not well represented in our system.
27. I'm not really interested in politics.
28. "If voting made any difference, they wouldn't let you do it."
29. There are many young people who would vote, if they had someone to vote for.
30. As well as having a right to vote, I have a right *not* to vote.
31. Voting affects not only yourself but also other people.
32. It's good for our democracy for there to be challenges through direct action.
33. I think my vote is meaningless.
34. On the whole our MPs do an extremely difficult job very well.
35. As far as I'm concerned, politics is a dirty word.
36. Voting is a part of my rights.
37. There is a lack of true choice in this election.
38. The only time everybody in this country is truly equal is when we are given a chance to vote.
39. Having strong opinions isn't really a good idea in today's complex world.
40. Direct action is more meaningful than anything you hear coming from Parliament.
41. Young people are more politically alike than other generations.
42. It's worse to cast an unconsidered vote than not to vote at all.
43. You can't expect politicians to behave differently from the rest of us.
44. I think politics used to be more genuine than it is now.
45. In a general election you have a responsibility to get your views heard.
46. Most people my age are apathetic towards politics.

47. Not voting sends an important message to all the parties that they're not getting things right.
48. Politicians rarely talk about the really important issues.
49. Voting for a small party is wasting your vote.
50. We give too much emphasis to minority voices.
51. People are too ready to pass responsibility for issues over to Parliament.
52. If and how I vote will be determined by what I think will do me the most good.
53. It frustrates me that people can be politically apathetic.
54. I have already made up my mind about what I shall do on May 1st.
55. Single issue groups are too one-sided and ignore the wider picture.
56. The issues discussed by politicians are not important to my age group.
57. People often go into politics to give something back to society.
58. In this election, there's too much focus on personalities and not enough on policies.
59. Following politics is rather like following a particular sport: it either interests you or it doesn't.
60. It's up to each of us to find out as much as we can before we make our decision about if and how to vote.
61. I feel, if I voted, I would be voting for something I don't really support.
62. Voting helps you get what you want from the Government and have the sort of lifestyle that you want.
63. Voting is the best way to make sure that extremists don't get into power.
64. Choosing how (or if) to vote is a moral issue.
65. Young people do care, they just care differently from the generation running things.
66. Voting is basically very selfish—you do it for yourself, not for anyone else.
67. It's a civic duty to vote.

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