

# YOUTH & POLICY

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*Youth & Policy:*  
The final issue?

Towards a new  
format

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# About *Youth & Policy*

*Youth & Policy* Journal was founded in 1982 to offer a critical space for the discussion of youth policy and youth work theory and practice.

The editorial group have subsequently expanded activities to include the organisation of related conferences, research and book publication. Regular activities include the bi-annual 'History of Community and Youth Work' and the 'Thinking Seriously' conferences.

The *Youth & Policy* editorial group works in partnership with a range of local and national voluntary and statutory organisations who have complementary purposes. These have included UK Youth, YMCA, Muslim Youth Council and Durham University.

All members of the *Youth & Policy* editorial group are involved in education, professional practice and research in the field of informal education, community work and youth work.

The journal is run on a not-for-profit basis. Editors and Associate Editors all work in a voluntary and unpaid capacity.

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# Extending democracy to young people: is it time for youth suffrage?

Kalbir Shukra

## Abstract

*Across Europe, there has been a growing interest in lowering the voting age to 16. Campaigners have met with some success in Scotland, Norway and Austria, but the age of franchise in England remains 18. Arguments on each side of the lobby are hampered by a lack of empirical data from real examples. This has left commentators relying on supposition and the voting patterns of the slightly older 18-24 year old group. This article addresses that evidence gap with election data from London Borough of Lewisham youth elections, gathered as part of a wider evaluation of the Young Mayor Programme. This evidence, set alongside experiences in Scotland, Norway and Austria, brings a new perspective and points to the need for a further, more open review of voting age.*

**Key words:** youth participation; citizenship; equality; elections; votes at 16.

WHO SHOULD and shouldn't be allowed to vote in a representative democracy is a normative question. The answers to questions such as these reflect how a society views itself, which of its people should have decision-making rights, what sort of decisions need to be made and how the process should operate. In sum, the topic raises questions about what sort of democracy we want to live in and which people we view as citizens. Citizenship rights once granted or denied in the past on the basis of land ownership, wealth, taxes, migration, ethnicity, gender or literacy have changed (Engerman and Sokoloff, 2001). While some of these are still present around the world, there is a consensus against such exclusions across Europe and the USA. Current campaigns for votes at 16 press us all to acknowledge that there is also a youth vote question and remind us that, in the future, we may view today's voting age restrictions as another undesirable exclusionary practice.

This article contributes to the issue by exploring the main arguments for and against voting rights for young people that were played out in the run-up to the 2015 General Election and draws on data from exit polls piloted in 2014 and 2015 in the London Borough of Lewisham, where young people have been voting for their youth representatives since 2004. The polls were undertaken as part of a larger study of Lewisham Young Mayor's Programme and shed light on the voting behaviour of under-18s and enable some of the disputes relating to the lowering of the voting age to be addressed. Although the polls originated as a pilot to test out a data collection tool on voting behaviour, they became important as the only source of data available to examine the quality as well as quantity of youth turnout in the case of an actually existing youth franchise in England. As

such, it also allows analysts to replace their assumptions with research findings. The findings add to analyses of 16 year olds voting in the Scottish referendum (Eichorn, 2015), Norwegian local elections (Odergard et al, 2014) and Austrian national elections (Zeiglovits and Aichholzer, 2014).

## Expansion of suffrage

Who we think ought to have a formal say in decision-making is something that changes over time. In recent years, there has been a debate across Europe as to whether prisoners or young people ought be allowed to vote – questions that would have been unthinkable fifty years ago. Unequal voting rights framed by race, class and gender, have been challenged and changed in most parts of the world, also many states have lowered their voting age from 21 to 18 (CIA, undated). However generally calls in most countries to reduce it further have met with cynicism and resistance. Bids for lowering the voting age further echo calls from important moments of the past, when social groups excluded from the franchise questioned existing orthodoxy and mobilised for change. Historically it was often young people who supplied the energy, time and vision needed to promote the extension of the suffrage (De Schweinitz, 2009). Yet people under 18 are rarely permitted to vote in national elections. Paradoxically, opportunities are constructed to enable young people to participate in participation programmes concerned with ‘youth development’ (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013), but are excluded from the political realm. It is assumed they lack the capacity to make sound political judgments. Whilst being denied a vote, young people are nonetheless affected by government policy and taxed if they work. They also bear the brunt of austerity policies (European Trade Union Institute, 2013; Nunn, 2015) including spending reductions in education, young people’s services, health and other public sector budgets. Protest movements and campaigns for a youth franchise challenge the idea that political representation should be an adult privilege and encourage politicians to pay greater attention to extending rights to young people.

