



## Youthquake: Young People and the 2017 General Election

In Chap. 3, we highlighted the persistence of postmaterialist values in a hostile economic environment, which has led to the emergence of a cosmopolitan-left group of young people as a political force in the UK. In Chap. 4, we explained how this manifested itself in youth engagement in the referendum – in favour of British membership of the European Union. Here, we argue that the impact of the financial crisis and austerity politics, the continued existence of postmaterialist values and an increase in cultural conflict, the galvanizing effect of the EU referendum, and the anti-establishment credentials of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, combined to set off a *youthquake* in political participation at the 2017 General Election.

When Theresa May called a general election on 18 April 2017, the result was seen by many as a foregone conclusion. The polls predicted an emphatic victory for the Conservative Party, which would strengthen the Prime Minister's hand in the wake of the 2016 EU referendum vote for Brexit. In February 2017, an Ipsos MORI (2017a) poll recorded a 37–31% advantage for the Conservatives over Labour, and May enjoyed a +17 net satisfaction rating compared to –38 for Jeremy Corbyn. Interestingly, given the surge in youth support for the Labour Party, there was no significant difference in young adults' (18–24 year olds) satisfaction with the two leaders at this point in time: +2 for May, and +3 for Corbyn. This

highlights the dramatic upturn in fortunes for Corbyn and the Labour Party during the campaign period.

The election result was a surprise. The Conservative Party improved its share of the vote to 42% (up 5.5 points from 2015), but the Labour Party increased its share of the vote to 40% (up 9.6 points from 2015). This led to a loss for the Conservatives of 13 seats in Parliament, forcing it into a fragile coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland. We argue that principal driving forces behind the result included the increase in youth engagement and activism during the campaign and the vote, as well as the switch in youth support to the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn as standard-bearers for cosmopolitan-left sentiment.

With regard to political interest, it is important to reiterate the fact that young people were relatively engaged in politics prior to the 2017 General Election (compared to the general election two years earlier). Although turnout estimates vary, it is generally accepted that a considerably larger proportion of 18–24 year olds had voted in the 2016 EU referendum than in the 2015 General Election (Bruter 2016). At the end of the previous chapter, we also reported the results of our 2017 Populus Poll that 81% of 18–24 year olds claimed to be following the election campaign closely (as much as the adult population as a whole).<sup>1</sup>

Ipsos MORI (2017b) and YouGov (2017a) estimated increases in youth turnout in 2017 of 15 percentage points and 16 percentage points, to 54% and 59% respectively. The Essex Continuous Monitoring Survey (Whiteley and Clarke 2017) estimated an increase of around 20 points. Although these figures have (in our view, unjustly) been challenged by a *British Election Study* report (Prosser et al. 2018), it is clear that 18–24 year olds voted at rates not seen since the early 1990s (Curtice and Simpson 2018). Given the weakening of party allegiances and decline in party membership over several decades, and the low levels of trust in politicians and political parties, the increase in youth turnout rates in 2017 was a seismic event.

The election also revealed a stark intergenerational divide in voter choice – so much so that YouGov (2017a) pronounced that age had replaced class as ‘the new dividing line in British politics’. The gap in support for the two main parties amongst 18–24 year olds – 35 percentage points – was unprecedented in size. Nearly two thirds (62%) of this cohort voted Labour and only 27% voted Conservative, compared to 61% of over 65s who voted Conservative and just 25% who voted Labour (Ipsos MORI 2017b). Labour enjoyed a majority over the Conservative Party in

every age group under 45. The highest levels of support came from young women (73%), and young people of a low social grade (70%). The Labour Party also garnered the support of a large majority of Black and Minority Ethnic voters (73%), who have a younger age profile than the majority white population.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 5 begins with an analysis of the 2017 UK General Election campaign. It examines young people's consumption of political news, as well as the extent to which the main political parties sought to appeal to younger citizens through their manifestos and communication strategies. We pay particular attention to efforts to appeal to young people through social media. Afterwards, we investigate the nature of youth turnout in 2017, and provide evidence to support the conclusion that there was a surge in youth participation. The next section explores the spectacular increase in youth support for the Labour Party in more detail, studying the intergenerational and intragenerational aspects of this sea-change in voter choice. Finally, we turn to the policy dimension of the election – identifying the key issues that were prioritised by younger citizens. Here, we illustrate the similarities between young Labour voters and those young people who voted Remain in the EU referendum.

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF YOUNG VOTERS

Election manifestos provide a unique insight into the electoral strategies and demographic target groups of political parties (Laver and Garry 2000). In 2017, it was clear from the outset that the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party made a concerted effort to engage with younger members of the electorate. The Labour Party (2017) manifesto articulated a vision for improving living standards through a number of key policy proposals. They included addressing the increasingly unaffordable costs of housing (for instance, through the introduction of rent controls for the private sector), reversing the abolition of housing benefit for 18–21 year olds, the abolition of university tuition fees, and the banning of zero-hour contracts.<sup>3</sup> The manifesto devoted 426 words (1.77% of its 24,019 word manifesto to specific pledges to young people, compared to just 88 words (or 0.29%) of the 2001 document (see Chap. 3). The Labour Party had taken tentative steps to addressing youth issues in the run-up to the 2015 General Election – promising to get rid of most unpaid

apprenticeships, abolish zero-hour contracts, deliver votes at 16, and reduce university tuition fees to £6,000 – but they did not play as central a role in the actual campaign.

The Liberal Democrats (2017) tied the future well-being of young people to the country's uncertain future surrounding Brexit and its relationship with the European Union. The Liberal Democrat manifesto also pledged to spend more on young people's mental health, to promote environmental protection, and to reverse housing benefit cuts for 18–21 year olds. However, other than on the subject of housing benefits, the Liberal Democrat manifesto remained vague on the details of its youth-oriented policies, providing only 54 words (0.233% of the document) – regarding retaining opportunities for young people to work, study and travel abroad – that were specifically dedicated to younger citizens. The Green Party's (2017) bespoke 'youth manifesto' promised to restore the Educational Maintenance Allowance, reinstate housing benefits for those aged under 21, scrap university tuition fees, tackle the nation's 'housing crisis' and protect the environment.<sup>4</sup> Despite making a pitch for the youth vote, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens were ultimately matched in the Labour Party's *'For The Many, Not The Few'* manifesto. Thus, the appeal of the Labour Party and Jeremy Corbyn to younger voters resulted in a lack of progress for the Liberal Democrat Party (preventing any rebound after the disintegration of their support amongst young people in 2015) and the Greens. For the Liberal Democrats, we would argue that the relative appeal (to young people) of their continued support of EU membership was effectively cancelled out by their perceived lack of credibility on issues such as public services, higher education, and austerity more generally (given their participation in the 2010–2015 Coalition Government).

