



A Generation Apart

Were younger people left behind
by the EU referendum?

Katy Owen and Caroline Macfarland



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About CoVi (Common Vision)

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Foreword

I am sure that none of us will forget the EU Referendum. The result sent shockwaves around the world and has stunned people throughout the UK. The generational divide in the polling results was clear – the younger you are, the more likely to vote to remain part of the EU.

Young people will have to live with the fallout from the referendum for a lot longer than those who are already retired. Despite this, it was widely reported that politicians were failing to engage younger people in the debate. This report takes a timely look at some of the reasons behind this lack of enthusiasm that has ultimately led to the Remain camp losing the argument.

Democracy doesn't work well if people don't participate. It is clear that politicians and the media need to reassess the messages they send out and the way they are presented or we risk a whole generation losing faith in democracy.

Kirsty Blackman, MP for Aberdeenshire




Authors' note

The generational divides in attitudes towards the EU, underpinned or compounded by other factors such as attitudes towards migration, identity and levels of education, were the subject of commentary and speculation for a number of months leading up to the referendum. These differences were by no means a new phenomenon, but became ever more salient when many predicted that the youth vote could have a deciding effect on the outcome.

We commenced this project to explore the drivers behind the attitudes of the “millennials” or “Gen Y”, that is younger people between the ages of 18 and 35, and the extent to which the campaigns to Remain and Leave were successful in engaging the youth vote. Although we often use the pronoun “they” in this paper when describing this generation, the authors also fall within this age cohort.

If the UK had voted to remain within the EU, as we and many others expected, then the primary aim of this project would have been to gain insights for political engagement and participation in general. Yet the result of the referendum and the events which have followed have meant that we are facing the most profound political shift in our lifetimes. The decision to break away from the EU will undoubtedly have consequences for decades to come. The insights from this project are thus all the more crucial to inform and guide what happens next.

In the hours, days and weeks that have followed the referendum, many young people flocked to social media to vocalise their feelings of frustration, sadness, outrage and betrayal – sentiments that do not look set to subside any time soon. A range of commentators have suggested young Remain voters are going through the “stages of grief” – if we have already witnessed “denial” and “anger”, an extensive process of “bargaining” will undoubtedly follow. It is vital that younger people, those who have most at stake in the future, have a role in this process. But it is also vital that we have a responsible process of deliberation and cooperation rather than declaring intergenerational warfare. Age cohorts are just one lens in which to look at the views, attitudes and preferences of those who voted – there are other stark trends such as levels of education and geography. The Brexit process



and what follows will need to unify the country across a range of different divides.

This is a time of uncertainty. Our political parties are fractured, but younger people are less likely to hold conventional party affiliations in the first place. Our economy faces challenges, but this generation is one that has already spent their formative years in a recession and has had to adapt to these challenges. Britain's role in the world will be negotiated heavily, the terms of which will have to account for the internationalist outlook of the younger population.

Amidst this uncertainty there are countless opportunities to have a say in the changes that will come. The vote to leave does not determine the basis of how we renegotiate our relationship with Europe and others. It is our elected politicians in the UK who will be negotiating these new terms. Perhaps this referendum can serve as the wake-up call that younger people need to re-engage with the political system, and in turn the political process needs to become more responsive to our expectations too.

Caroline Macfarland and Katy Owen

July 2016



Executive summary

In the months leading up to the referendum, the attitudes and voting intentions of younger people (those between 18-35 years old) were the subject of increasing focus for campaigners and commentators. This generational divide was by no means a new phenomenon. Studies over the course of the lead up to the referendum consistently indicated that at least two thirds of those under 35 would opt to remain, whilst with over 55s the picture was almost the reverse. Our own polling with Opinium, conducted after the referendum, has put the percentage shares for Remain at 73% for 18-24 year olds and 59% for 25-34 year olds.

However, it was the referendum result for Brexit that heightened the significance of these divides – an outcome which the majority of younger voters had not chosen.

Despite a number of varying estimates being released since the referendum, we will never have precise official figures turnout by age in the EU referendum as this data is not released. What we do know for now is that overall turnout, at 72%, was higher than in any national election since 1992. If the ratio of youth turnout to overall turnout was the same in the June 2016 referendum as the 2015 general election, that would mean that 47% of 18-24s and 59% of 25-34 year olds voted in the EU referendum – higher than in any recent general election.¹ Yet this is still low compared to older cohorts.

We conducted a research and analysis exercise to explore why such a difference by age was observed – both in regards to turnout and voter attitudes. Our methodology included an overview of existing attitudinal studies, exclusive new polling with Opinium Research, sentiment and keyword analysis of the headlines of online media outlets most popular with younger people, and an online poll of 1,028 Facebook users.

Section Two explores the drivers behind the attitudes of the “millennials” or “Gen Y” and how their social attitudes, identities and political behaviours affect their outlook towards the EU. Younger people care more about global issues such as environmentalism, human rights and humanitarian aid. They are less aligned with traditional notions of sovereignty, and more

comfortable with migration – key issues for older voters. They are also more risk-averse than previous generations, possibly contributing to concerns that Britain would be less influential in the world outside the EU.

Younger people also “do politics” differently. They are less likely to vote in elections or join a political party, but are more likely to sign a petition, attend a protest and join a campaign on a singular issue. We looked at reasons why people of all ages did or didn’t vote in the referendum, and find that older people are more likely to see the intrinsic value of voting, whereas younger people are more likely to vote in order to have their opinion heard or because they feel strongly about a certain issue, in other words the extrinsic value. This suggests that younger people are more easily deterred from voting especially if they don’t think their vote will achieve something.

The EU referendum should have been the perfect opportunity for younger people to engage more than in a general election because it should have been more directly about issues compared to the usual party politics.

In Section Three we examine why the campaigns – and in particular the Remain campaign which had the most to gain – failed to mobilise more young people to turn up and vote. These are complex and of course do not

just apply to younger voters. Based on what we know about the differences in attitudes, behaviours and identities of millennials we can summarise the shortcomings as follows:

The negative debate undermined confidence to vote: The official messages, whilst potentially appealing to younger people’s perceptions of risk and uncertainty, did not appeal to their optimistic views of the EU or their internationalist identities. The tone in the media was overwhelmingly negative, with 57% of online news headlines containing at least one negative word compared to just 26% containing at least one positive word. Just 16% of people said the public debate around the referendum was optimistic in tone. Overall, the issues that mattered most to Gen Y were barely referenced compared to immigration and non-specific references to the economy.

The messengers became the message: The fact that David Cameron’s name was mentioned in headlines more frequently than jobs, healthcare, housing, pay and human rights combined, demonstrates the extent to which personalities and specific individuals saturated the public debate. The referendum therefore was not clearly distinctive from the terms of a general election where political leadership is the main question. Of over 300 people

who were mentioned in the 4,399 online news headlines we analysed, the average age was 58, 79% of them were men and 93% of them were white.

The referendum logistics excluded young people: Individual electoral registration and a voting day outside term time were factors that were notable in this instance, but more generally the mechanics of voting are optimal to younger people's behaviours and the ways they are used to expressing preference.

The growing crisis that is low voter turnout among Generation Y in elections requires innovative solutions. However, low voter turnout is a symptom not a cause of malfunctioning democracy. We must therefore also look at ways to address the broader social and political environment.

There is a real danger that the result of the referendum will have a strong impact on the optimism of millennials. Yet the uncertainty around the Brexit process is coupled with an opportunity to reinvigorate politics.

