



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In December 2017, the Oxford English Dictionary named ‘youthquake’ as its ‘word of the year’,¹ referring to the events at the UK General Election earlier that year. The OED (2017) described a youthquake as ‘a significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people’. Although this decision created some controversy – over the issue of voter turnout – we show in this book that 2017 was indeed a transformative election: one in which youth turnout returned to levels not seen since the early 1990s; one in which age replaced class as the most important predictor of voting intention; one in which we witnessed a resurgence in youth activism in (some) political parties; and, one in which the cultural values and economic priorities of Young Millennials dramatically altered the British political landscape.

For over twenty years, scholars have lamented the decline in youth turnout in British general elections. The same could be said for many other established democracies. Our own research has identified significant changes in youth political participation (Henn and Foard 2014; Sloam 2014). It has noted the disillusionment of young people with electoral politics, which is particularly acute in the UK. Yet, during the course of our research, we were always struck by the interest of young people in political *issues*. In each of our various research projects, we have been reminded that younger citizens are – in the words of Pippa Norris (2002) – ‘reinventing political activism’. The 2017 *youthquake* in the UK is

testament to our belief in the vibrancy of young people's politics and has led us to reflect more deeply on the manifestation of youth politics in an era of economic and political turbulence.

There has been a long-term generational trend away from electoral politics. Younger cohorts have turned away from political parties and elections, but have become more active in issue-based forms of participation, such as signing a petition, participating in a consumer boycott and joining in a demonstration. Since the turn of the new Millennium, new technologies have enabled a further proliferation of youth engagement into a vast array of non-institutionalized, online activities. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, young people in many countries have utilised social media to express their outrage at growing social and intergenerational inequalities in society.

The 2017 General Election demonstrated that young people will engage in electoral politics if the conditions are right. The turnout of 18–24 year olds surged from around 40% in the first decade of the new millennium to well over 50% in 2017 (Ipsos MORI 2017; Curtice and Simpson 2018). And, the generational differences in support for the two main parties were also the largest on record. Two thirds of 18–24 year olds voted for the Labour Party compared to just one third in 2010. Why did these dramatic changes take place? What was it about Labour under Jeremy Corbyn that proved so attractive to younger voters? And, what can this tell us about recent and future trends in political participation in the UK and beyond?

The book investigates the reasons behind the *youthquake* from both a comparative and a theoretical perspective. It compares youth turnout and party allegiance over time and traces changes in youth political participation in the UK since the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis – from austerity, to the 2016 EU referendum, to the rise of Corbyn – up until the election in June 2017. The situation in the UK is also contrasted with developments in youth participation in other established democracies, including the youthquakes inspired by Barack Obama in the United States (2008) and Justin Trudeau in Canada (2015).

We support the view that the individualisation of values and lifestyles means that today's young people see politics and politicians quite differently to previous generations. Part of the story lies in the growth of postmaterialist values and identity politics, which has led to the emergence of new cultural cleavages. Theoretically, we address the work of Norris and Inglehart (2018) and others on the increasing significance of cultural

issues since the financial crisis. We portray the young people in the UK who supported Remain in the EU referendum and Corbyn in 2017 as *young left-cosmopolitans*, who – despite their lack of trust in politicians and political parties – became engaged in electoral politics.

The book also examines differences in electoral participation *amongst* Young Millennials (those who were born between the early 1990s and the turn of the century). In particular, we look at how an individual's social class, level of educational attainment and educational status, gender and ethnicity can strongly influence their participation or non-participation in electoral politics. For example, young people with low levels of educational attainment were much more likely to vote for Brexit than their peers. Young women were considerably more supportive than young men of the Labour Party in 2017.

There is a significant body of work that explores the political participation of citizens of all ages in the wake of the ongoing global financial crisis. However, much of this work has focussed on the rise of populist parties and movements, as well as the decline of mainstream political parties. Despite the large volume of work that has been produced on youth protest movements (from the Arab Spring, to the Spanish indignados, to Occupy) and the intense scrutiny of the Obama youthquake in 2008, there are few existing studies of the electoral attitudes and behaviour of younger cohorts (or their underpinning values and policy preferences) during this period.