In Europe, harmonisation of voting age down to 18 was enforced from 1997. In the UK the change was marked by the ‘Representation of the People Act’ 1969. Twelve years later Council of Europe (2009) ministers proposed an ‘expansion of democracy by lowering the voting age to 16’. As it was resolved to leave the matter to member governments votes at 16 has remained a national campaigning issue ever since. In the UK a British Youth Council led coalition has campaigned to reduce the voting age, involving youth organisations, politicians and young people under the banner of ‘votes at 16’. This operates in alliance with the League of Voters at European level (Imafidon, 2014; Youth Citizenship Commission, 2009). The campaign gained significant momentum after 16 and 17 year olds were permitted to vote in the 2014 Scottish referendum and Sky News began running its high profile ‘Stand up, be counted’ campaign, enabling young people to interview politicians and air their views in the run up to the 2015 general election. In June 2015 Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) passed legislation to enable 16 and 17 year olds to vote in elections in Scotland. On the same day, an amendment to the EU Referendum Bill rejected the right of 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the 2016 referendum.

## Opposition to a youth vote

Resistance to a youth vote has persisted, despite young people lacking the political leverage they need to address their disadvantaged position (Nunn, 2015). A primary concern has been whether young people can be trusted with a decision around political representation. In addition, experts have expressed a fear that a youth franchise might exacerbate a ‘democratic deficit’ by increasing the proportion of non-voters. The first concern is based on the view that under-18s lack political interest and maturity and so cannot be relied on to vote intelligently, knowledgeably and appropriately (Chan and Clayton, 2006; Bergh, 2013, Electoral Commission, 2002; 2004). The second worry comes from viewing a call for ‘votes at 16’ as missing the broader problem of widespread political disengagement and non-voting (Mycock and Tonge, 2015). It is argued that since first time voters and young adults turn out to vote disproportionately less than older voters, a lower voting age could prove counterproductive as it might increase the proportion of non-voters or turn abstention into a norm (Russell, 2014).

In 2009 a UK Youth Citizenship Commission (2009) considered arguments for reducing the voting age but rejected them on the basis that of an ‘evidence gap’ and the government’s view that human rights are not affected. But the UK did produce some data when 16 and 17 year olds were temporarily granted the franchise for a referendum on Scotland’s future in the UK. At the time, there were fears that the youth vote would skew the results but young people’s votes alone did not determine the outcome of the referendum. Rather, they contributed to a vibrant public debate and excitement about the decision (McInnes et al, 2014). Despite what was widely seen as a positive political experiment, those 16 and 17 year olds who voted in the referendum were not able to vote in the General Election a year later. This sort of inconsistency in voting age is evident in other parts of the world where, for example, under-18s have a vote in municipal elections but not in national ones. Norway, Germany and the US have experimented with lowering the voting age to 16. Some countries have also considered offering votes to young people younger than 16, though this is rare (Wall, 2011). Austria has lowered the voting age threshold to 16 in national elections, matching Cuba, Brazil, Guernsey, Isle of Man and Jersey. UK political parties, academics, youth experts and young people remain divided on the issue, despite research from Austria and Scotland having pointed to the experiences as positive (Wagner et al., 2012; Bergh, 2013; Eichorn, 2015). In England, the closest equivalent youth voting opportunities are the annual elections of Young Mayors.

## Youth elections

Some London boroughs and UK cities have a ‘Young Mayor’ connected to a Young Mayor’s Network overseen by the British Youth Council. Each ‘Young Mayor Programme’ (YMP) varies in structure and organizational culture. Lewisham has the longest running YMP and it offers a unique opportunity to study youth democracy in action. For over thirteen years, it has activated young

people's right to vote for municipal youth representatives and combined youth voice with a youth vote. It is being simulated in other parts of Europe and the UK and serves as potentially valuable source of data about young people, voting and citizenship.