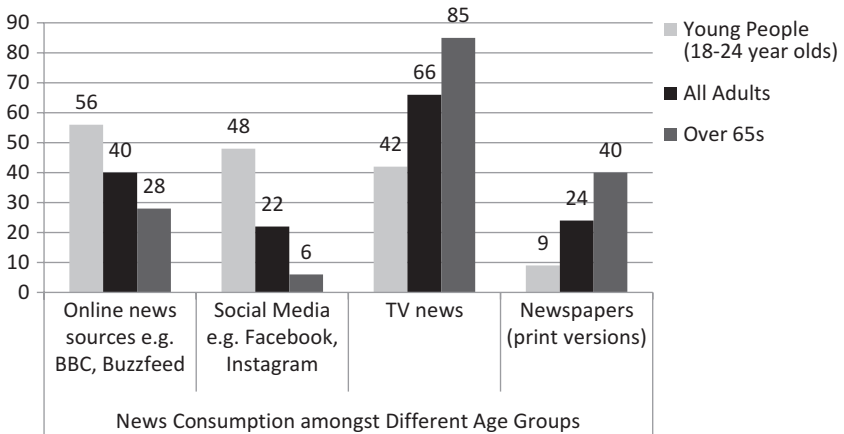
The Conservative Party's (2017) prescriptions for young people were largely a restatement of existing policies, such as efforts to boost youth employment and apprenticeships. The manifesto only devoted 45 words (0.147%) to youth-oriented policies, referring only to 200,000 apprenticeship places already created, and a commitment to intergenerational justice through reforms to payments for social care for the elderly. There was hardly any direct engagement with the key youth issues mentioned above. The strategy was, instead, geared towards attracting older, Leave supporters, many of whom had voted for UKIP in 2015. And, in this aim, the party was very successful. As a consequence, the Conservative Party's efforts to improve intergenerational inequalities through the increased use

of means-testing of social care for the elderly – derided in the media as the ‘dementia tax’ – and the removal of the ‘triple lock’ on pensions were not articulated as policies that would benefit young people (even though they appeared to have the potential to re-balance resources in favour of younger citizens).<sup>5</sup> And, in the face of internal resistance and opposition from older voters and traditional allies in the media, the so-called dementia tax was jettisoned during the heat of the campaign. The Conservative Party’s lack of focus on youth affairs was not inevitable. In 2015, the party addressed young people more directly through policies such as the help-to-buy scheme for young first-time buyers.

Labour’s manifesto policy pledges managed to achieve two crucial objectives when it came to young people. They made the Conservatives appear out-of-touch with their main grievances and concerns, and they prevented the party from being outgunned by other progressive parties on youth issues. The Labour Party adopted policies that had clear appeal to younger voters: from university tuition fees, to the proposed public investment in social housing. And, since young people viewed healthcare as the most important issue facing the country, Labour’s historic ownership of public services issues and Jeremy Corbyn’s passionate anti-privatisation stance on the NHS also placed the party at a major advantage amongst this demographic.

Labour’s success in attracting younger voters during the campaign was underlined by its increasing support in the opinion polls. Only four months before the 2017 General Election, the Labour Party’s lead over the Conservatives amongst 18–24 year olds was only 41–23% (18 points) (Ipsos MORI 2017a), compared to 35 points in the actual result. And, for around a quarter of Labour supporters (of all ages) the party’s manifesto as the most important reason for voting Labour (YouGov 2017b). This was not the case for older Labour supporters.

We know, therefore, that the Labour manifesto was successful in appealing to younger voters. But what role did their communications strategy play in reaching out to this demographic group? In our Populus poll, we explored how younger citizens consumed news about the election. It is well known that young people are increasingly using online and social media sources to gather news about politics, and to share this news and their own opinions with other young people. But the extent of the inter-generational differences was unexpected. We found that online news was the most popular source of information for young people: over half (56%) of 18–24 year olds consumed news through sources such as BBC Online

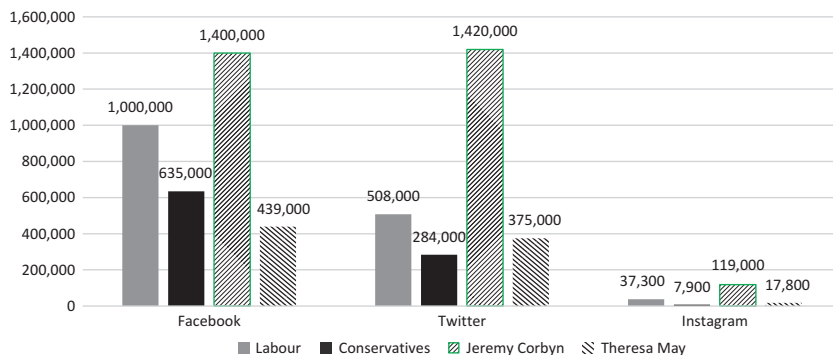


**Fig. 5.1** News consumption during the 2017 UK General Election across age cohorts (%). (Source: Sloam and Ehsan 2017.  $N = 2,007$ )

or BuzzFeed, compared to 40% of all age groups, and 28% of over 65s (Fig. 5.1). Social media was the second most common way of gathering political news for nearly half (48%) of young people, compared to 22% of all age groups, and 6% of over 65s. TV news continues to be a common source of information, but this is much less the case for Young Millennials: 48% of 18–24 year olds watched TV news, compared to 66% of all age groups, and 85% of over 65s. Finally, it is now quite rare for young people to read the print versions of newspapers: only 9% of 18–24 year olds, compared to 24% of all age groups, and 40% of over 65s.