This book helps to fill this gap in the literature. It is partly a response to the dramatic events of June 2017 in the UK, but more precisely a longer-term study of youth political participation before and after the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, and the emergence of new patterns of political participation in established democratic systems.

FROM DEMOCRATIC DECLINE TO YOUTHQUAKE

Although the extent of the decline in electoral participation amongst younger generations varies widely across Europe and North America, the trend towards disillusionment and disengagement with political parties and politicians has been unmistakable (Fig. 1.1). In the United States, the turnout of 18–24 year olds in presidential elections fell from 51% in the 1960s to an average of around 40% since the 1980s. In the UK, youth participation averaged around 65% between the 1960s and the early 1990s, but suffered a collapse in engagement thereafter. Elsewhere in Europe, the drop in youth turnout in established democracies was not as

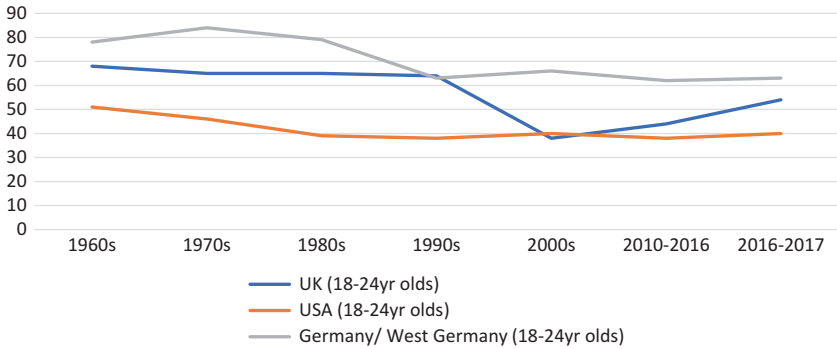


Fig. 1.1 Youth electoral turnout in the United States, the UK and Germany since the 1960s (%). (Sources: British Election Study, German Federal Returning Officer, Ipsos MORI, US Census Bureau)

steep. Germany is a typical case in point. The Federal Republic experienced only a gradual decline in youth electoral turnout despite the higher levels of voter apathy in its new Eastern states after re-unification. These mostly proportional systems nevertheless witnessed a serious ebbing away of support for *catch-all parties* amongst younger cohorts. In Germany, for instance, the share of 18–24 year olds voting for the Christian Democrat (CSU/CDU) and Social Democrat (SPD) parties fell from 90% in the 1970s (compared to 94% of all adults) to 74% (81% of all adults) in the last pre-unification election in 1987, to only 43% (53% of all adults) in the 2017 Federal Election (Federal Returning Officer 2017).²

The distancing of citizens from political parties was captured by Russell Dalton and Martin Wattenberg in their seminal text, ‘Parties without Partisans’ (2002), which recorded the process of voter dealignment in 20 OECD countries. In Europe, established political parties experienced a sharp decline in membership after the 1980s. According to Van Biezen et al. (2012), party membership fell by 68% in the UK, 53% in France, 47% in Sweden, 36% in Italy and 27% in Germany between 1980 and 2009.

The UK has been noticeable not just for its very low levels of youth turnout – which seem to be a particular feature of first-past-the-post electoral systems – but also the large gap between the participation of the youngest cohort of voters and that of the electorate as a whole between 2002 and 2012 (Fig. 1.2). The ratio of youth engagement (between 18–24 year olds and adults of all ages) is just 0.51, compared to an average

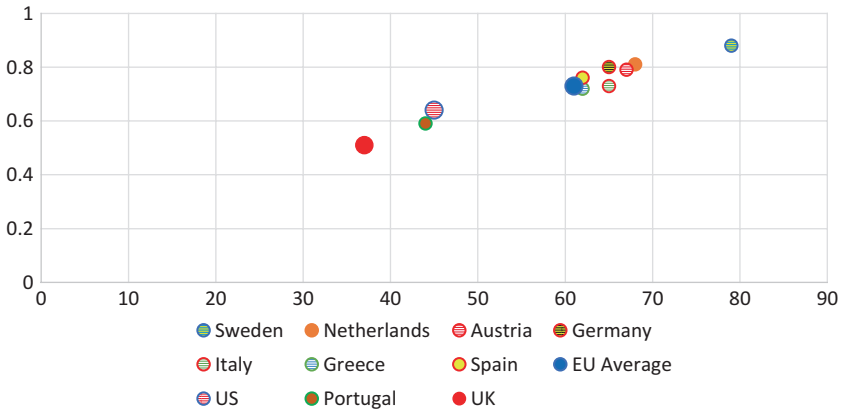


Fig. 1.2 Rates and ratios of youth participation in EU9 countries and the United States, 2002–2012. (Sources: European Social Survey, US Census)