Lewisham youth elections are an important source of evidence around whether and how young people under the age of 18 cast a vote in formal elections. While sceptics argue young people would not engage in voting, almost ten thousand young people vote annually in Lewisham. Every October, the Electoral Services Team runs an election overseen by the Returning Officer, using methods that mirror those of formal adult elections. These elections have been a way of young people electing their four borough-wide youth representatives, who are supported by a group of Young Advisors.

Secondly the elections in Lewisham are important for testing the argument that young people under 18 aren't mature enough to make an informed decision. Locally they are popular visible annual events that involve 11 to 18 year olds, bringing them into the civic realm, identifying and debating issues of importance to them and voting for representatives. The 13th election was in October 2016. A review of data from these elections addresses the reliance on the voting behavior of 18-24 year olds. As the voting behaviour of the older age band may not be comparable to that of under 18s, it is useful to explore the two main arguments against a lower voting age: that young people wouldn't turn out to vote if given an opportunity and if they did vote, they wouldn't make a mature decision.

## Youth voter turnout

Explanations of low voter registration and turnout among young adults (18-24 year olds) are frequently used to justify the current voting age and framed either as voter apathy or voter disengagement and distrust (Cammaerts, et al, 2014). The voter apathy perspective attributes low engagement to a lack of interest, understanding or commitment to politics on the part of voters. The voter distrust argument focuses responsibility on politicians or the political system (Franklin et al, 2004). Both discourses conclude there is a continuing and growing youth democratic deficit. Youth participation projects have sought to influence these for over a decade (Shukra et al, 2012) but research on the 2010 General Election showed that, despite projects and initiatives to increase young voter participation, turnout remained low. 76 per cent of those aged over 65 voted, whereas turnout among 18-24 year olds was stuck at 44 per cent (Ipsos-MORI, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that this gap has increased over time and 'turnout inequality' has negatively impacted on non-voters, including young adults (Lodge et al, 2014). Measures such as citizenship education and postal voting were unsuccessfully introduced to increase voter participation and demands for compulsory voting for first time voters were even suggested but rejected.

A central strand of arguments against votes at 16 is based on concerns that only a small percentage

of young people would turn out to vote even if the voting age is lowered. As this has been based on the conviction that young people are not interested in politics (Chan and Clayton, 2006), some researchers have attempted to prove that young people are interested in non-traditional politics. They conclude that ‘politics’ is too narrowly defined and needs to incorporate volunteering, petitioning and discussions (Cammaerts, et al, 2014; Henn et al, 2005). As few have explored the hard evidence of under-18s’ voting behaviour it is pertinent to ask whether, given an opportunity to do so, young people use their vote in Young Mayor elections. Table 1 shows that the votes cast in Lewisham Young Mayor elections over the last 12 years ranged between 42 per cent and 56 per cent of the electorate.

**Table 1 – turnout in Lewisham Young Mayor Elections 2004 – 2015**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Votes Cast	7087	8110	7967	8316	9327	9616	9363	8076	9341	9417	8961	9624
Turnout %	45%	47%	43%	45%	49%	53%	47%	42%	53%	49%	49%	56%

The youth election turnout shown in *Table 1* was stronger than turnout in standard local elections. For example, in 2012, a council by-election was overshadowed by a Young Mayor election in the same week when a 22 per cent turnout of adults was surpassed by a record 53% turnout in the youth election. A month later, 2012 Police Commissioner elections were marked by low adult turnout rates across the country, ranging from 11.6 per cent to 20 per cent (BBC News, 2012). The reality of young people voting in the Young Mayor elections flouts the reasoning used to oppose a youth franchise in the 2015 General Election (Russell, 2014) namely that young people do not vote when given an opportunity to do so.

The evidence from Scotland is consistent with the Lewisham experience of youth turnout being higher than adult turnout. In Scotland 89 per cent of 16 and 17 year olds had registered to vote for the Scottish Referendum (McInnes et al, 2014). Public opinion research reported by the Electoral Commission (2014) identified turnout for under-18s in Scotland at 75 per cent compared to 54 per cent for 18-24 year olds. In a telephone survey, Eichhorn (2015) found that young people were at least as interested in politics as adults.