It is, therefore, clear that traditional forms of political communication are less likely to appeal to, or be heard by, younger voters. The continuing rise of new styles and methods of political communication and news consumption had important implications for political parties and their campaign strategies in 2017.

The Labour Party was more effective at communicating its messages to younger voters in 2017. We might have expected Labour to dominate in the digital sphere, given the young, left-leaning profile of social media users. But, as we explained in the previous chapter, it was actually the Leave campaigns that dominated this sphere during the referendum campaign in 2016. Boosted by his celebrity endorsements and the emergence of left-leaning, online news platforms such as The Canary, Jeremy Corbyn



**Fig. 5.2** Social media following of Labour, Conservative, Jeremy Corbyn, Theresa May during the 2017 UK General Election campaign. (Source: Sloam and Ehsan 2017)

achieved about three times as many Facebook likes (1.4 million) and Twitter followers (1.42 million) as Theresa May (Fig. 5.2). Moreover, Corbyn, unlike May, was more popular than his party (by 400,000 Facebook likes and almost a million Twitter followers). This was made possible by Corbyn's personal appeal to young Labour supporters. A quarter (24%) of young Labour supporters (compared to only 10% of Labour supporters aged over 25) cited his leadership as their main reason for voting for the party (YouGov 2017b). Conversely, Theresa May's leadership was cited by just 4% of young party supporters (and 5% of those over 25) as their main reason for voting Conservative.

The Labour social media strategy – pioneered during Corbyn's party leadership bid by the grass-roots campaign group, Momentum – provided an effective means of reaching out to younger voters through attractive, interactive content (Fletcher 2017; Lilleker 2017; Pickard 2018). Subsequent BuzzFeed analysis found that only one of the top twenty "liked" election stories on Facebook was negative about Labour or Corbyn (Waterson 2017). The top two stories were 'How many of Jeremy Corbyn's Policies do You Actually Disagree With?' and 'A Guide to Anti-Conservative Tactical Voting'.

Momentum utilised cutting-edge knowledge of political mobilization – some of this learnt from the Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic Party Nomination for the US presidency in 2016, including through the direct involvement of Sanders activists (BBC, 7 August, 2017) – to engage with young people. One example was the use of texts rather than emails to

mobilise voters. Momentum claimed that it had contacted an estimated 400,000 people through WhatsApp, the messaging service, on election day. This emphasizes the fact that the Momentum and the Labour campaign strategies involved a combination of both online and offline engagement, including online contacts and information sharing alongside offline meetups or activism. The existing literature shows that online interactions are most effective when coupled with engagement in the real world (Chadwick 2017).

Labour's ability to appeal to younger voters was in large part enabled by the structural changes to the party that had been put in place under the leadership of Ed Miliband (2010–2015). The Miliband team, through their '*Refounding Labour: A Party for the New Generation*' reform programme explicitly sought to appeal to new, younger members. These reforms and the entry into the party of new £3 'registered supporters' swelled the membership, and encouraged the 'horizontal social movement' style of mobilisation (attractive to younger citizens) utilized by Momentum in the 2015 Corbyn leadership bid and the 2017 General Election (Pickard 2018). With regard to communicating Labour's message to young voters, Corbyn proved to be an adept performer both in person and through social media. The perception of the Labour leader as *authentic* and *principled* allowed him to tap into social networks, and channels of communication not open to other leaders. Which other politician (in 2017 or in earlier decades) would have been greeted with cheers at the Glastonbury music festival or could have drawn support from the *Grime* music scene? The brave decision of Corbyn and his campaign team to appear at Glastonbury also demonstrated that actively courting the youth vote had become a central plank of Labour's election strategy.

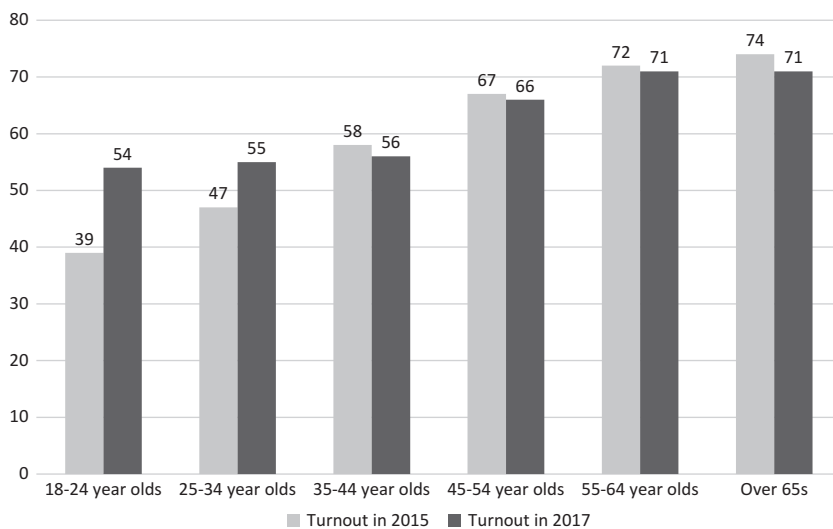
In 2015, Ed Miliband had attempted to engage more actively (than previous Labour leaders) with a younger audience – notably through his broadcast interview and discussion with actor and comedian, Russell Brand – but lacked the ability to connect with younger voters when compared to his successor. It should nevertheless be noted that Corbyn's efforts to appeal to young people, whilst addressing youth issues, also contained elements of a populist appeal to emotions and simplistic notions of 'right' and 'wrong' and 'them' (political and economic elites) and 'us' (Flinders 2018). This was something that Miliband, with his more intellectual brand of social democracy could never have achieved.



## TURNING OUT

We explained in the introduction and Chap. 2 how youth participation in elections in the UK declined dramatically after the late 1990s, falling to the lowest levels in Western Europe – an average of around 20 percentage points below the turnout rate for 18–24 year olds in France, 30 percentage points below Germany, and over 40 points below Sweden.