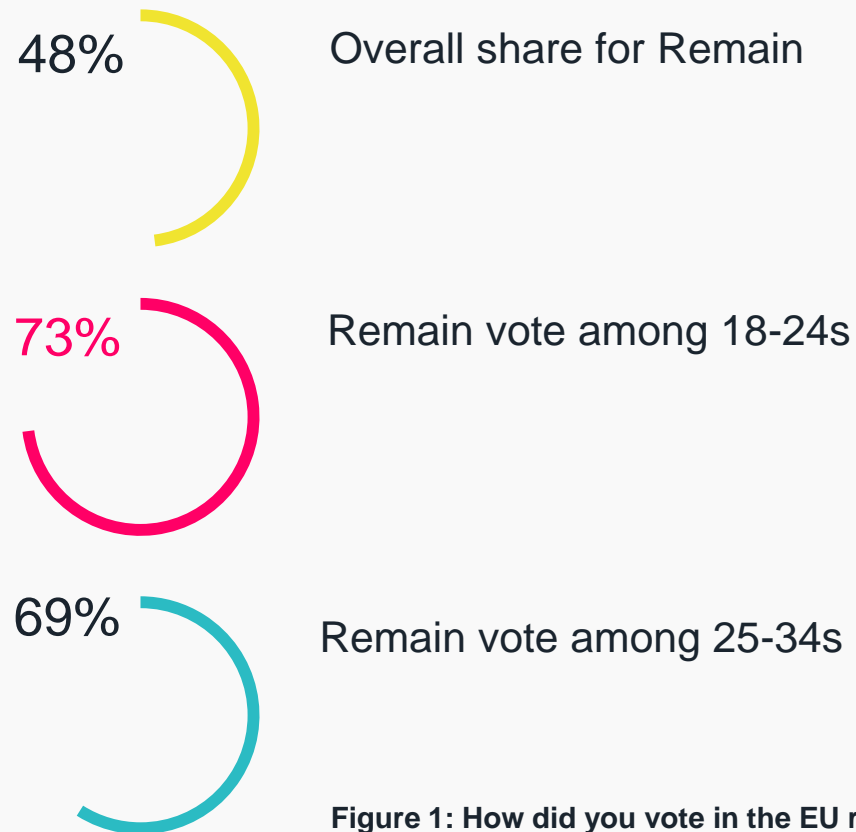
In the concluding section we set out some ways in which government, parliament and younger people themselves could harness this opportunity.

Lessons for democratic design: Our recommendations to government include a series of measures to fix the mechanics of voting to better suit younger people's behaviours, including considering ways to introduce online voting, holding elections over more than one day, reviewing the rules on referenda and extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds.

Uniting the country: We urge the new Prime Minister and the government to bridge the generational divide, by undertaking a public consultation on Brexit to ensure that negotiations with the EU and other countries take account of the values and priorities of younger people. The new Prime Minister has a key responsibility to ensure a positive public debate, whilst other Parliamentarians and the Opposition have an important role in ensuring a balance of interests.

How millennials can take back control: Finally, we provide some practical advice for younger people, including talking to elected representatives, joining a voluntary group, campaign or political party, and continuing the conversation without resorting to intergenerational warfare or casting blame on others. Working together is the only way to shape a common vision for the next generation.

1. Introduction



**Figure 1: How did you vote in the EU referendum?
(CoVi/Opinium, June 2016)**

On the 24th June 2016 the world woke up to the result of the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union. Against the expectations of most pollsters, politicians, pundits, and even the general public themselves, the UK had voted to leave the EU.

On the eve preceding the referendum, the final polls of each of the polling companies had disagreed significantly on predicting the result. What they did agree on, however, is that younger people were much more likely to want to remain in the EU than older people. The poll with the greatest share for Leave, by TNS, suggested that around 71% of 18-24 year olds and 59% of 25-34 year olds would vote for the UK to Remain in the UK.² Meanwhile, the poll with the greatest share of the vote for Remain, by Populus, suggested 73% of 18-24 year olds and 62% of 25-34 year olds would vote for the UK to Remain.³ The on-the-day poll released by YouGov after polling booths closed, which suggested the 'Remain' vote was narrowly ahead, also estimated that 75% of voters under the age of 25 had voted to stay in the EU, in contrast to two-thirds of over 65s voting to leave.⁴

Our own polling with Opinium, conducted after the referendum, has put the percentage shares for Remain at 73% for 18-24 year olds and 59% for 25-34 year olds.

Whilst the YouGov 75% figure was the focus of many across social media and the press the following day, with headlines reporting fury from the generation of millennials who had been “screwed over” by the older population of baby boomers, the differences in attitudes between age groups was not new information. Almost every single study published about the referendum in the months leading up to it, as well as previous academic research on attitudes to the EU, demonstrated strong generational differences in views on whether the UK should leave or remain in the EU. It was the referendum result that heightened the significance of these divides – an outcome which the majority of younger voters had voted against.

Analysis has shown that those who have most at stake in the future, whatever it holds, were also the least likely to turn up and vote. Already more distrustful of the political establishment, and less engaged with

traditional forms of engagement, this generation has in the past been characterised as lazy and apathetic when it comes to politics. And in recent weeks some have been less sympathetic with the disappointment of younger people at the outcome of the referendum given they were at least predicted to vote significantly less than older people.

This report seeks to examine the rationale behind the youth vote and the factors behind the discrepancy in both turnout and attitudes from those of older generations. These are factors and issues which go beyond the referendum alone, but by using the EU referendum as a focal point we hope to use this opportunity to curate important insights about the behaviours and expectations of this generation including their political identities, civic engagement and participation, and how political systems and processes can best respond.

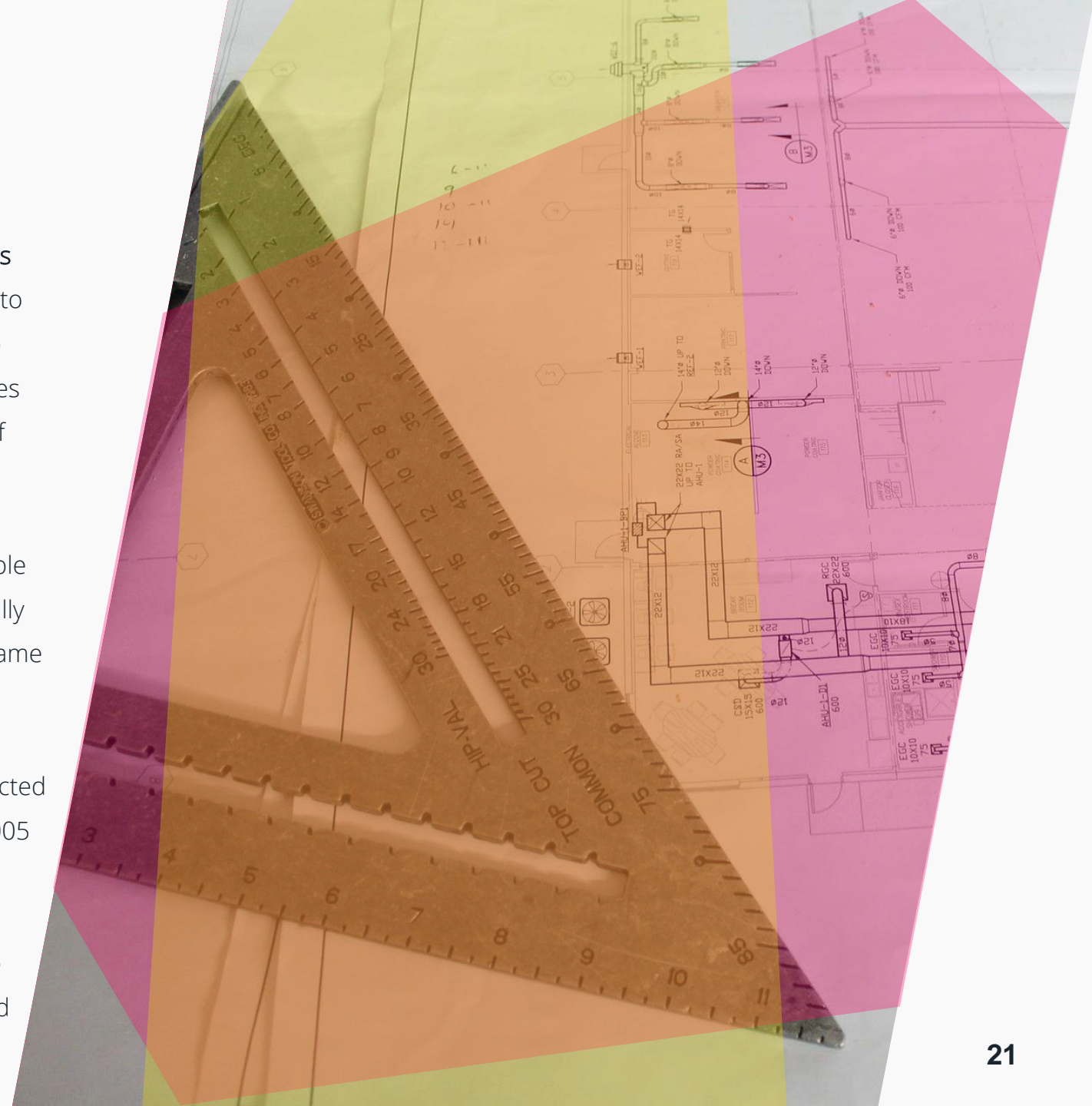
WHO ARE THE MILLENNIALS?