In Norway, the voting age was reduced to 16 for local elections in 20 selected municipalities in 2011, as part of an experiment. The turnout for 16 and 17-year-olds was 58 per cent compared to 18–21 year olds at 46 per cent (Ødegård et al, 2014). Despite this, under-18s in these elections did not have a higher turnout than first time voters in the 2013 national elections (ibid; Bergh, 2013). What did appear to be significant, was the level of information about procedures and voting options – those municipalities that provided plenty of information had a higher turnout than those

that did not.. This suggests that engaging voters about the political system increases turnout of young voters and that ‘a lowering of the voting age may in the long run contribute to improved focus on political information towards young voters’ (Ødegård et al, 2014).

Researchers of Austrian elections concluded that ‘findings contradict the studies that assume low electoral participation of 16 – and 17-year-olds because of lack of political interest (Chan and Clayton, 2006; Electoral Commission, 2004; Zeglovits and Aichholzer, 2014). The evidence from these diverse contexts and circumstances contradicts the view prevalent in the UK that 16 and 17 year olds are significantly less likely to vote.

## Political maturity

Having established that 16 and 17 year olds have in fact turned out to vote when given the opportunity it is important to acknowledge that it is a right and not a compulsion. If a proportion of the population chooses not to participate that does not invalidate their right or the claims of others to that right. On that basis the argument that young people should not have the right to vote because they wouldn’t use it becomes immaterial. The more significant argument from opponents of votes at 16 is that young people lack ‘political maturity’ until the age of 18 (Chan and Clayton, 2006). Underpinning this perspective is a view of young people as less capable than adults. Youth organisations, including the BYC, have testified that young people are as capable of casting a vote as adults. Young people’s vote may be based on a shorter life experience but everyone’s life experience is different. Whether or not someone has cast an acceptable vote in a contest is by its nature subjective. One person’s well reasoned vote might be another person’s idea of poor judgment and irresponsible voting. Indeed all voting decisions are a matter of opinion.

Research based on under-18s voting in Austria found that offering votes at 16 reduces age differences in voter turnout (Bergh, 2013; Wagner et al, 2012). The analysis of data from Austria also contests the maturity/capacity argument:

*First, we do not find that citizens under 18 are particularly unable or unwilling to participate effectively in politics. Second, while turnout among this group is relatively low, we find no evidence that this is driven by a lacking ability or motivation to participate. (Wagner et al, 2012: 381)*

This brings us to what the Lewisham exit polls tell us about the judgment exercised by young people when they were voting. What informed their voting choice? What factors were important to them in making their voting decision? Did the electoral opportunity engage them?

## Young Mayor exit polls

Exit poll surveys were introduced as a tool in a wider evaluation study of Lewisham Young Mayor Programme in order to understand the basis of young people's voting decisions. The surveys were conducted at a selection of Lewisham Young Mayor polling stations to collect data from under-18s immediately after they had cast a vote. They were not intended to predict the outcome of the elections, as increasingly happens in general elections, but to examine how voting decisions were being made. In reviewing theories of voting action Visser argues that:

*as a general principle, voting action is determined by a totality of factors' such that 'the vote may be conceived of as a field determined action. Since the field exists of the person and the environment as he sees it, it becomes crucial to uncover the person's subjective experience.*  
(1998: 89)

The main questions were about which candidate the voters supported and why, to acquire a sense of what the voter thought his or her decision was based on. Further questions sought to find out how far campaign activities and backgrounds relating to ethnicity, gender, age or religion may have been an influence. It was also possible to gain contextual information about the surroundings and group factors by noting the school of the voter. The level of influence of specific aspects of election campaigns was sought through questions about the importance of speeches, manifestos, videos and social media.

The exit poll sample in 2013 comprised voters at five secondary schools selected on the basis that they were spread across the borough and of varied type and size (n = 252) and in 2014 increased slightly (n = 292). The random polling aimed to target every tenth voter over the course of three hours to complete an anonymous survey. Despite the limitations related to sample size this is the only data from a live youth election in England that can provide a check on how young people respond to being given an opportunity to vote.