of 0.73 in eight other European democracies and 0.64 in the United States. This suggests to us that the reduction in youth electoral participation in the UK cannot simply be attributed to long-term trends. It marked a generational rupture, or ‘period effect’, amongst those coming of age from the early 1990s onwards.

These negative trends in electoral participation spawned a number of *pessimistic* studies that expressed concern about the negative impact of youth disengagement on democratic citizenship. However, there are radical differences between academic authors in how they account for this disengagement. Robert Putnam, in ‘Bowling Alone’ (2000) and other work, linked the decrease in engagement amongst younger citizens to a broader fall in the membership of traditional associations, such as trade unions and churches, and a general decline in *social capital* and *trust*. This version of events is hotly contested, since it deals with changes in young people’s attitudes and engagement (*demand-side factors*) but largely ignores changes to the supply of politics. In short, society has evolved, but political parties and party systems have struggled to adapt. Not all pessimists have laid the blame for low turnout on younger citizens. Several alternative explanations point to the changing nature of politics and policy-making over recent decades. These include claims about the effects of voter dealignment (see above) and the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 in the 1960s and 1970s (Franklin 2004). Other important factors

considered include the ‘hollowing out’ of political parties (Mair 2013) and the ‘outsourcing’ of policy-making from representative democracy to expert groups, international bodies and even financial markets (Fawcett et al. 2017).

These pessimistic accounts of (youth) political participation have been challenged by a second body of research that focuses on what young people do rather than on what they do not do. These studies adopt broader definitions of what qualifies as political action, and tend to look at trends in participation across several democracies (as opposed to single country case studies). Pippa Norris (2002, 2004) was amongst the first to provide a counter-narrative to Putnam’s explanation of declining civic and political engagement. She depicted a ‘Democratic Phoenix’ wherein younger cohorts are rewriting the rules of the game through increasing participation in non-electoral forms of politics, such as petitions and boycotts. These changes are partly explained by the switch in citizens’ political objectives *from politics to policy*. For instance, issues such as climate change, global poverty, or free higher education might be more easily pursued through pressure group membership (such as joining Greenpeace), consumer action (including buying fair trade products) or joining a demonstration (such as the British anti-tuition fees rallies, 2010/2011), rather than by long-term membership of traditional political organisations. In these accounts, *voting remains pivotal within the context of an increasing diversification of youth political participation*.

Whether existing studies are pessimistic or optimistic about the quantity and quality of young people’s politics, they generally accept that young people’s motivations for political engagement differ from those of older generations and previous generations of young people. We are particularly impressed by Amnå and Ekman’s (2014) notion of the ‘stand-by citizen’ – that young people increasingly engage in politics on a case-by-case basis, when an issue is relevant to their everyday life. This may be an issue that challenges an individual’s sense of collective identity (such as the opposition of young Muslims to Western foreign policy in the Middle East), or something that has a tangible bearing on one’s economic future (perhaps the availability of low-cost housing), or on one’s leisure pursuits in a local community (such as the threat of closure to a local park or youth centre). This conceptualization of a *stand-by citizen* adds a temporal component to political engagement, emphasizing the importance of the *timing and the duration of political action*. It is not that engagement in institutionalized and formal electoral politics does not take place, but that it has become increasingly contingent upon the resonance of an issue.

To our minds, the optimistic accounts of young people's politics have become even more persuasive in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The dominance of austerity politics and the rise of authoritarian-nationalist forms of populism (from the UK Independence Party to Donald Trump), has led to the politicization of Young Millennials. The day-to-day economic concerns of younger citizens have become more pressing in light of falling living standards. And cultural or postmaterial issues, such as environmental protection, national identity and immigration, have become more contentious and prominent. These dual crises resulted in a perfect storm of discontent amongst young people, many of whom participated in an international wave of political protest in both liberal and illiberal democracies: from demonstrations against rising university tuition fees in London, to Occupy Wall St. in Manhattan, to rallies against transport costs in Rio de Janeiro, to protests against the infringement of political freedoms in Istanbul, to occupations of public squares by the Spanish *Indignados* ('the outraged') to combat political corruption and youth unemployment across Europe.