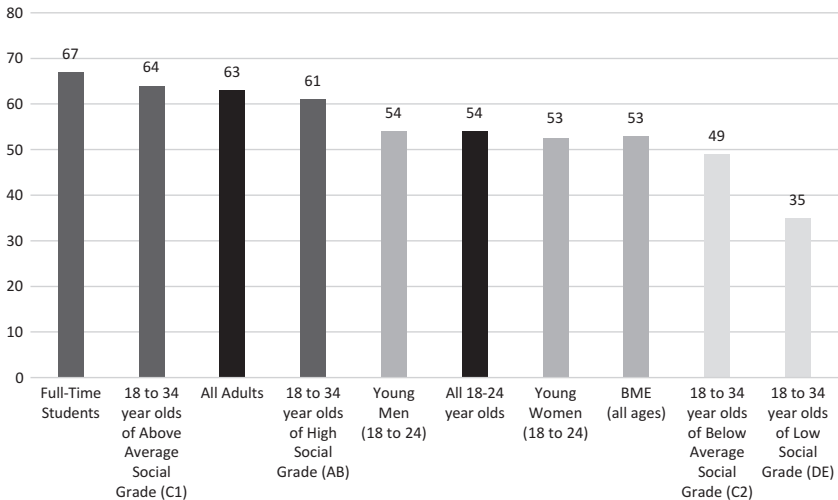
In 2017, the situation changed radically. According to Ipsos MORI (2017b) data, the participation of 18–24 year olds rose 15 percentage points to 54% – from 39% in 2015 and a low of 37% in 2005 (Fig. 5.3). Although, as we will discuss later in the chapter, there was some controversy over the youth turnout figures, there is general agreement – as argued in the British Social Attitudes study – that youth turnout had returned to the levels of the early 1990s (Curtice and Simpson 2018). Ipsos MORI data (2017b) suggest that 2017 witnessed a youth surge rather than a general increase in electoral participation. Figure 5.3 shows that the increase in turnout was confined to younger cohorts – 18–24 year olds and 25–34 year olds. By contrast, electoral participation in all other



**Fig. 5.3** Voter turnout by age group in 2015 and 2017 (%). (Source: Ipsos MORI 2017b and Sloam et al. 2018.  $N = 7,505$  (5,255 classified as voters))

age groups showed no significant change. So, the difference between the estimated participation of 18–24 year olds and the estimated participation of all citizens shrank from 22 points in 2015 to 9 points in 2017. And, the ratio of participation (of younger to older voters) returned to a similar level to those found in other established democracies (Fig. 1.2, Chap. 1). Youth turnout in 2017 remained 17 percentage points below the turnout rates for over 55s, but is almost identical to the rate of participation for those aged 25–44 and 35–44.

It should not be forgotten that there are some important intra-generational differences in voting patterns. Socio-economic status had a major bearing on levels of electoral participation amongst Young Millennials. Youth turnout was dependent upon a young person's social grade and educational status (Fig. 5.4). A large majority (61%) of 18–34 year olds of a high social grade (AB) and 64% of 18–34 year olds of an above average social grade (C1) voted, compared to only 49% of 18–34 year olds of a below average social grade (C2) and just 35% of those of a low social grade (DE). As expected, full-time students (67%) were also



**Fig. 5.4** Turnout (estimated) of groups of young people in the 2017 UK General Election (%). (Source: Ipsos MORI 2017b and YouGov 2017a.  $N = 7,505$  (Ipsos Mori),  $N = 52,615$  (YouGov))

much more likely (by 13 percentage points) to turn out to vote than the average young person. Black minority ethnic citizens of all ages were significantly less likely to vote than the average UK citizen. However, this can largely be explained by the composition of BME citizens, who are generally younger and less well-off than the general population (Sanders et al. 2014). Gender appeared to have no discernible effect on electoral participation in 2017.

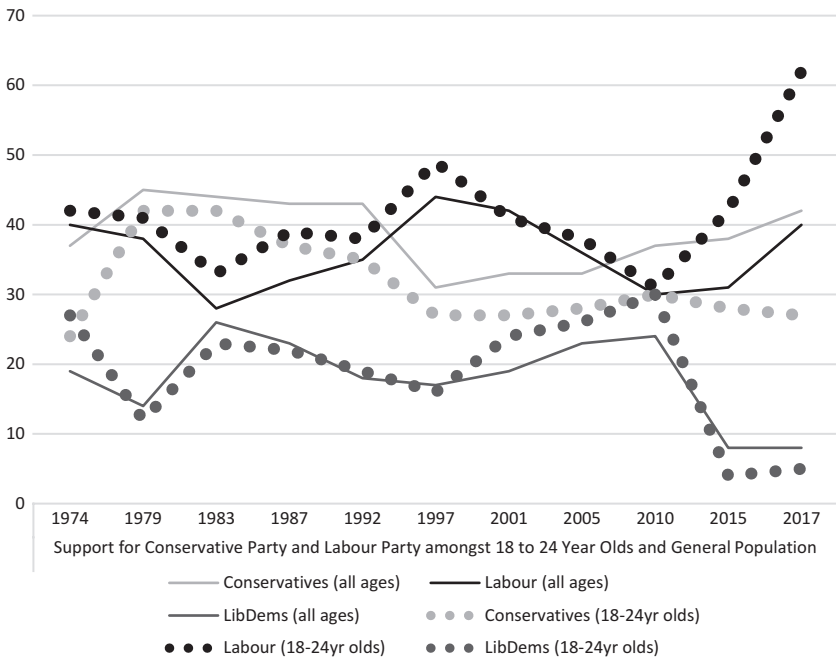
So, the estimated turnout gap between young people and all citizens is very small or reversed with respect to young people of an above average or high social grade and full-time students. The problem, more precisely defined, is the non-participation of young people from poorer backgrounds.

It is, obviously, too early to say whether 2017 was a watershed, where a new generation of young people became engaged in electoral politics or simply a one-off. Nevertheless, it was clear that the Labour Party was considerably more successful in mobilizing young people in 2017 than in previous polls.