The exit poll survey results in 2013 and 2014 showed that young people's voting choices are as diverse as those of adults. In both years the majority of reasons given for voting for a first choice candidate related either to issues/policies or personality with 60 per cent reasons given in 2013 falling there. In 2014 the proportion reduced to 42 per cent, but remained the top two categories.

**Table 2 – example exit poll statements**

<b>Examples of the diverse statements classified as ‘issues/policies’</b>	<b>Examples of the diverse statements classified as ‘personality’</b>
Because her campaign is about teen mental health illness which is important	I liked what she said and she sounded like she was reliable.
I liked the idea of having more facilities for young people to use	She had ambition
Because I like what she is going to do	Because he is inspirational
He has been successful in youth events and could make a change	I met her and she has was very nice and she had a good future for Lewisham
Because he don’t want to change Lewisham, he just want to make Lewisham a better place	Because I really like his idea of the media project.

As the examples in *Table 2* demonstrate statements classified as issues and policies tended to indicate knowledge or awareness of a problem or strategy that the candidate might address. Some statements conveyed broad perceptions of a need for change in the locality whilst others demonstrated an awareness of specific topics highlighted by a candidate. The statements coded ‘personality’ indicated that some voters made decisions based on their perception of the candidate’s character, charisma, profile or abilities.

The school and age of the voter, in both years, had a significant influence on who voters picked. The poll showed the majority of voters in the samples supported a candidate from their own school or college. Across the two exit poll samples, nine out of ten schools produced a majority of first choice votes for a candidate from the host school. In the tenth school a school candidate balloted second highest votes. The strong influence of school could be read simply as voters’ loyalty to their schools, but not all schools host candidates (though the schools in the polls did). Data returns from voters pointed to some complexity. Voters were asked to rate the importance of pre-selected factors in their voting decision and school affiliation turned out to be a mid-frequency answer in both samples. 53 per cent of the 2013 sample and 34 per cent of the 2014 sample indicated that supporting a candidate from their own school or college was ‘very important’ or ‘important’ to them. Other motives were more frequently cited as important. But if voters didn’t vote for candidates from their own institution primarily because of their attachment to it as school students then what else did they think informed their voting decisions?

The most cited motives related to issues, policies, personalities, campaigning and speeches while school affiliation and knowing the candidate were mentioned least. Since voters were likely to be more familiar with the issues, policies, campaign and personality of their own school candidate(s) than with candidates from further afield, this more consistent voter contact and interaction with the promotional material and candidate(s) from their own school, is more likely to be what won them over than a desire to support the institution. In short, candidates seemed to be at an advantage within their own schools in instances where their campaigns were well profiled at the school during the campaign period.

Candidate engagement with voters was important; during observations and interviews with candidates in four consecutive elections, candidates reported they could not assume that school based voting applied. Candidates had hoped to draw significant support from within their own schools but had not been confident they would achieve that. During the campaign periods they were nervous and often surprised when they experienced supportive assemblies. Indeed some candidates reported cynicism and difficulty in garnering support from within school. The recognition amongst candidates that they could not take votes at their own school or college for granted was more acute where there were several candidates studying at the same institution.

While the culture of support for a candidate within a particular school community became an almost semi-automatic act of solidarity in some schools, the data in *Table 3* points to the campaigning activities and materials of candidates as key in voters reaching a decision. In questions about factors the voter felt to be of importance in making a decision it turned out voters valued hearing speeches, meeting candidates and reading about what the candidate stood for. In other words, the candidates reaching out to voters made a bigger difference than a candidates faith, ethnicity or gender.