We use the term “younger voters” or “youth vote” in this paper synonymously with “generation (Gen) Y” and the “millennials”, terms coined by market researchers to define the cohort of people aged roughly between 18 and 35, or born from the early 1980s to the turn of the millennium. There are no precise dates for when this cohort starts or ends and research does not always fit this category, with some polling data grouping individuals aged 18-24 and 25-34 separately. Where we are referring to a specific age range we will make that clear. Finally, it goes without saying that boundaries between ‘generations’ are rather blunt – we all know someone who has had the disposition of the elderly since they were a child or has remained playful and young at heart for their whole life. However, this does not make such distinctions arbitrary or meaningless – there is strong evidence that those born after 1980 as a whole have certain different attitudes and behaviours to those born before, even as they age. ⁵

Methodology

We began by collating and analysing a range of **existing attitudinal studies** and academic literature on generational differences and youth attitudes to politics. This includes insights from the published polling in the run up to and immediately after the referendum. As we are often using sub-samples of already small sample surveys, there are sometimes margins of error of approaching seven percentage points to a 95% confidence interval. (This means that the results are in the range of 7% more or less than the true percentage all but 5% of the time.) Where we have used such small sample sizes, we have felt the differences to be large enough to remain statistically significant, particularly where multiple sources are used to confirm the same finding.

We also conducted **exclusive new polling** with Opinium Research. Conducted after the referendum, online between 24th and 28th June, this poll of 2,005 adults has been weighted to be demographically representative of the country. Firstly, we sought to establish the reasons why people voted or didn't vote, and whether there were differences in rationale between age groups. Secondly, questions were asked about the nature, messages and




tone of the campaigns and the extent to which they appealed to different generations. Opinium are members of the British Polling Council and abide by its rules.

Further primary research was conducted in the form of **sentiment and keyword analysis of media headlines**. We chose online sources as these are accessed more by younger people than press or broadcast.⁶ Furthermore, social media is clearly an increasingly important mechanism for sharing news and messages during election campaigns. As articles in large online news websites are often shared on social media with the headlines given prominence on someone's feed, these provide useful insight into the tone and content of the public debate. We chose six sources for these headlines. The Guardian, Telegraph and Mail Online were selected because they are the three most accessed press websites by 15-34 year olds,⁷ the BBC was chosen because it is the most accessed news site in Great Britain,⁸ and Huffington Post UK and BuzzFeed were chosen as two exclusively online outlets marketed at younger people. We sourced articles via an online search of the term "EU referendum" on these news outlets on a weekly basis throughout the three months leading up to the referendum (23rd March to 23rd June). We analysed a total of 4,399 articles across the 6 outlets which featured the phrase for the term "EU referendum" in either the headline or

body of the article, and estimate that this number is comprehensive of at least 90% of all news articles online across the six outlets. The gap is accounted for where articles are not identified by searches and human error. We then coded issues mentioned in the titles using some of the most important issues indicated by voters. We also identified all the people mentioned in the headlines by name (but not by title such as "Prime Minister") and all the negative and positive words contained in the headlines.

Finally, we conducted an **online poll of 1,028 Facebook users** which aimed to gauge views and expressed voting behaviour on social media in the week immediately following the referendum. Participants were asked their age and whether the results reflected their vote. Those participating reflected roughly the demographic split of the polling conducted before and since the referendum – with younger people more likely to say the results did not reflect their vote.



2. A generation apart?

Younger people's feelings towards, and their perceptions of, the European Union are rooted in much broader social attitudes, identities and preferences relating to perceptions of globalisation, international cooperation and nationhood. Younger people are more likely to hold socially liberal, "progressive" outlooks, whilst simultaneously holding views which could be seen to be more "right-wing", such as being more individualist and

distrustful of institutions and the role of the state. Overall this means that "left" and "right" are even less helpful labels in politics than they ever were.

Young people are not a homogenous group and there are of course differences within and between age cohorts, such as by levels of education, gender, ethnicity, geography and socioeconomic status to name but a few. But it could also be argued that although social structures such as class continue to shape people's lived experiences, behaviours and identities, these structures have become increasingly insecure, leading to an intensification of individualist attitudes as well as risk-aversion.⁹

What social research organisations seek to do is identify the trends that reflect majority attitudes and opinions within a particular age group. Some of these trends may be life cycle rather than cohort effects – and we refer to both in this paper – along the lines of the old (but far too simplistic) adage that people become more "conservative" with age. But studies analysing whether attitudinal differences are due to a "life cycle" or "cohort" effect find that there are long-lasting opinions and expectations which are likely to drive significant shifts in the national balance of opinion in the future, as the older population decreases and the younger generation's views account for a greater proportion of living adults.

LIFE CYCLE OR COHORT?

How do we define the differences? Let's use an example. Let's take Aaron and Bethany. Aaron is 19 and Bethany is 57. Aaron believes that people of any gender should be allowed to legally marry one another whereas Bethany believes that marriage should only be between a man and a woman.

Of course, Aaron and Bethany's views could be unique to them but let's assume they are representative of the average person of their age. In defining the differences between them there are two key options.



If the difference in their views is a "life cycle" difference, that means we can expect that, as he ages, Aaron will hold more similar views to Bethany and that by the time he is 57 he will also believe that marriage should be between a man and a woman.



However, if the difference is a "cohort" or "generational" difference, then we can expect Aaron to more-or-less keep his view that people of any gender should be allowed to legally marry one another for the rest of his life.

How we work out which of these categories observed age differences fall into is a difficult question that sociologists have grappled with for a long time. Ideally what is needed are datasets that track people's attitudes in a consistent way and in sufficiently representative samples throughout their lives so we can track views over time. In other words, we need to be asking the Aarons and the Bethanys repeatedly what they think about issues throughout their lives to work out which views stay with them, which change, and whether those that change do so in similar patterns to people of different cohorts.

A third option accounts for "period effects" where certain major events impact on different age groups in a similar or more uniform way. So, both Aaron and Bethany may become proportionately more pro-gay marriage after it was legalised in many countries.

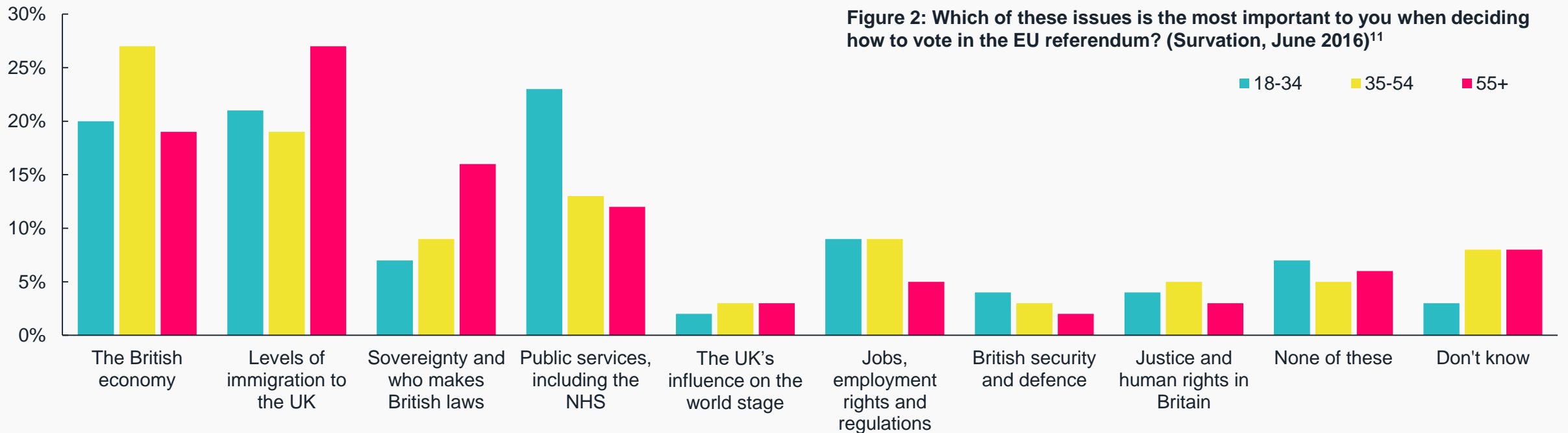
There are some examples of such longitudinal studies, and approximations, that can give us insight into the generational differences we observe at the moment between younger and older people. Typically, these approximations involve asking a representative sample of the same age cohort over time rather than the exact same people – so rather than asking Aaron and Bethany repeatedly, the research involved asking people of their age in a representative way across other factors such as region, education, gender, income and perhaps even voting history.