## TURNING LEFT

One of the most prominent features of the 2017 General Election was the importance of age in predicting which party an individual voted for. A remarkable 62% of 18–24 year olds voted for the Labour Party, contrasting with only 27% for the Conservative Party (Ipsos MORI 2017b). During the period from October 1974 to 2017, the gap in support for the two parties amongst young people recorded at the 2017 General Election – 35 percentage points – was unprecedented in size (Fig. 5.5). The next largest gap during this period was 22 points in 1997. The swing to Labour in 2017 reverberated down the generations. The Labour Party's 2017 lead over the Conservatives was 29 points amongst 25–34 year olds and 16 points amongst 35–44 year olds. Thus, the youthquake extended beyond the *youngest* cohort of voters.

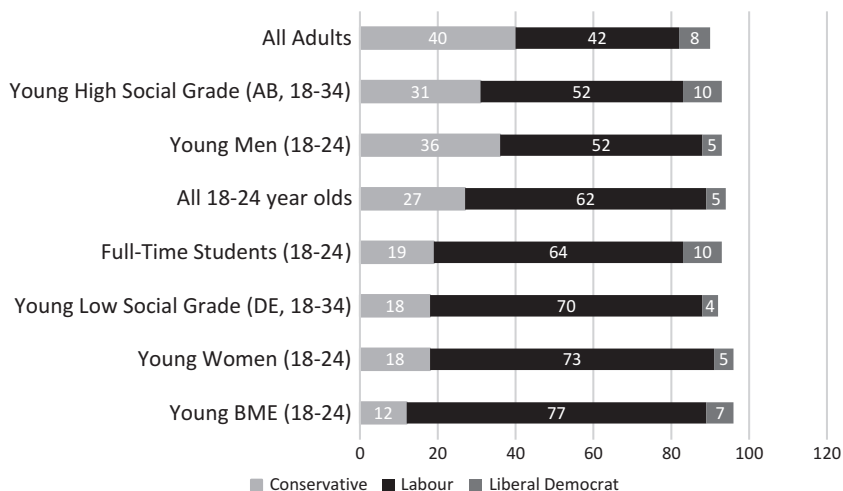
It is common to assume that the Labour Party is always more popular amongst younger voters, but this is not the case. In 2015, 18–24 year olds supported Labour over the Conservatives by 42–28%, a gap of only 14 points. In 2010, the two large parties were locked together with the Liberal Democrats on approximately 30% support from the youngest electoral cohort. We would highlight the significance of the 2015 General Election in that the Labour Party managed to improve its performance amongst



**Fig. 5.5** Party support amongst 18–24 year olds and general population, October 1974 to June 2017 (%). (Source: Sloam et al. 2018)

18–24 year olds by 11 percentage points, thanks largely to the implosion of the Liberal Democrat youth vote (from 30% to 4% as a result of the party’s participation in the Coalition Government and U-turn on university tuition fees). It should also be noted that, in 2015, the Green Party also benefitted considerably from the decline in Liberal Democrat support amongst this demographic.

Labour’s astonishing success in 2017 amongst younger citizens was achieved through small gains from the Conservative Party, the large-scale capture of voters from third parties, and by mobilising more young people to vote. The Liberal Democrat Party failed to improve on its disastrous performance in 2015. Although it did not suffer any further decline in its share of the 18–24 year old vote in 2017, the fact that it was not able to regain some of its losses in this age group was a major disappointment given the strong pro-European theme of its manifesto. What is more,



**Fig. 5.6** Support for Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats amongst groups of young people (%). (Source: Sloam et al. 2018)

tactical voting and a surge in student support for Labour, led to damaging defeats for Liberal Democrat incumbents in the university constituencies of Sheffield Hallam (Nick Clegg), and Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland). An underreported feature of the youth vote was the large gain in Labour support from the Green Party, whose share of the youth vote fell from 8% in 2015 to just 2% in 2017. The emergence of Corbyn as an anti-establishment figure with cosmopolitan-left credentials, and the perceived lack of importance of the environment as an issue (as discussed below) squeezed support for the environmental party.

The Labour Party's emphatic lead amongst 18–24 year olds varied across different groups of young people (Fig. 5.6). It gained greatest support from young women (73%), and young people of a low social grade (70%). Labour also secured the backing of 73% of Black and Ethnic Minority citizens, who have a younger age profile than the average UK citizen.<sup>6</sup> Whilst we might expect, from previous elections, social grade and student status to have a large impact on party support, the scale of the Labour Party's appeal amongst young women was surprising given that there was no difference between men and women's support for Labour and the Conservatives amongst adults of all ages. These results might be attributed to the Brexit effect – 75% of young Remainers

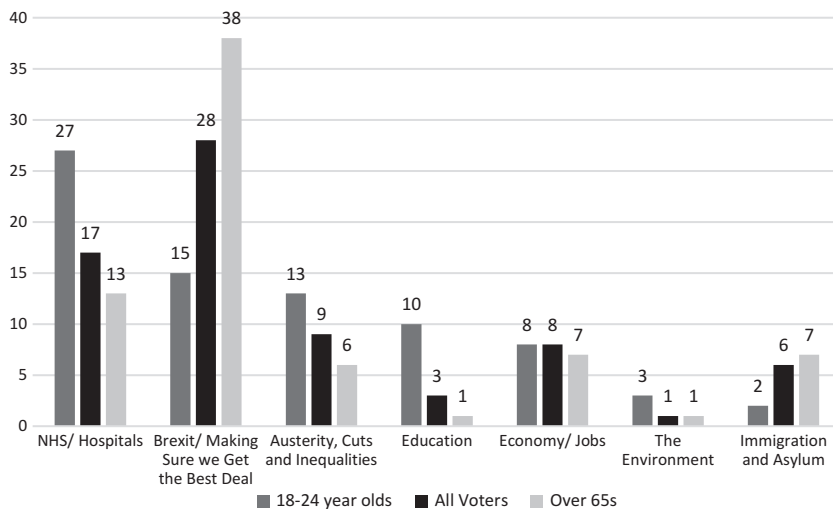
voted Labour in 2017 (ICM 2017b) – and to the Corbyn effect. Young women, students and BME citizens were all very likely to vote Remain, and to sympathise with the Labour leader’s views on economic inequality, immigration and British foreign policy. On the other hand, the weaker support for Labour (52%) and stronger support for the Conservatives (36%) amongst young men may in part be attributed to their higher than average levels of Euroscepticism.