**Table 3 – percentage of the sample that marked a factor as important or very important in their voting decision**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>
Speeches	88%	76%
Manifesto	84%	65%
Meeting candidates	80%	62%
Posters/leaflets	77%	58%
You tube video	59%	41%
School candidate	53%	34%
Candidate popularity	42%	21%
Shared ethnicity	32%	17%
Facebook/Twitter feeds	31%	36%
Good looking candidate	24%	22%
Wanted to elect a young woman	34%	20%
Wanted to elect a young man	24%	19%
Shared faith	26%	13%

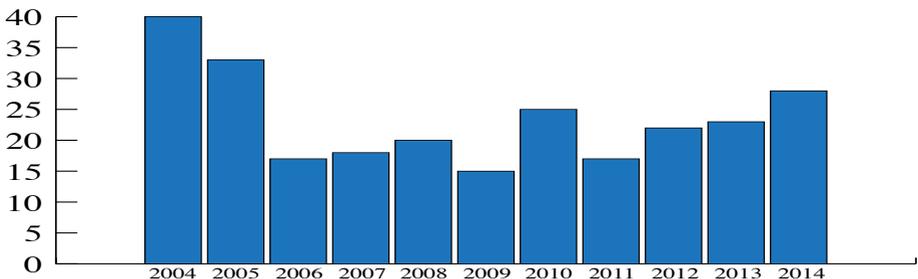
Table 3 shows candidates' backgrounds seemed to be less important to the voter than the link or relationship built up during the campaigns. A candidate's proximity to voters within his or her own school offers stronger opportunities to build up direct contact. Candidates' faith background seemed to be of least interest to the voters. 26 per cent in 2013 and 13 per cent in 2014 considered it to have been of importance and this is interesting given that the UK population that describes itself as belonging to no religion was 50.6 per cent in 2013 and only 30.7 per cent amongst 18-24 year olds reported religious affiliation (British Humanist Association, 2016). Given the low proportion of young adults with a religious affiliation, the percentage of young people who thought that their shared faith with a candidate contributed to their voting decision might be of significance.

Overall the survey found most young people take their voting decisions more seriously than they have been given credit for. For example there is a widespread myth that young people would vote for someone on the basis of physical attraction and that this doesn't happen for adult voters. However in adult politics there is also a great deal of media commentary surrounding the look of particular candidates – including what politicians consume, wear and how they speak. In the London Borough of Lewisham's youth elections many adults had imagined teenagers are swayed primarily by the attractiveness of a candidate and as this opinion was echoed by some of the candidates who were interviewed a related question was incorporated into the exit poll. However, the outcome was that 76 per cent in 2013 and 67 per cent in 2014 did not consider it important to vote for a 'good looking' candidate compared to 24 per cent in 2013 and 22 per cent in 2014 who did think it was of importance to them. Importance was evenly proportioned between male and female voters in 2013, but in 2014 it was more important to the females in the sample. Whilst for some voters, voting for a subjectively good looking candidate is a factor and it remains a possibility that for others its an unarticulated contributory factor, the poll results to date undermine the view that votes are cast primarily on the candidate's appearance or attractiveness.

## Young people as election candidates

Young people's political maturity can also be measured by a high willingness to participate as candidates and campaigners.

**Figure 1 – number of Young Mayor election candidates 2004-2014**



Not only has the number of candidates in Lewisham's youth elections remained high, but the engagement of most of the candidates in the campaign process has been strong. The campaigning process young people engaged in was opaque to adults not involved in the programme, so the interviews and ethnographic aspects of the study were needed to shine some light on that. An understanding of what goes on was gained through shadowing staff working closely with the candidates, conducting interviews and group evaluations with candidates and gathering updates from young people attached to the programme. This was supplemented with ethnographic observation while young people were engaged in campaign activity.

As with candidates in adult elections some youth candidates were more active and earnest in seeking votes than others. Candidates campaigned in whatever public spaces they could reach; schools, youth clubs, buses and shopping centres. Chicken shops and burger bars frequented by teenagers after school were targeted by some candidates, as were online spaces. All of the candidates who came in the top four during the study were active in speaking and leafleting. Each of them had attended assemblies, hustings and been seen campaigning. In the absence of party political machinery of the sort that adults rely on in elections young people created more flexible and, by necessity, cost effective alternatives in the form of personal election teams. Candidates said they felt it was important their faces were more visible than those of their campaign teams. They appreciated the need to build a clear relationship with voters while their campaign team kept them motivated.