Social attitudes: What do young people care about?

The millennials have grown up in an age of globalisation and technological advancement. Their experiences have changed significantly to those of their parents not least due to changes in labour markets.¹⁰ They generally hold more internationalist views and are more likely to be concerned about global

issues such as environmentalism, human rights and humanitarian aid. They also care more about poverty and inequality. They are less aligned with traditional notions of sovereignty, and more comfortable with migration – both more important concerns for the older demographic and thus a key focus for the pro-Brexit campaigns.

However, the picture is not all optimistic. Millennials have also seen their formative years overshadowed by economic collapse, and often this generation is characterised as facing the challenges of hardship and



uncertainty. Shiv Malik and Ed Howker have termed this the *Jilted Generation*, arguing that young people face the most uncertain futures since the pre-War years, in stark contrast to their parents' enjoyment of the boom years. Similarly, in his book *The Pinch*, David Willetts describes the "baby boomers" – those who are now pensioners or approaching retirement – as the richest generation that Britain has ever known. The sheer size of this cohort, these authors and other commentators contend, gives them significant demographic power and commands responses from politicians, possibly at the expense of younger generations. Ipsos MORI's work found

that only 42% of Gen Y feel their generation will have a better standard of living than their parents, compared to 79% of the pre-war generation, attitudes that are consistently held within these cohorts even as they age.¹⁵

A variety of research has also indicated that younger people are more financially risk-averse,¹⁶ perhaps due to significant changes in the labour market.¹⁷ This may have been significant in regards to the vote for Remain; a YouGov poll from April 2016 found that 18-24 year olds thought leaving the EU would be bad for jobs and make Britain worse off economically (Fig. 3).¹⁸

Figure 3: Would Britain be economically better or worse off if we left the European Union? (YouGov, April 2016)¹⁴

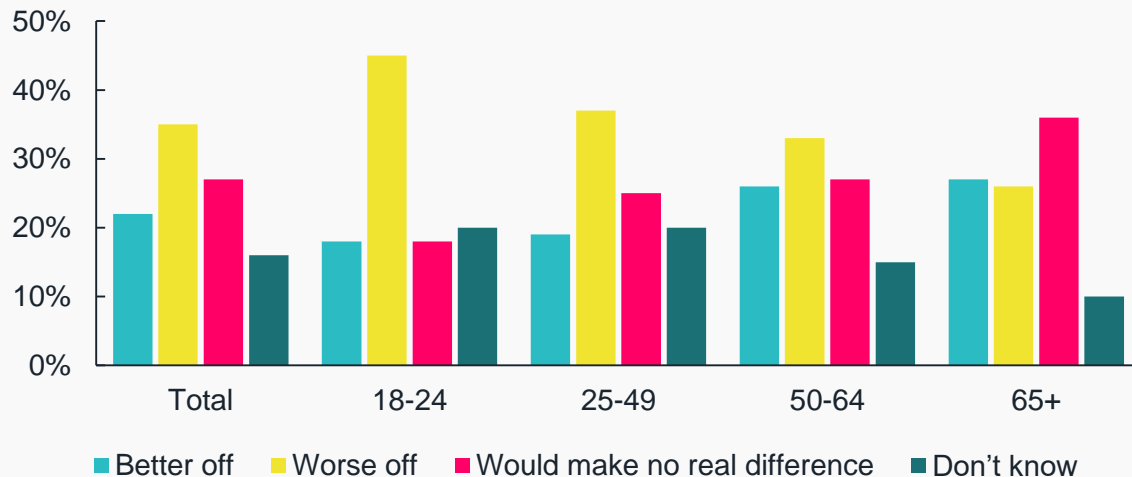
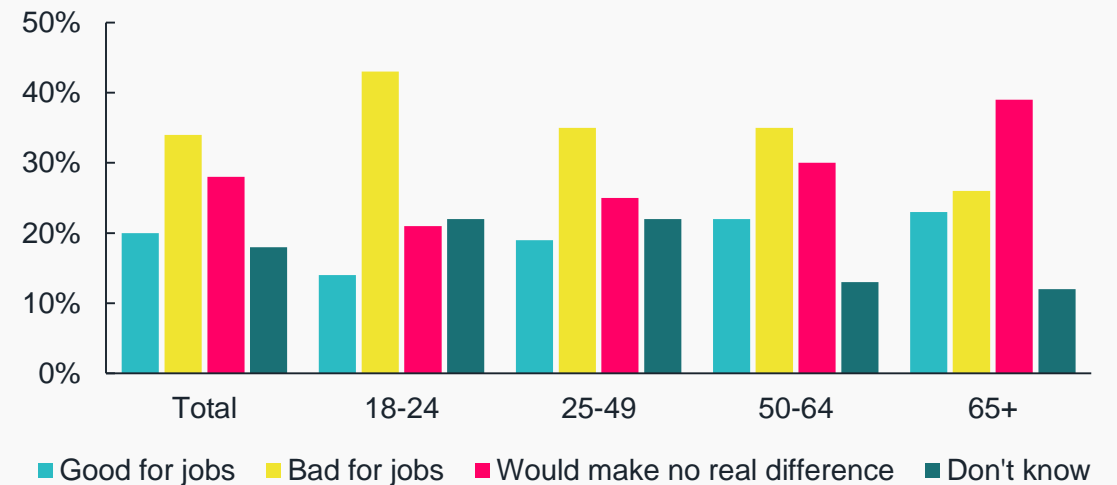


Figure 4: Would it have a good or bad effect on British jobs if we left the European Union? (YouGov, April 2016)¹⁹



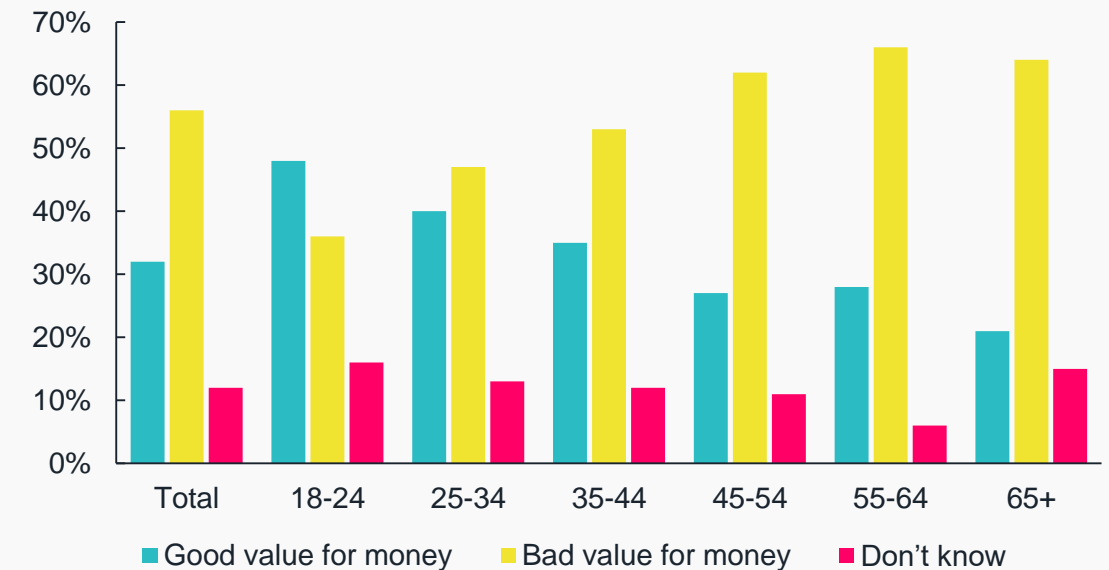
It is perhaps due to this uncertainty that the aversion to risk prevalent in this generation may seem to be more typically “right-wing”, with younger people more likely to distrust large institutions and be less ideologically wedded to the concept of redistribution through the welfare system.²⁰


How are these views of social progress, economic risk, and individualism manifested in attitudes towards Europe? One insight is that younger people are pragmatic when weighing up the benefits of EU membership, appreciating the EU for facilitating jobs and trade, and providing opportunities for migration for work and education purposes – benefiting the “Remain” vote.²¹ Furthermore, 18-34 year olds were much more likely to say that the impact on them personally would be a motivating factor in their vote – at 33% compared to 24% for 35-54 year olds and just 16% for 55+ year olds.²²