The influence of socio-economic status on voting intention has become more complex. In 2017, young people of a high social grade were more likely to support Labour than the Conservatives (by 52–31%), but to a smaller degree than the average 18–24 year old (a Labour lead of 35 percentage points). However, full-time students were considerably more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (by 64–19%). Attention should be drawn to some notable differences between young Remain voters in 2016 and young Labour voters in 2017. Labour scored better than the Remain campaign amongst young people of a low social grade (by 70–54%), but worse amongst young students (by 64–82%).

Despite the overwhelming extent of youth support for Labour in 2017, the narrative of the party’s appeal to young voters must be treated with some caution. Youth support for Labour appeared to be highly dependent upon Corbyn’s leadership, and as such might be viewed as a protest vote against: the political establishment in general, the economically precarious position of the Millennial generation, and the authoritarian-nationalist populism of Nigel Farage, Donald Trump and elements of the Leave campaign. It is very uncertain as to whether this youth support for Labour would transfer to a less anti-establishment party leader, or whether youth support for Labour might ebb away the further removed we become from the trauma of the financial crisis and the memory of the Brexit referendum.

### THE POLICY PRIORITIES OF YOUNG MILLENNIALS

To better understand why young people overwhelmingly voted for Labour, we need to take a closer look at party policy and the issues prioritised by younger cohorts. Figure 5.7 indicates the policy preferences of young people (18–24 year olds) compared to the average UK citizen, and those aged over 65. According to Lord Ashcroft polling, the ‘*most important single issue*’ for young people during the election campaign was



**Fig. 5.7** ‘Most important political issue’ during the 2017 General Election campaign (%). (Source: Lord Ashcroft Polling 2017.  $N = 14,384$  (734 18–24 year olds))

healthcare, which was chosen by 27% of this cohort. The NHS, a traditional strength for the Labour Party, was earmarked for extra funding in its 2017 manifesto. The next priority for young people was *Brexit* (15% of younger citizens prioritized this policy area). Here, younger voters were also more closely aligned to the official Labour position, which – though lacking in detail – advocated a ‘soft Brexit’ through the maintenance of close relations with the Single Market. Though Brexit was a key issue for young people, it was viewed as similarly important to a number of materialist issues.

The third most important area for 18–24 year olds was that of austerity, poverty and economic inequalities (13%). This was followed by education (10%), and the economy and jobs (8%). In our Populus poll, ‘housing’ also emerged as a key theme for young people.<sup>7</sup> Whilst many of these issues may be long-term problems that have persisted for several decades, the polls suggested that young people associated austerity, economic inequalities and the increasingly unaffordable costs of housing with seven years of Conservative-led government.

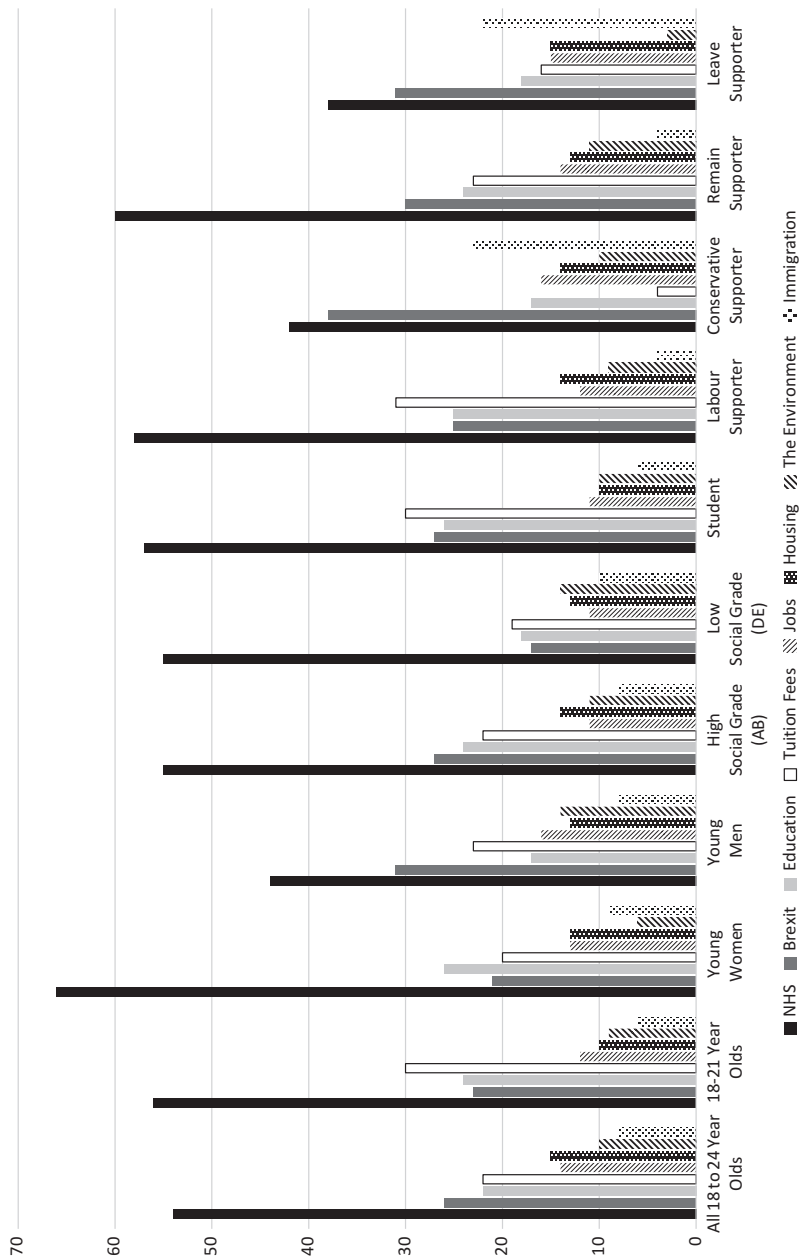
Perceptions of the importance of different issues varied greatly across generations. The differences between young and old were largest on the

subjects of Brexit (−23 percentage points), the NHS (+14 points), education (+9 points), austerity, cuts and inequalities (+7 points), and immigration and asylum (−5 points). Adults of all ages considered Brexit (alongside the NHS) to be the top issue facing the country, and it was easily the most important issue for those over 65. The cosmopolitan-left attitudes and sentiments of Young Millennials, thus, diverged remarkably from those of the over 65s. This related not just to their policy priorities, but also to the positions adopted on the issues. This was particularly the case with regard to the political-cultural issues of Brexit and immigration, where young people were much more supportive of membership of the European Union and were much less concerned about immigration to the UK (see Chap. 4).