This politicization of young people has manifested itself in greater scepticism about politicians and political parties in general, but also – on occasion – through greater engagement with the political process. In many countries, this has led to large increases in youth support for political parties that are socially liberal and economically 'left-wing' (offering, for instance, support for greater state intervention). In systems with proportional representation and in places that have been worst hit by the financial crisis, new parties have emerged from the margins to meet these challenges. This was the case for PoDemos in Spain, which was formed in 2014 off the back of the *Indignados* protest movement.³ In first-past-the-post systems, the increase in cosmopolitan-left sentiment has led to challenges to the leadership of existing centre-left parties. Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders were both successful in attracting the youth vote (despite being old, white, men) to the British Labour Party and in the 2016 US Democratic primaries, respectively. In all three examples, they profited from the engagement of legions of enthusiastic young activists who were able to ignite grass-roots support for their parties or candidate.

It is also true that the radical nature of cosmopolitan-left parties and candidates can put off older voters, and might ultimately limit their support and chances of gaining power. Here, the cases of Barack Obama in the United States (2008) and Justin Trudeau in Canada (2015) are instructive. In economic terms, they both positioned themselves more to

the centre ground than the three previous examples. Although the first Obama administration injected huge sums into the economy in the immediate aftermath of the financial crisis, and managed to introduce a (much watered-down) healthcare programme, OECD figures record that US public spending (as a proportion of GDP) barely altered between 2008 and 2016 (OECD 2017). Obama's achievements regarding cosmopolitan values and international outlook were more impressive. These included halting the deportation of young undocumented immigrants who met the criteria laid down in the Dream Act, and a commitment to international targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases at the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. Trudeau's Liberal-led Government has similarly paid more attention to injecting social liberalism into Canadian politics – for example, the welcoming of refugees from Syria and efforts to legalize marijuana – than to traditional left-wing objectives. The support of the Obama and Trudeau administrations for international free trade deals (such as those initiated with the European Union) is more akin to the Clinton-Blair brand of progressive politics than that of Sanders, Corbyn and PoDemos (who are naturally suspicious of the role of international markets and financial institutions).

YOUTHQUAKES AND YOUNG COSMOPOLITANS

Over the last two decades the word 'youthquake' has been used by political commentators, and more occasionally by academics,⁴ to describe seismic political activity that seems to be inspired by younger citizens. But the term has never, to our knowledge, been adequately explained. We appreciate the broad nature of the OED definition (cited earlier in this chapter), which refers not only to significant changes in electoral politics, but also to the underlying social, economic and political forces that precipitate these changes. We would add that *'youthquake elections' are ones in which dramatic changes in how many young people vote, who they vote for and how active they are in the campaign have, quite literally, shaken up the status quo.*

To qualify as a youthquake, we therefore believe that an election must meet one or more of the following criteria: increased turnout amongst young people; a decisive shift in youth support for a political party or the emergence of a new party attracting widespread youth support; or, a significant increase in the volume or intensity of youth political activism. To explain why youthquake elections happen and what the consequences might be, we then have to look at the broader economic, social and political

dimensions identified in the OED definition. In this respect, we would stress the importance of value change amongst younger generations and the impact of the financial crisis on young people's everyday lives as being of primary importance. In our view, the spike in youth turnout in the 2017 UK General Election, the unprecedented levels of support of 18–24 year olds for the Labour Party, and the high levels of youth activism associated with the Labour Party's strong performance, provide one of the clearest recent examples of such a landmark vote.