There were significant age differences in what issues were most important to people’s vote in the EU referendum. 18-34 year olds said public services were most important, whereas the economy was most important for 35-54 year olds and immigration for 55+ year olds (Fig. 2).²³

Perhaps because they believed in the benefits that the EU brought, younger people were less likely to be concerned about the amount of money the UK contributes to the EU. Even when told by ComRes that “the UK spends a net £8.5 billion pounds on the EU”, almost half of 18-24 year olds (48%) said this represents good value for money (Fig. 5).²⁴

Figure 5: The UK spends a net £8.5 billion on the EU. Does this represent good or bad value for money? (ComRes, April 2016)²⁵





Global citizens, multiple identities

The ways in which millennials view their place in society also differs to previous generations. This is a generation which holds concurrent and cosmopolitan identities, and for whom multiculturalism, feminism, the gay rights movement and the green movement have been positive forces.²⁶ However, perhaps due to the factors already mentioned, younger cohorts have a greater sense of personal responsibility and individualism than seen in other generations at a similar age.²⁷

Thinking about how this manifests in the relationship with the EU, it is worth remembering that no one under approximately the age of 40 has living memory of the last referendum in 1975 on EU membership, or indeed of life in Britain outside of the EU. Analysis of Eurobarometer survey data across EU member states by Professor Anthony Heath and Dr Thees Sprecklesen found that, in virtually every EU member state, younger people are more likely to have a “European identity” – defined as “an enduring aspect of one’s personality often established during the formative years of growing up, and

[distinct from] a policy preference or political attitude” – than older people. In Britain, the gap in European identity across age groups has widened over time.²⁸

Whilst these tendencies towards both cosmopolitanism and individualism may seem contradictory, it appears that the lack of a strong national identity (something that is more prevalent among older people) means that younger people have more positive associations with the EU even if they do not hold strong European identities. Younger people are more likely to be optimistic about the future of the EU (Fig. 6) and to believe that Britain has more influence inside it than it would outside it (Fig. 7).²⁹ Whilst YouGov found that half of all British adults agreed that “The European Union is hopelessly inefficient and corrupt”, only a quarter of 18-24 year olds felt this way (Fig. 8).³⁰

“We got 99 problems but a socially-minded economic and political community ain’t one.”
Matt, 34

Figure 6: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the European Union? (YouGov, April 2016)³¹

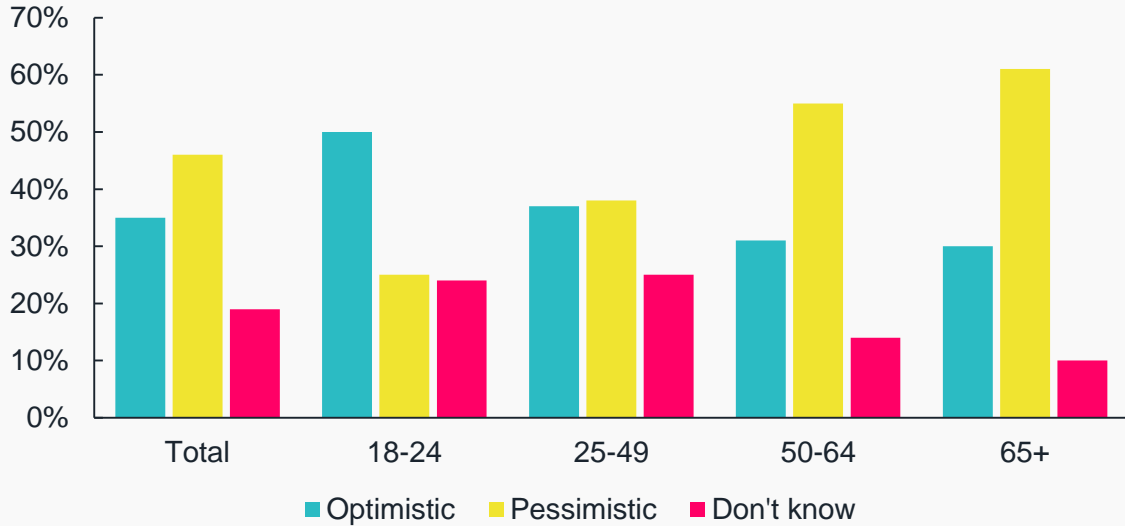


Figure 8: Do you agree or disagree that "The European Union is hopelessly inefficient and corrupt"? (YouGov, March 2016)³³