Using an ICM (2017c) poll of 1,002 18–24 year olds fielded a week before the election, we were able to examine the policy priorities of young people in more depth, with respect to age within the cohort, gender, social grade, student status, support for Labour or Conservatives in 2017, and support for Remain or Leave in the 2016 referendum. Figure 5.8 illustrates the large differences that existed between young women and young men on the relative importance of the NHS (prioritised by 66% of young women and only 44% of young men) and Brexit (prioritised by 31% of young men and only 21% of young women). This, again, illustrates why young women were much more likely to vote Labour than young men. The differences between 18–21 year olds and all 18–24 year olds over their prioritization of *materialist* issues were less surprising; for instance, the younger group were more concerned about university tuition fees whilst the older group were more focused upon jobs and housing.

The similarities between the policy priorities of young Labour supporters and young Remainers (and between young Conservatives and young Leavers) was remarkable. This provides further evidence for claims about the emergence of a distinct, cosmopolitan-left political constituency. The divide between young Labour and young Conservative supporters (and young Remainers and young Leavers) was unambiguous on a number of issues. The NHS was viewed as one of the most important issues by 58% of young Labour supporters and 60% of young Remainers, and by only 40% of young Conservatives and 38% of young Leavers (a gap of around 20 percentage points for both). Tuition fees were prioritised by 31% of young Labour and 23% of the pro-EU young Remainers, and only 4% of young Conservatives and 16% of young Leavers. On the other hand, young Conservatives and young Leavers were much more likely to stress





**Fig. 5.8** Policy priorities (three most important issues) for sub-groups of 18–24 year olds. (Source: ICM 2017c. N = 1,002 (all 18–24 year olds))

the importance of immigration (23% and 22%, respectively) than young Labour and young Remainers (4% for both).

It is also important to point out, again, that the prioritisation of particular issues by different sub-groups of young people does not mean that they were supportive of the same policy solutions. For example, there was little difference between the policy priorities of the highest and the lowest social grades and between these social grades and full-time students, but this masked large differences in support for or opposition to cultural diversity and European integration (see Chap. 4).

### THE YOUTHQUAKE DEBATE

Estimating voter turnout amongst sub-groups of the population is fraught with difficulties. It can be measured as a proportion of the population and as a percentage of registered voters. The former is preferred by most political scientists. However, citizens are often reluctant to admit (in opinion polls) that they did not participate in an election due to the perceived social desirability of voting. So, we have to rely on best estimates of turnout.

With regard to youth turnout in 2017, the British Election Study (BES) reported that there was no significant increase in the electoral participation of 18–24 year olds in 2017. And, on this basis, described the youthquake as a ‘myth’ or a mere ‘tremor’ (Prosser et al. 2018).<sup>8</sup> We disagree with this characterisation of the youthquake for a number of reasons. Despite its highly regarded methodology, the BES results were based on a very small sample of young people, which makes the weighting of the data all the more important.<sup>9</sup> We agree with Stewart et al. (2018), who raise concerns about the large differences between the BES unweighted and weighted data of 18–24 year olds (63% and 49.6%, respectively).

Other pollsters, using much larger samples of young people, estimated considerable increases in youth turnout in 2017. Ipsos MORI (2017b), sampling 890 18–24 year olds, recorded an increase in youth turnout of 15 points to 54%.<sup>10</sup> YouGov (2017a), sampling 3,756 18–24 year olds, estimated an increase of 16 points to 59%. The New Musical Express (9 June, 2017) poll, sampling 1,354 18–24 year olds, recorded an increase of 12 points to 56%. And, if we look at the differences in estimates of support for the Conservative and Labour parties between polling companies, they were largely founded on different estimates of youth turnout. As ICM (5 June 2017a) argued: ‘those pollsters who, like us, show higher Tory leads

are implicitly sceptical about the extent of this self-reported turnout' amongst young people. Yet it was those pollsters like ICM, who predicted a lower youth turnout, that *underestimated* the vote for Labour on 8 June. Meanwhile pollsters such as YouGov, who predicted a higher youth turnout, proved to be more accurate in forecasting the actual result.

More generally, to dismiss the so-called youthquake as a myth is to take a very narrow view about what constitutes political engagement and political change. Even if we presume that turnout amongst 18–24 year olds did not increase (which is disputed by much of the polling data), we would point to several other changes that have reshaped the political landscape. These include the unprecedented rate of youth support for the Labour Party, high levels of youth activism in the campaign (Pickard 2018), and the distinctive cosmopolitan values of young Labour supporters. To argue that young people did not significantly influence the election result (Prosser et al. 2018), by focussing exclusively on 18–24 year olds, misunderstands how generational change influences politics. The dramatic events we discuss above were most evident with the youngest cohort of voters, but – as we explain – were to a lesser extent present in all cohorts aged below 45.

The 2017 General Election marked both a long-term *generational effect* and a short-term *period effect* on the values and political habits of Young Millennials growing up in the aftermath of the financial crisis and through their experiences of the 2016 EU referendum. When one looks into the *intragenerational* dimensions of the youth vote, the changes in 2017 were remarkable. The cosmopolitan-left attitudes and orientations of young people are particularly present amongst young students and young women.

Clearly not all young people could be considered as participants or fellow travellers in this cosmopolitan-left movement, and it is much less reflective of young white men from poorer backgrounds with low levels of educational attainment. Indeed, our research identifies a significant minority of young people who were likely to vote for Brexit in 2016 and the Conservative Party in 2017, and who harboured deep reservations about immigration and ethnic diversity.

We argue that a youthquake equates to much more than voter turnout, and should be seen as a multi-faceted phenomenon involving fundamental social, political and cultural shifts. It is worth re-stating that the OED defined a youthquake as 'a significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people'.