In this study, we focus on 18–24 year olds. Although it could easily be argued that this age range is too narrow, it refers to a distinct cohort of young people who are (mostly) voting in their first national election. Our range of survey data (of 18–24 year olds from 2002 to 2017) maps on to the standard definition of the Millennial Generation – those born between 1981 and 2000. And, since young people are most open change at this point in their lives and electoral participation is known to be habit-forming (Franklin 2004), we consider this to be the most significant stage in an individual's formal political development. It is the point at which an individual's decision to vote and to support a particular political party are most likely to have a lasting impact. However, we recognize that age more generally plays a key role, as values and behaviours that are typical of 18–24 year olds are also likely to be found (if to a lesser extent) amongst 25–34 year olds and 35–44 year olds. Indeed, this ripple effect is a feature of both long-term generational change and short-term period effects.

It is important to remember, when examining these events, that young people are not all the same. In their book 'Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics', Sidney Verba et al. (1995) highlighted the role of *resources* in determining whether an individual became civically or politically engaged. In this respect, a citizen's level of educational attainment and educational status are the strongest predictors of whether they participate or not in the electoral process. Education is more than a proxy for social class. With respect to higher education, students accrue resources from *being in higher education* – through the density of social networks and opportunities for civic and political engagement on campuses – and from the likelihood that they will acquire more political knowledge than the average young person. In the United States, Sander and Putnam's (2010) revision of Putnam's earlier work recognizes the growing gap between highly engaged college students and relatively disengaged non-college-bound-youth. This effect is observable

(albeit to different degrees) in all established democracies. And, it leads to a broader question about the extent to which voting is affected by one's socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity. So, however transformative a youthquake may be, there are always groups of young people that do not belong to these events. In this regard, the book also explores the extent to which authoritarian-nationalist forms of populism have become attractive to *young outsiders* – most commonly young men of low socio-economic status.

Despite these caveats, we contend that the emergence of cosmopolitan-left values and political engagement characterize recent developments in youth political participation, and include support for social liberalism and the redistribution of state resources, but also scepticism towards mainstream electoral politics. Young cosmopolitans are particularly prominent in the UK. Here, we emphasize the importance of tracing youth political trends across time – from Occupy to Corbyn, noting the temporal and cyclical nature of youth engagement.⁵ We also stress the need to provide both youth-centred (demand-side) and system-level (supply-side) perspectives (Hay 2007) if we are to fully capture the dynamics of young people's politics.

ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 2 begins with a review of existing theories of youth electoral participation and political participation more generally. We separate the literature into theories that deal with the implications of socio-economic change, those that emphasize changes in the nature of the political system, and those that pay greater attention to (youth) political activism.

The analysis of the existing literature highlights the central role of education (educational attainment, educational status and knowledge about politics), identity (including, gender, ethnicity, nationhood) and communication (for example, patterns of news consumption and the efforts of political actors to engage with young people). It also identifies the policy areas prioritised by younger cohorts, which (later in the book) are compared with and contrasted to policy programmes and campaign strategies of mainstream parties in general elections and the Remainers and Brexiteers in the 2016 EU referendum.

The chapter then sets out our conceptualisation of 'young left-cosmopolitans'. We argue that a combination of economic stagnation, high levels of educational attainment, and rapid social change, have

resulted in a historically distinct cocktail of political engagement and resentment, and the emergence of a large, young group of *cosmopolitan-left* citizens in the UK (and many other established democracies). These developments explain the widespread youth engagement at the 2016 EU referendum and the 2017 General Election, and youth support both for Britain remaining in the European Union and of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. Building on the recent work of Norris and Inglehart (2018) we assert that young people's politics is defined both by material interests (which became more pressing in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis), but also by an outward-looking cosmopolitanism and acceptance of cultural diversity.

This conceptualization of young, cosmopolitan-left citizens applies to most, but not all, young people. Cosmopolitan-left individuals are likely to hold university degrees, to be in full-time education, female, and live in an urban environment. Conversely, young, white males with low levels of educational attainment are least likely to possess these views.

Chapter 3 investigates young people's attitudes towards, and engagement in, electoral politics before and after the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis. Drawing upon two representative surveys of 18 year olds conducted in 2002 and in 2011, it explores how youth perceptions of politics, participation rates and political preferences vary by age, gender, ethnicity, level of educational attainment and educational career trajectory. It also considers how political attitudes and engagement are shaped by political knowledge, trust and a sense of confidence in one's ability to act and in the effectiveness of this activism in achieving change.