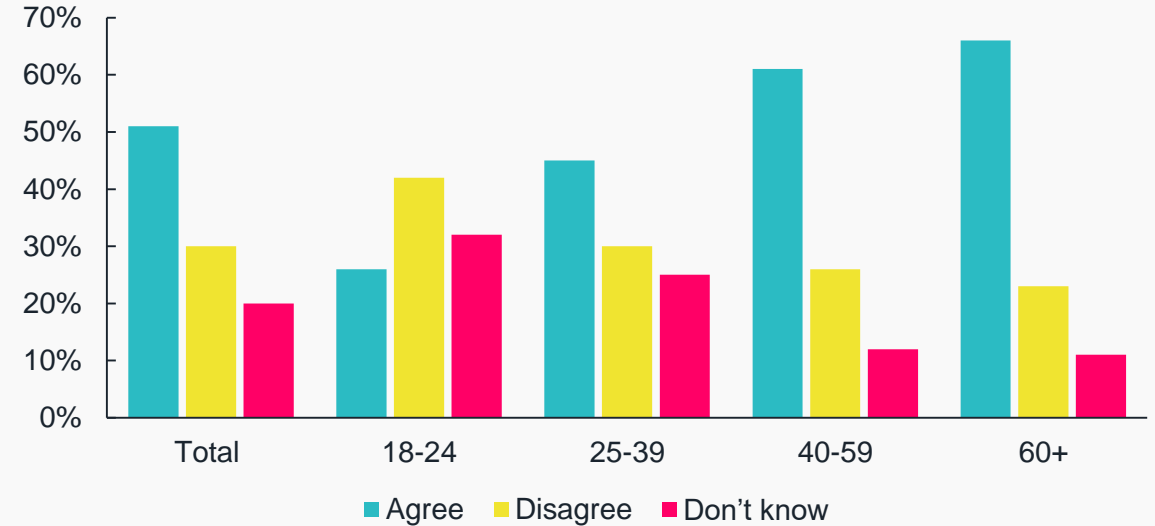
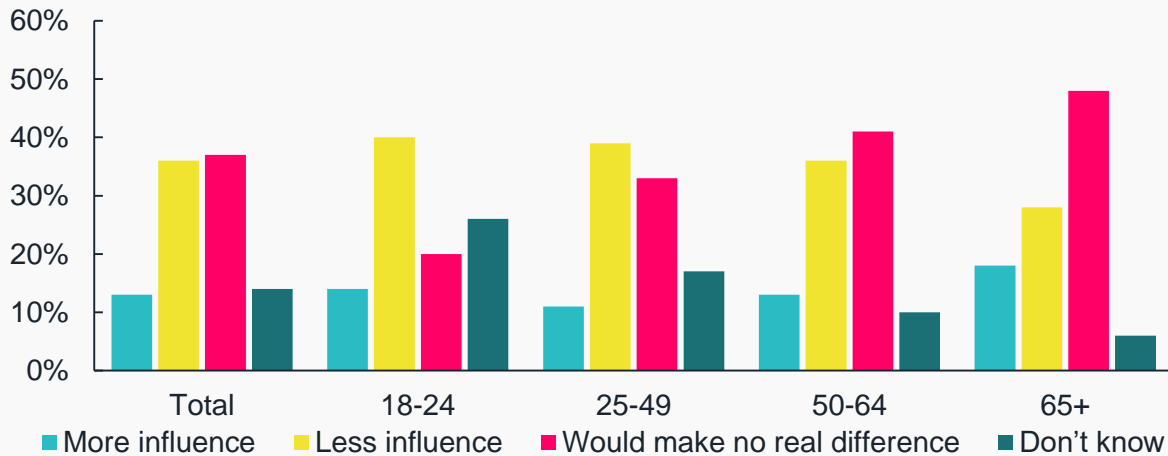
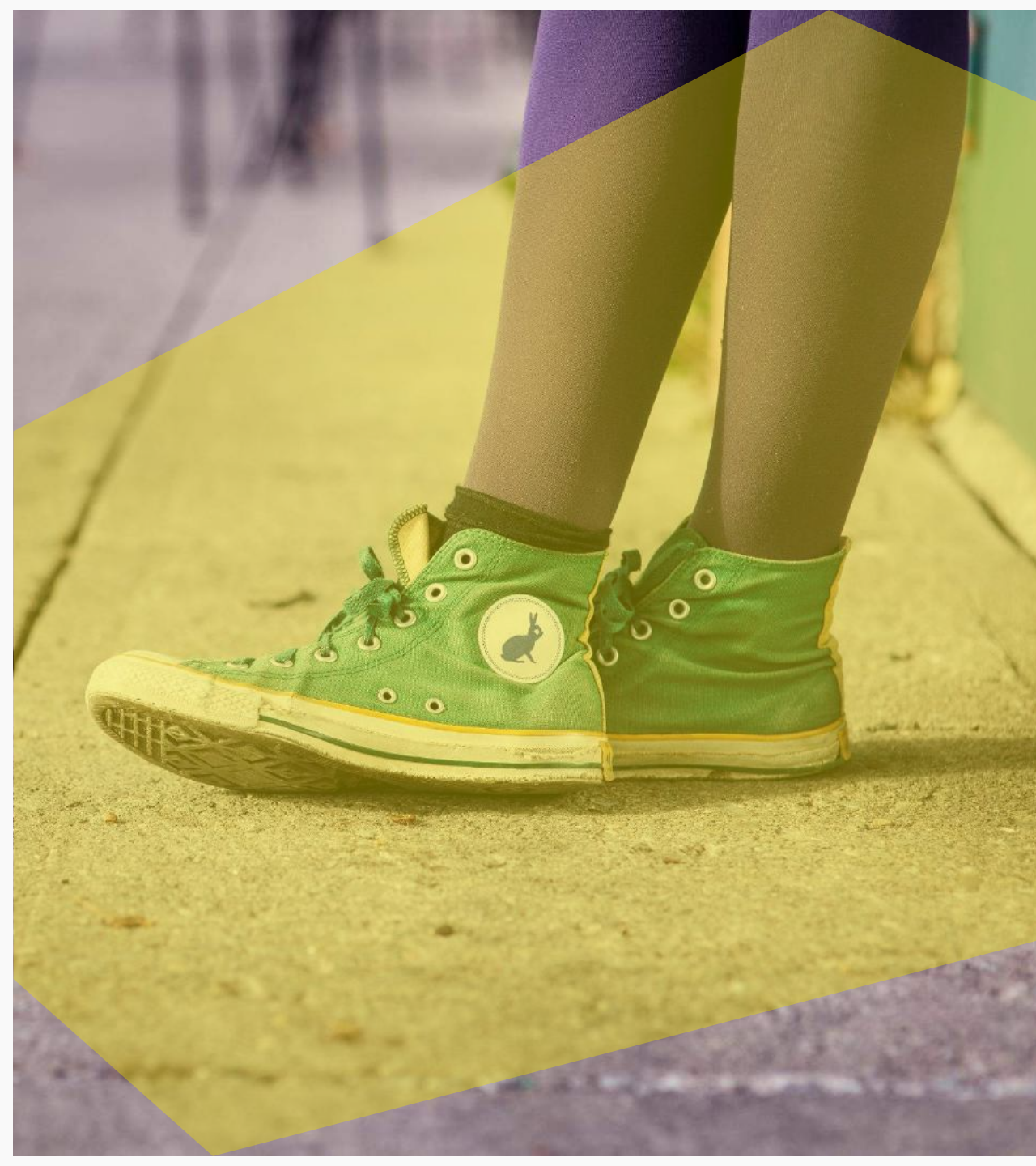


Figure 7: Would Britain would have more or less influence in the world if we left the European Union? (YouGov, April 2016)³²



"I feel that the reason we have had peace in Europe for over 60 years is because of the European project. We have become more interlinked and interdependent."
 Man, 18-34 (CoVi/ Opinium poll)

"We are just a tiny island at the end of the day."
 Joseph, 25



Behaviours: Different ways of doing politics

This referendum should have been the perfect opportunity for younger people to engage more because it was ostensibly not about party politics. Political behaviours of the under 35s are manifested in different ways to older generations. Whilst some of these changes are due to life cycle stages (for example younger people are more likely to be more transient) other behaviours look likely to be more set responses to technological and social influences. This presented a key opportunity for the referendum campaigns to reflect the terms of engagement with which this generation is comfortable.

Younger people are less likely to vote and less likely to join a political party,³⁴ but are more likely to sign a petition, attend a protest and join a campaign on a singular issue.³⁵ These different ways of doing politics is not necessarily a conscious one – indeed many younger people don't necessarily see these things as “political”. The very word politics is associated with Parliament, government, and political parties, all of whom are mistrusted and

considered alienated from a majority of Generation Y, particularly the younger half.³⁶ This disengagement with the traditional system has led many to infer that younger people are just lazier. Yet when it comes to particular social and political issues, they are just as interested and passionate as older people.

Their tendency to engage on a short-term basis on single issues means that younger people approach elections in a different way.³⁷ Coupled with the life-cycle effect that under 35s are less likely to vote for a particular party purely due to not having established strong habits, choosing not just how to vote but whether to vote is a choice that depends more on the issues that matter to them than which party they affiliate with.

Figure 9: Youth views of political system (vInspired)³⁸

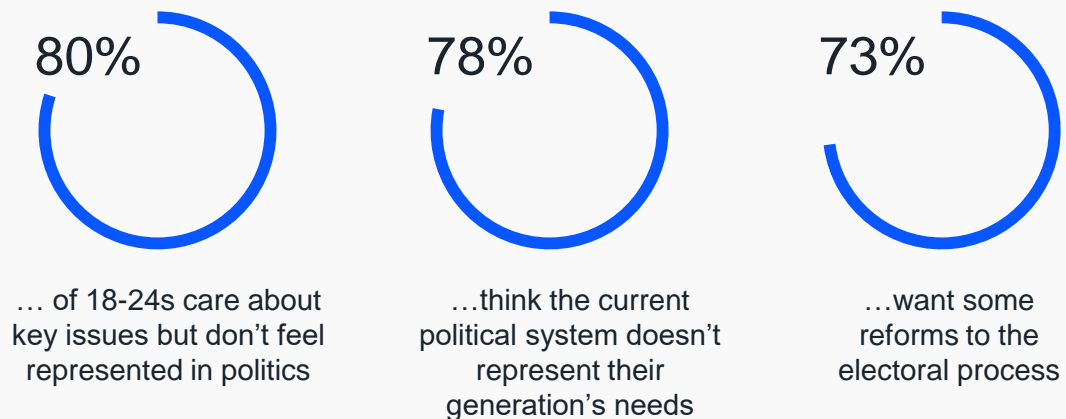
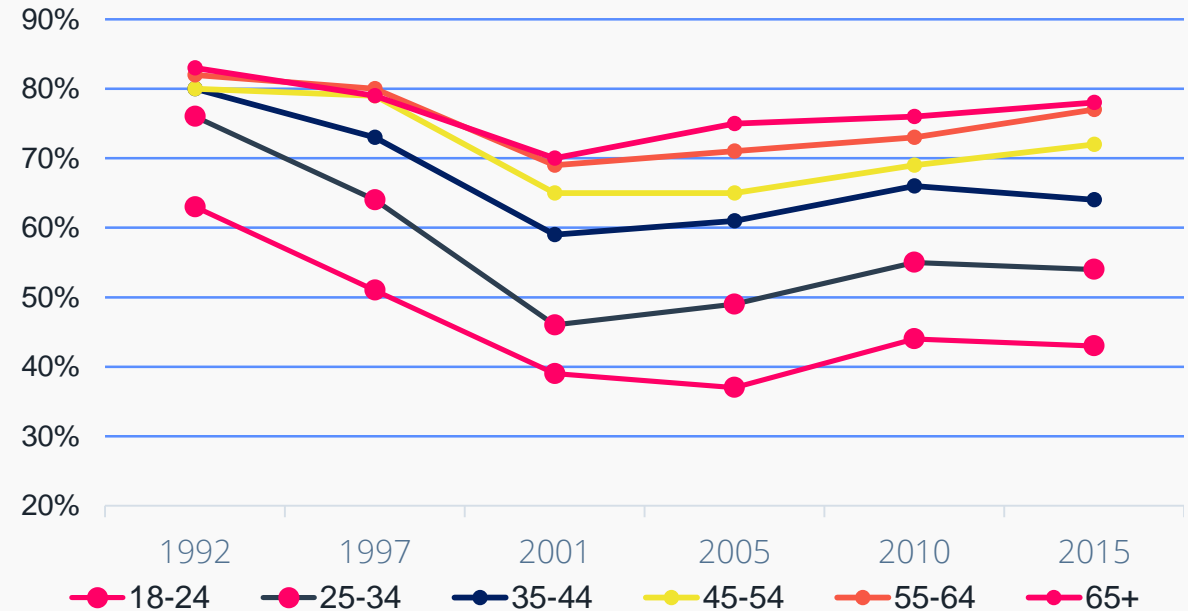