Finally, the narrative effects of the youthquake should not be dismissed out of hand. We would argue that the widespread acceptance that a youthquake happened had a tangible impact on the behaviour of the national political parties. Corbyn's deliberate targeting of the youth vote, Labour's unusually high dependency upon youth activists, and the unexpectedly strong performance of Labour in the election, encouraged the Conservative Party to rethink its approach to younger voters. This shaped a review of – amongst other things – the role of young people within the party as well as policy on tuition fees and housing benefits for 18–21 year olds.

### SUMMARY

In 2017, younger voters were politically energised by Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party. In an echo of the 1960s, they expressed themselves as left-of-centre cosmopolitans, reacting both to austerity politics and to the cultural conservatism found in older generations and embodied by the Leave campaign in the EU referendum.

In 2017, age replaced class as the key predictor of party choice. This emanated from the emergence of cosmopolitan-left attitudes amongst many Young Millennials, and the sense of collective political identity established within this group through their experiences of protest (for example, Occupy and the student tuition fee demonstrations), the 2016 EU referendum, and the 2017 General Election. The large intergenerational differences in political attitudes have been driven by the redistribution of resources away from younger citizens and youth-oriented public policy since the advent of the global financial crisis in 2008, and in opposition to the cultural backlash of older generations against the issues of diversity, European integration, and immigration. Despite his lukewarm approach to the European Union, Corbyn's opposition to austerity appealed to many younger voters, as did his internationalist outlook and his acceptance of immigration and cultural diversity. In the 2017 General Election and the 2016 EU referendum, support for the Labour Party and Remain was therefore particularly strong amongst citizens who were young, highly educated, female and supportive of cultural diversity.

Young people were attracted to Corbyn's perceived authenticity and policy program, but this was a two-way street. The Labour Party appealed directly to this demographic through proposed investments in education

and housing, and by guaranteeing workers' rights. By contrast, there was little for young people in the Conservative Party manifesto beyond vague references to intergenerational justice. Conversely, we can conclude that the (successful) pursuit of UKIP voters by the Conservative Party (with regard to positions in favour of a 'hard Brexit' and reducing immigration) were naturally repellent to many younger voters.

After the election, the Conservative Party recognised 'the need to win over young voters' (Damian Green, BBC Online, 1 July 2017), and in 2018 appointed two vice-chairs of the party with the specific task of improving its standing amongst younger citizens. In spring 2018, the Conservatives also launched *Onward*, a think-tank to be spearheaded by (amongst others) Ruth Davidson, the young, socially liberal and pro-EU Scottish Conservative leader with the express intention of 'enticing younger voters away from Jeremy Corbyn to the Conservatives' (The Times, 18 April 2018).

It is clear that the Labour Party – particularly its leader Jeremy Corbyn – dominated a social media space where political information is well-trusted and relatively highly consumed by Britain's young people. The party certainly enjoyed a comfortable advantage over the Conservative Party on this front. This led to Conservatives, such as Robert Halfon, a former Minister for Education, to argue for a Tory-affiliated version of Momentum, to counter Labour's ownership of the digital sphere. Speaking to City AM, Halfon dismissed Tory grassroots infrastructure as 'either ageing or non-existent' (Sloam and Ehsan 2017).

The higher youth turnout in 2017 showed that young people can be mobilised if politicians address the issues they care about with concrete policy proposals. On the other hand, the engagement also reflected disillusionment and anger with the impact of public policy on younger generations in the aftermath of the financial crisis and actualised in government austerity programmes during the 2010–2015 and the 2015–2017 Parliaments. Furthermore, our findings show that we should also continue to pay attention to low electoral participation amongst certain groups of young people – particularly those of a low social grade, not in education or with low levels of educational attainment. In the UK, there is also the additional issue of voter registration. With the introduction of Individual Voter Registration in 2014, over a million citizens (disproportionately young people) fell off the electoral roll (James and Sidorcsuk 2016).

## NOTES

1. We disagree with the claims of Curtice and Simpson (2018) and others that political interest did not increase amongst young people during and after the referendum. If one asks questions about political interest per se that might be true (reflecting a continued dissatisfaction with politics and politicians amongst young people). But if one asks questions about interest in the campaign, that is not the case.
2. Unfortunately, in our polling data, the sample size for young BME citizens was not large enough to be reliable – particularly when separated out into different ethnic minority sub-groups (such as social class and so on).
3. Other youth-oriented policies set out in the Labour Party manifesto included: greater investment in *early stage intervention* in young people’s mental health, and the creation of a justice system to help re-integrate youth offenders back into society
4. Due to the separate Green manifestos produced for different groups of citizens, it was impossible to compare their focus on young people to the three main parties.
5. It should be noted that, in what many considered to be a populist move, the Labour Party positioned itself as opposing these Conservative proposals for the reform of social care for the relatively well-off elderly, whilst at the same time advocating increased spending on youth-oriented issues, including the abolition of university tuition fees.
6. We were not able to acquire large enough samples of young BME voters to include them in this study. However, we would have expected to find considerable support for the Labour Party from this group, given Jeremy Corbyn’s active engagement with ethnic minority groups (for example, Grime4Corbyn), and his critical views of British foreign policy in the Middle East, the Prevent de-radicalisation programme, and police targeting of young ethnic minority citizens for stop-and-search (The Independent, 30 May 2017).
7. ‘Housing’ was not classified as a separate category in the Lord Ashcroft Polling (2017) data.
8. The authors of the BES report claimed that there was no surge in electoral turnout amongst 18–24 year olds and that the youth vote (due to its numerical size if nothing else) did not swing the election (Prosser et al. 2018).
9. We would note that the small BES sample size of 18–24 year olds did not (or could not) address the voting patterns of distinct sub-groups of young people (such as young women, young people in full-time education or geographical variations in youth voting patterns).

10. It is worth noting that, under Ipsos MORI's pre-2017 'percent of all resident adults' methodology, the increase in turnout was even higher – over 20 percentage points. The figures we use for 2010 and 2015 draw upon this old methodology, whilst the figures we use for 2017 are based on the new methodology ('percent of all registered voters'). So, if anything, we believe that we are presenting a conservative estimate of the increase in youth turnout.

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