Part of the candidates' development process included learning that in standing for election, the relationships they were building were important and they were moving into the public realm and needed to construct a public-political identity. Social media, You Tube and radio were important means of projecting their public identities and speaking to voters. Those candidates already comfortable with online spaces used them during their campaigns with ease. Several candidates over the years have been particularly familiar with a variety of contemporary social media and digital video formats which enabled them to draw on links with MCs and various artists. Many candidates set up separate election pages on Facebook and the older candidates with more experience in digital methods were able to make the most of social media networks.

The winning candidates in 2012 had made greater use of social media than their competitors but in 2013 social media usage reached a higher level than before. The top two candidates made strong use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other formats. In 2013 the winning candidate demonstrated an extraordinary capability of combining social networking sites and a You Tube channel with face-to-face contact through school visits, hustings and street campaigns. He developed a personal election machine that he maintained after being elected and merged his personal following with that of his official identity. Although the majority of voters didn't consider the Facebook or Twitter feeds of candidates to be important (69 per cent in 2013), in this candidate's case a process of 'likes' and retweets helped to create a distinctive profile and momentum. He utilised what was

then an unusually wide range of social media networks, including BBM, Vine and Instagram. This meant he became a talking point amongst young people whether they were eligible as voters or not. Moreover he had thousands of You Tube hits which were popular because they were entertaining and considered amusing. This was borne out by the exit polls: You Tube was cited as important by 59 per cent and 41 per cent of the two exit poll samples in deciding who to vote for.

The winning candidates each year covered a lot of ground in campaign terms. They invested time and energy in developing a message and communicating it as widely as possible whilst recognising that their own contact with voters was key. Far from showing political immaturity the candidates developed a strong understanding of social networking for political gain.

Despite young people engaging in youth elections it did not follow that they viewed adult elections positively. On the question of whether they would vote in a national election, three young women each took a distinctive view:

**A: I don't like big politics.**

**B: But what if no one voted for you to be young mayor?**

**A: Big people politics, Labour and Conservative... I don't agree with their policies ...**

**B: You're not going to agree with all of them, you have to start somewhere.**

**A: I don't mind voting, just not for parliament.**

**B: You have to vote because every vote counts... that's all the work we've been trying to do... or you're not practicing what you preach.... that one vote could've been the vote that won Labour... I'm voting, I have to vote or the BNP will come in.**

**C: Yes, I'm voting because it counts ... it annoys me when people don't vote and then moan about it.**

While young people do vote in youth elections they may also perceive adult elections differently to the Young Mayor elections. This may be due to what Franklin et al describe as the 'character' of an election:

*Turnout changes, if it does, because elections change their character or because of changes in the proportion of an electorate that pays attention to the character that elections have. Elections have changed their character in recent years mainly by becoming less likely to bring about policy change. This is what is meant by a less competitive election. At the same*

*time, more voters now respond (because younger voters are less set in their ways) to the fact that there is little reason to vote in an uncompetitive election. (2004: 143)*

Youth elections tend to be more vibrant and competitive than in adult elections. In particular they speak directly to young people's interests and concerns. Similarly the excitement and fervor that emerged in the referendum in Scotland was produced by candidates organising around a clear policy demarcation and led to a strong youth turnout. It has been argued, across the spectrum, that a reduction of voting age would first require additional formal political education and that more 18-24 year olds are likely to vote if school based political education is developed. Eichhorn's survey analysis in Scotland pointed to schools as an important feature:

*Lowering the voting age to 16 in combination with a detailed rethinking of the role schools play in political education may therefore be positive development worth exploring beyond this referendum. (2014: 13)*

In Lewisham, schools were central to the success of the Young Mayor elections. School based initiatives included assemblies on the theme of understanding democracy, linking Young Mayor democratic processes to school council elections. By hosting candidate activities and polling stations, schools partnered in an experiential learning process which developed youth 'political literacy', a term described as 'invented to mean that someone should have knowledge, skills and values to be effective in public life' (Crick 2004: 82). Overall, the Lewisham model allowed young people, whether as voters, campaigners or candidates, an opportunity to engage in the politics of representation alongside the politics of deliberation and social action. It offered something more directly relevant, creative and imaginative than the traditional youth wings of political parties. Rainsford (2014) found mainstream youth factions struggling to recruit, too marginal to be able to influence party policy and unable to offer a youth voice. She called for a review of party political relationships with their youth wings, greater participation and a louder voice for young people within them. In avoiding a connection between the YMP and party politics Lewisham produced a creative non-partisan programme that facilitates youth voice and influence.