Figure 10: Turnout by age in general elections (Ipsos MORI)³⁹



In terms of voting turnout more generally, it is a well-observed fact that younger people do not vote as much as older people. This gap has been increasing over time. In the 1992 UK general election, 63% of 18-24 year olds voted compared to 83% of over 65s. Fast forward to 2015, and just 43% of 18-24 year olds voted (although this is higher than in 2001 and 2005) compared to 78% of over 65s.⁴⁰ Thus overall decline in voting is masking a growing gap in turnout by age – older people are voting nearly as much as they have for decades but younger people are voting less.

However, this is not a fait accompli. The Scottish independence referendum in September 2014 had the highest overall turnout of any election in Britain since universal suffrage. The entire country was engaged in the debate, and many people voted for the first time in their lives, including newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds. This interest among young Scots was maintained in the general election in 2015.

If low turnout were an inevitable result of the cultural and behavioural changes among Generation Y, we would expect the same to be true in other Western countries who have seen the same changes. Yet there are other European countries where turnout among younger people is essentially as high as that of older groups. In Belgium and Sweden almost twice as many young people (defined in this case as 18-24 year olds) vote as they do in the UK.⁴¹ This suggests that we shouldn't assume that this is simply a life cycle effect and therefore will improve with age, and neither should we view the widening gap in turnout across age cohorts as irreversible.

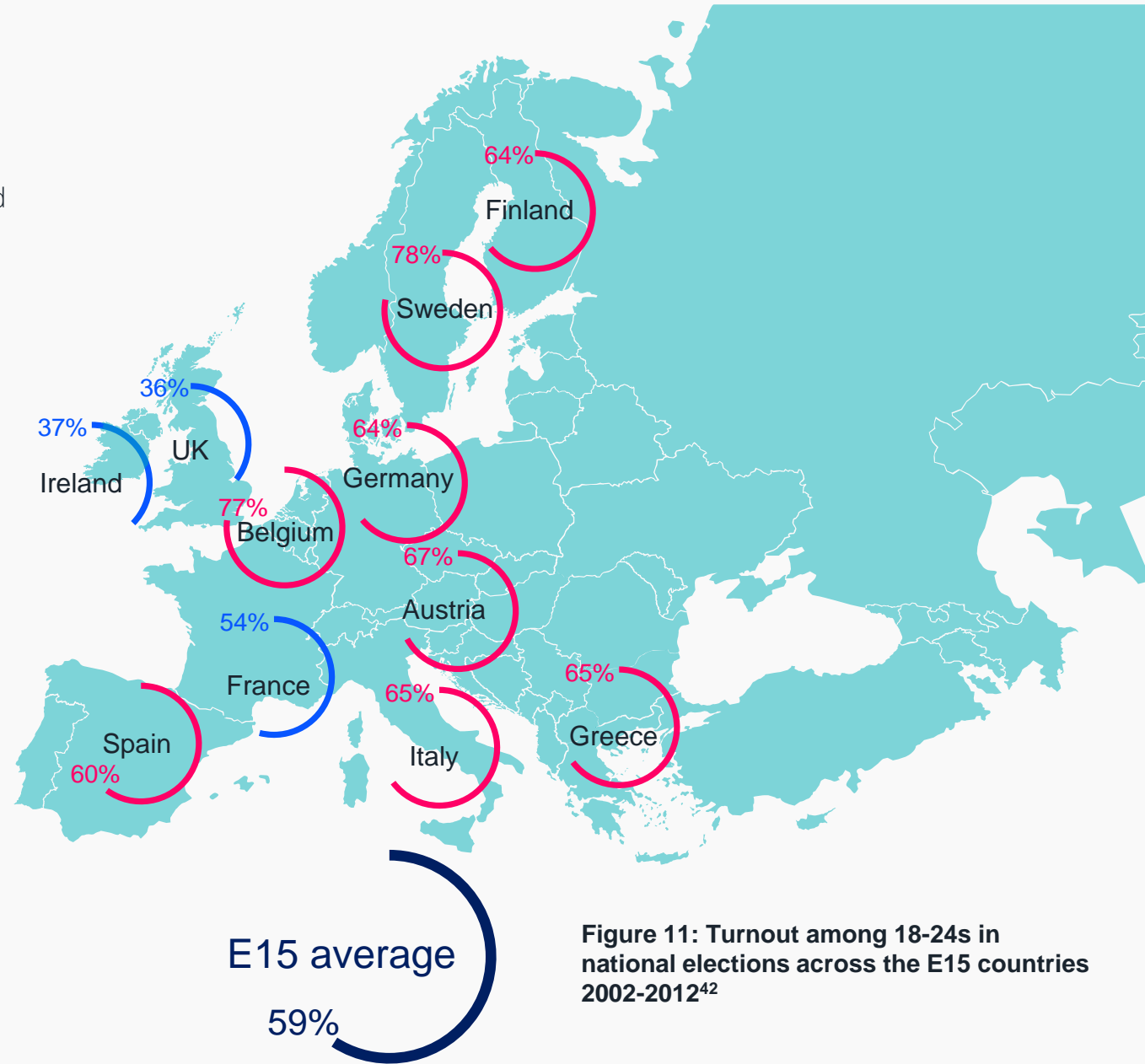


Figure 11: Turnout among 18-24s in national elections across the E15 countries 2002-2012⁴²

3. Lessons from the referendum



As Section Two has explained, given their propensity to engage on single issues more than conventional party politics, coupled with their global identities and their internationalist attitudes, this referendum should have been the perfect opportunity for younger people to participate “on their own terms” and on a subject which they could relate to.

However, in the lead up to the referendum there were various criticisms of the way in which the government had designed and conducted the process and the implications for younger voters. Individual Electoral Registration (IER) meant that many people may not have realised that they were no longer registered to vote. A bid to extend the vote to 16 and 17 year olds was overturned. And the date of the vote, as well as clashing with the Glastonbury festival, was outside university term time, meaning that many students who registered to vote at the May local elections would need to re-register if they were at a different address for the summer.

Youth “broke the internet”... But did they #turnup?

The switch to IER in 2014 meant that an estimated 800,000 people were removed from the electoral register. The most dramatic reduction in registered voters happened in areas with higher student populations. A Hope Not Hate/YouGov survey found that only 51% of 18-31 year olds said that they were certain to vote, with under 25s being twice as likely not to be on the electoral register.⁴³ This was billed as a potential “secret weapon” for the Leave camp.

As the referendum campaigns kicked off, younger people were targeted by politicians and campaign groups. President Barack Obama spoke in London to an audience of young people in April, urging them to "reject pessimism and cynicism" and "know that progress is possible and problems can be solved". There was a concerted drive around the voter registration deadline, with charities, celebrities and consumer apps such as Tinder, Uber and Deliveroo all used as platforms to persuade young people to register with the electoral commission and subsequently to cast their vote.

The registration drive was deemed highly successful when the voter registration site crashed due to unprecedented demand just hours before the deadline. More than 50,000 people were trying to access the site just after 10pm with more than 1,000 unique visitors every minute. After emergency legislation passed the following day, the deadline was extended for a further 48 hours. Many of those who signed up near or after the original deadline were younger voters.

