**Byline Times Article:**

**How can we encourage younger people to use their vote?**

**Young people are more engaged in politics than many give them credit for: we must connect that engagement with the voting booth**

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**Young people are clearly aware of and passionate about current socio-political issues like climate change, anti-racism and income inequality. But we typically turn out to vote in lower proportions than older age groups within society –**[**estimates showed**](https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2019-election)**that turnout in the 2019 general election among 18–24-year-olds was as low as 47% compared to 74% for the 65+ group. There seems to be an idea from older people and established forces within politics, backed by these stats, that young people just aren’t engaged in politics.**

In the latest [Grassroots for Europe roundtable session](https://grassrootsforeurope.org/the-round-table/), we learn that this isn’t the case – young people are incredibly engaged, we just must link for them the issues that they are passionate about with the idea of voting and of mainstream politics. The session was chaired by political activist [Femi Oluwole](https://twitter.com/Femi_Sorry), a prominent anti-Brexit campaigner, and featured presentations from Tappan Vickery, senior director of programming and strategy at [HeadCount](https://www.headcount.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank), and Matteo Bergamini, founder and CEO of [Shout Out UK](https://www.shoutoutuk.org/) (SOUK).

**Lack of engagement in young people is a myth**

Femi opened the session with his own personal experience of going into schools to talk to young people between 2017 and 2019. When he would ask a class, “Who here cares about politics?” there would be perhaps one or two hands go up out of 20 – but when he asked “Who here cares about how much stuff costs in the shops … whether or not you can get a job when you leave school … whether you can get treated by the NHS”, all the hands went up. That’s politics, he would say to the pupils. For young people, the idea of politics seems very remote, removed from the ideas they are passionate about.

“I grew up in the West Midlands, so for me as a kid politics was basically just old white men shouting at each other in London, hundreds of miles away,” Femi said.

He explained that youth engagement in issues such as climate change and equality demonstrate the falsehood of the idea that young people aren’t engaged in politics: the problem is a lack of connection for young people between these issues, and ‘politics’ as seen by young people in Westminster.

“Our failure,” he added, “is to fail to recognise that these young people are already heavily politically engaged, and it’s our job to present something to them to show how they can link their ideas to what’s happening in Westminster.”

**The diagnoses from Matteo Bergamini**

These sentiments were echoed by Bergamini: the mission of Shout Out UK (SOUK) is to engage young people in the political process by running political and media literacy classes in schools and colleges, helping them to understand the system and link their ideas with it. “They don’t see these issues as politics,” he said of young people who engaged in mass student protests or Greta Thunberg’s climate youth climate strikes. There is a disconnect between these issues and Westminster, as Femi said too – what’s pushing young people to become activists and to protest is not being connected to the voting booth.

This disconnect can be viewed alongside, Bergamini says, the fact that if young people don’t get a lot of political education in school, all they see about politics is in the media, which often focuses on what’s going wrong – scandal, sleaze, and so on.

*“Why, as a young person, would you ever want to engage with something you see as dirty, sleazy, nasty, corrupt?*

*“There is no pull to engage with a system in the way [young people] see it.”*

**The solution from Shout Out UK**

SOUK’s solution is to deliver political and media literacy lessons in schools; the barebones basics of how our democratic system works and understanding how to critically analyse the information we receive. So far, Bergamini says, they have delivered these to over 1,000 schools across the United Kingdom, and he has seen a clear rise in understanding from pupils.

Political literacy can help young people to connect the issues they feel passionately about with ‘politics’ and with voting, and by helping young people see how they can catalyse change, counterbalance the negative connotations of ‘politics’ young people may absorb from the media.

This work is essential. Bergamini said: “The sad reality is, we don’t really have a choice about being involved in politics, we don’t really have a choice if politics affects us.

*“The only choice we really have is, are we going to be in the room when the conversation about our lives happens? Or are we going to not, and allow other people to have the influence over our lives?”*

**Registering to vote**

SOUK also engages in more traditional strategies of engaging young people to register to vote. For example, for the last few years they have run, with the Greater London Authority, *London Voter Registration Week* – Bergamini said that last year they achieved an online reach of about 5.1 million people over the seven-day period.

**HeadCount US**

Voter registration is the mission of the other group presenting at this round-table discussion – **HeadCount**. A US company, they focus on voter registration partly because, according to their research, there is a huge gap between election turnout and registered-voter turnout in the United States, more so than other countries. Over 90% of those registered to vote, vote, according to HeadCount’s data from the 2020 presidential election.

Tappan Vickery told attendees: “The intentionality of deciding you want to participate and deliver, actually increases voter turnout tremendously, it makes a huge difference.”

HeadCount, founded in 2004, targets young people (they focus on 18–29 year-olds) at cultural events – “anywhere where people are going for a cultural experience” – like concerts and music festivals, Broadway shows and sports games. A clipboard outside the grocery store is great, Vickery said, but it doesn’t engage young people as well as when they’re in their own environment and have their guard down more. Headcount claim to have registered over one million voters, over 200,000 in 2022 alone.

**Give young people the credit they deserve.**

Bergamini said in his reflections and ‘lessons’ on engaging with young people, among other things, that it is essential to be non-partisan and non-election specific. Young people can tell if you want something from them, and they’re less likely to engage with you if they think you’re just trying to swindle a vote out of them for a specific party. In other words, they’re smarter than you think, and they’re quite apt at detecting bullsh\*t.

This links to a key takeaway from this roundtable, that young people are far more engaged than many give them credit for. They care about issues that we identify as politics, but often see politics and especially voting as a dead-end to solving them. Our goal, then, must be connecting young people and the issues that they are passionate about with the political system and then encouraging them to use the power of their vote. © Yorkshire Byline Times 2023