## Why young people vote

Although one of the key arguments against lowering the voting age is that young people wouldn't vote or aren't mature enough to make an informed decision, Lewisham Young Mayor Programme offers a different view of young people. Lewisham has a model of youth democracy that involves schools, community, civic and youth centres across the borough in creating a culture in which youth perspectives are included in all strategic decisions, service design and delivery. In 2014 it was recognised by the World Forum for Democracy and the 26th Session of the Congress of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg which asked Lewisham YMP to advise them on how young people can participate in and contribute to local and regional democracy. The programme engages

all 11-18 year olds who live or go to school in the area by automatically registering them as voters in annual elections of their Young Mayor, Deputy and UK Youth Parliament representatives (Quirk, 2006). The Young Mayor model in Lewisham is understood to offer something important in youth democracy and it has always been hoped that success in voter engagement would stretch into voting in adulthood. This is a notion that was supported by the conceptualisation of voting as a ‘habit’ (Franklin et al, 2004). Once learned the habit tends not to be broken. On this assumption Berry argued that ‘lowering the voting age would lead to higher turnout among all young people, as it enables a habit of voting to form’ (2015: 16). Voting as a ‘habit’ does not readily apply to voting behaviour if the action of voting is conceived of involving a conscious decision based on a rational choice. Voting as a duty, or ritual as a commitment emerging from ‘political literacy’ (Crick, 1998; Kerr, 2015) are alternative ways to view the act of voting. Whether votes are cast out of habit or civic duty, however, there is potential for young people to develop positive emotions and identification around voting (Cammaerts et al, 2014:7) and become more familiar or literate around voting principles and processes (Crick, 1998).

Beyond the exit polls the broader evaluation of Lewisham YMP confirmed that young people engage in the programme and its elections because it fosters positive emotions and identification around voting, by creating a sense of civic pride, institutional responsibility and political literacy through a real experience of voting and community support. The annual elections are hard fought, exciting, visible and vibrant in a way that adult politics simply isn’t. This is the answer to the question posed by local politicians expressing admiration for a high turnout achieved in youth elections when adult candidates and parties struggle to persuade adults to vote. Their reflection is at odds with experts’ worrying over whether 16-18 year olds might decrease national voter turnout statistics.

## Conclusion

Since 2010 there has been continuing concern about young adults not engaging in elections, making it more difficult for under-18s to win a right to vote. Assumptions that young people would not turn out to vote, would not take their decision-making seriously and would not understand what to do, is challenged by data emerging from England as well as Austria and Scotland. Exit poll surveys of the Lewisham Young Mayor elections in 2013 and 2014 indicate young electors take their vote seriously and a higher proportion of teenagers vote for a directly elected Young Mayor than adults do for a directly elected Mayor in adult elections elsewhere. However we cannot assume from this that the same voters would turn out at a general election. This is partly because the polling for the Young Mayor candidates occurred in schools and colleges and both are open on the day of the Young Mayor election, making it easier to vote than in general elections. It is also because Young Mayor candidates are voters’ peers, making the election feel immediately relevant to their lives. Whereas the age threshold for Young Mayor candidates is 13 and general election candidates must be over 18, the youngest MP elected to Parliament was 20 and only elected in 2015.

During the 2015 general election campaign, some opposition parties spoke up in support of a youth franchise and the House of Lords is now in favour of it. A youth vote would extend the expectation that young people be consulted and engaged in the political sphere: if it is legitimate to argue that young people's views should influence local policies why not give young people direct access to a vote and representation in national, regional or European elections? The recent elections for the Mayor of London and the EU referendum offered a chance to review our democracy and whom we think should have a say in the decisions that affect all of our lives. At the same time, we could remind ourselves that democratic politics is more than voting in elections: votes are a small expression of a wider political engagement that can be expected of us all.

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