Using the theoretical framework outlined above, the chapter also identifies the economic and cultural issues that are prominent in young people's politics, and explores how attitudes, engagement, policy preferences and political allegiances have been affected by the financial crisis. And, it looks at the extent to which British political parties have attempted (or neglected) to engage with young people through an analysis of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos and voter mobilisation strategies for the 2001 and 2010 general elections.

Chapter 4 begins by exploring the relationship between public attitudes towards European integration and the rise of authoritarian-nationalist populism and cosmopolitan ideals in the UK and elsewhere in Europe. Afterwards, it presents the results of a representative survey of youth attitudes and engagement in the 2016 British EU referendum. At the same time, we also examine the platforms of the Remain and Leave campaigns,

to evaluate the extent to which each were willing or able to articulate and address young people's concerns and interests. The analysis finds that three quarters of young people supported Remain in the referendum *despite* their lack of trust in the very political elites that fronted the Remain campaign. Chapter 4 also drills down into the composition of the youth vote according to demographic factors, knowledge, trust and efficacy. Young university students were particularly likely to engage in the referendum campaign and to vote Remain.

The chapter focuses on the interplay between economic and cultural reasons for supporting British membership of the EU. It finds that young people's support for EU membership was less to do with any sense of European identity, and much more do with their relative acceptance of cultural diversity and European integration, and their fears of the negative economic consequences of a potential Brexit (in an era of austerity and falling living standards for younger cohorts).

Chapter 5 draws upon another of our surveys as well as freely available polling data, to explore youth attitudes to, and engagement in, the 2017 General Election, which led to a seismic change in youth participation: an increase in turnout and mass support for the Labour Party amongst Young Millennials, reaching up to all cohorts under 45, which denied the Conservative Party a majority in the new House of Commons. According to Ipsos MORI figures (2017), a remarkable 62% of 18–24 year olds voted for the Labour Party, contrasting with 27% for the Conservative Party. The highest levels of support for Labour came from young black minority ethnic citizens, young women, and young people of a low social grade.

Chapter 5 also examines the supply side of politics in more depth. It assesses the success of Corbyn's team in mobilizing young people – through the work of Momentum as well as the appeal of Corbyn himself. We also analyse the drawing-power of the 2017 General Election manifestos of the Conservative Party, Labour and the Liberal Democrats – and the extent to which each was able to communicate a substantive policy programme for younger citizens.

We conclude by again highlighting the emergence of *young cosmopolitan-left* citizens, and what this means for the future of British democracy and other established democracies. We account for the resurgence in youth activism in the following ways. First, the redistribution of resources away from younger citizens and youth-oriented public policy after 2010 has persuaded more young people to favour increased public spending in areas such as health and education. Second, cultural differences across

generations have deepened. Young people are much more approving of cultural diversity, more welcoming of European integration, and much less concerned about immigration than older generations.

Here, we reflect again upon the success of the Corbyn in appealing to younger voters, but also on the efforts by the Conservative Party (after the 2017 General Election) to widen their appeal amongst those cohorts. After decades of neglect by the political class, this has the potential to inspire a virtuous circle of engagement by political actors in youth-oriented policy and greater participation of younger voters in electoral politics. Nevertheless, it is far from certain whether mainstream political parties will be able to capitalize, beyond Corbyn, on this increase in youth engagement in electoral politics.

NOTES

1. The Guardian, 9 June 2017, ‘The Youth for Today: How the 2017 Election Changed the Political Landscape’, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/09/corbyn-may-young-voters-labour-surge>
2. Whilst the new states of the united Germany certainly contributed to greater voter volatility, the trend away from the catch-all parties was already clearly observable in the 1980s.
3. PoDemos sprung from the *Indignados* protests against austerity and political corruption (led by the 36 year-old politics lecturer, Pablo Iglesias) to become Spain’s third largest party within 20 days of its formation.
4. Al-Momani (2011) uses ‘youthquake’ in relation to the Arab Spring, and Goodwin and Heath (2016) refer to its use in the media after the 2017 General Election. More interestingly, Stephen Mintz (2006) examines the phenomenon over time when analysing the impact of youth activism on post-1945 US politics.
5. Rather strangely, the cyclical nature of youth electoral participation (over time) is largely neglected in the electoral studies literature, but more developed in the study of protest movements and ‘contentious politics’ (Tilly and Wood 2015).

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