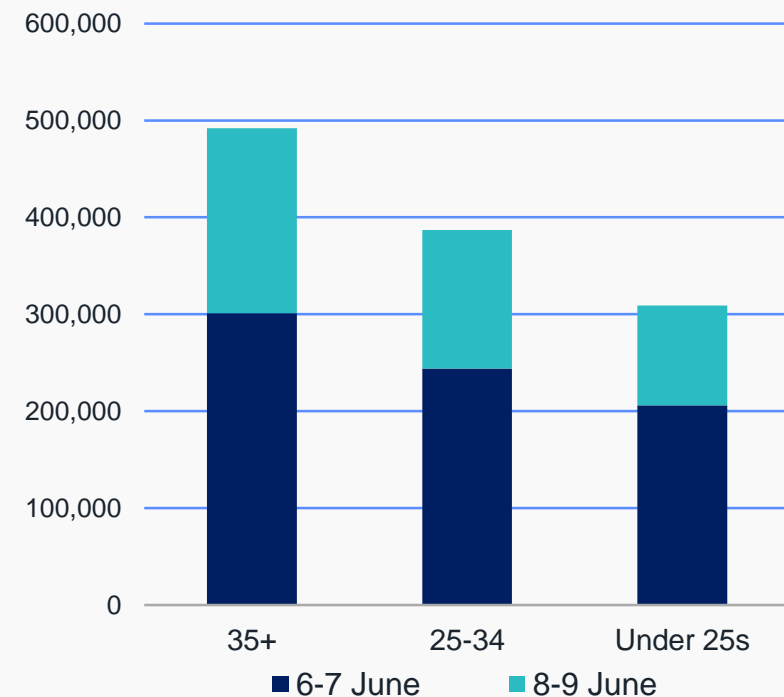


Figure 12: Online applications to the electoral register (gov.uk)⁴⁴

We will never have precise official figures turnout by age in the EU referendum as this data is not released. Analysis of the results by local authority by the Financial Times shows that low turnout correlated with areas with higher numbers of younger residents.⁴⁵ There have been wildly varying estimates of turnout among younger age groups since the election took place, none of them wholly reliable. What we do know for now is that overall turnout, at 72%, was higher than in any national election since 1992. If the ratio of youth turnout to overall turnout was the same in the June 2016 referendum as the 2015 general election (based on Ipsos MORI's analysis),⁴⁶

that would mean that 47% of 18-24s and 59% of 25-34 year olds voted in the EU referendum. This is just under youth turnout rates in the 1997 Blair landslide general election.

Our post-referendum survey with Opinium included open-ended questions which asked why people did or didn't vote. Although the sample sizes are small for non-voters, the results do indicate a difference in the reasons for not voting between generations. The most common reason 18-34 year olds gave for not voting was being too busy or not having enough time to make it to the polling booth with around a third giving an answer along these lines, compared to just one in ten of over 35s. The most common reason among older people was that they couldn't decide which way to vote in the referendum at around 28%. This compares to just 5% of under 35s.

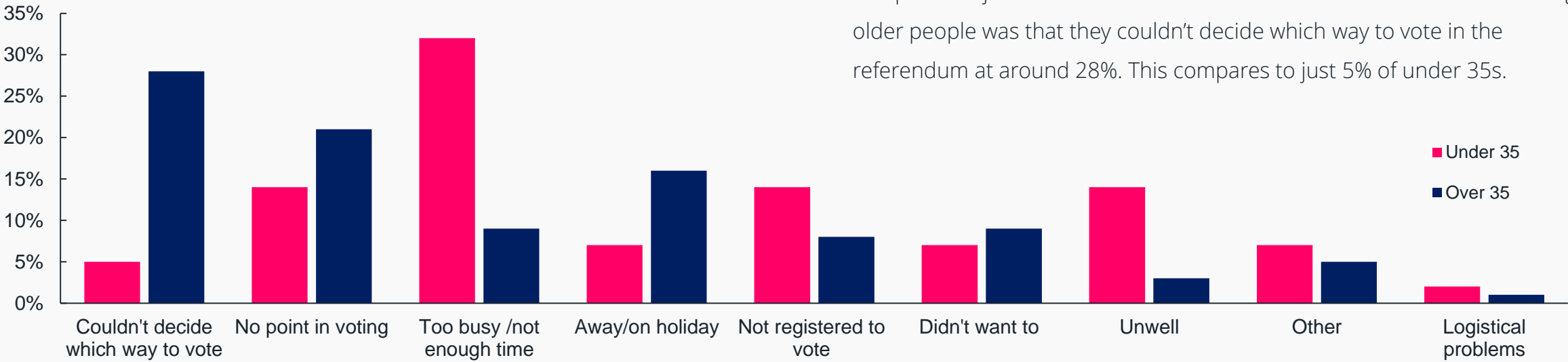


Figure 13: Why didn't you vote in the EU referendum? (CoVi/Opinium)

There was not a significant difference by age of whether respondents said they didn't vote because they didn't want to or didn't see the point. Indeed, if anything, older voters were more likely to say they didn't see the point of voting in the referendum. What our research suggests is that, where younger people don't vote, it is often due to practical reasons such as not having enough time in the day. It could be argued that being too busy to vote is a proxy for low motivation to vote. That is, if a 21 year old and a 54 year old are both equally busy on polling day, the 54 year old may be much less likely to be deterred from voting. Why is this?

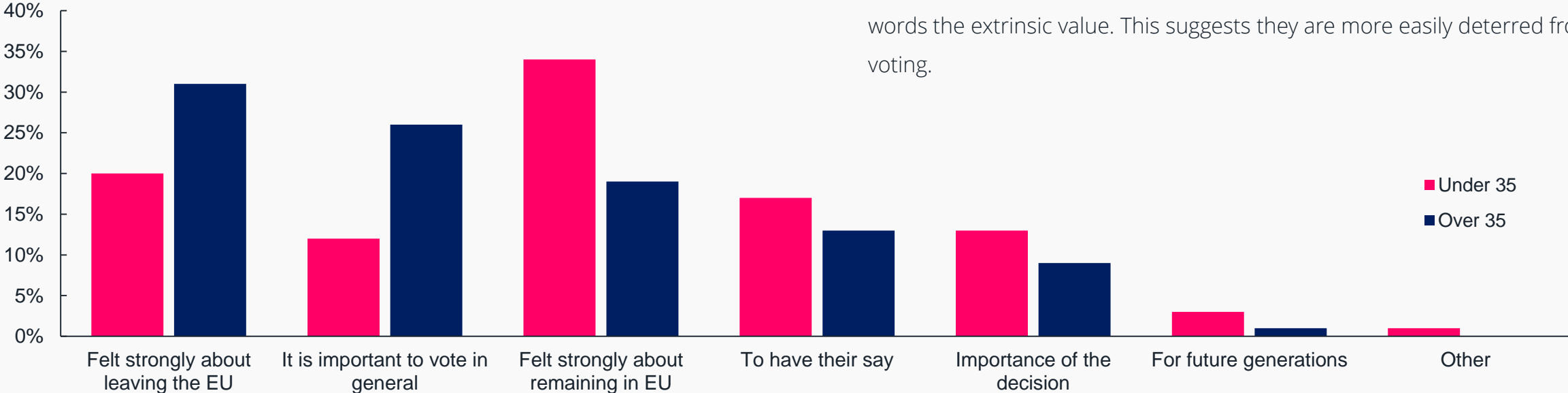


Figure 14: Why did you vote in the EU referendum? (CoVi/Opinium)

We asked those who did vote why they voted. Under 35s were much more likely to say they voted in order to have their voice heard, compared to over 35s who were more likely to say it is important to vote as the duty or responsibility of a citizen. This suggests that older people are more likely to see the intrinsic value of voting, that is, as a value in and of itself, and therefore will try harder to ensure they vote, even where they are busy or unwell.

Younger people, by contrast, are more likely to vote in order to have their opinion heard or because they feel strongly about a certain issue, in other words the extrinsic value. This suggests they are more easily deterred from voting.



Would 16 and 17 year olds have swung the vote?

In 2015, a debate was held in Parliament about whether to extend the vote to 16 and 17 year olds, as was the case with the Scottish independence referendum the year before and subsequently in all Scottish national elections. This was overturned by the government on the grounds that it would cost £6 million.

In the Scottish independence referendum, 75% of 16 and 17 year olds were expected to vote compared to 54% of 18-24 year olds. Would 16 and 17 year olds have swayed the overall vote and won the referendum for Remain?

We modelled the result based on a very optimistic level of turnout of 80% and a similarly optimistic vote share for Remain of 80%. Even this scenario would not have led to a Remain victory. This is simply because the size of the Vote Leave margin at 1.2 million is almost as high as the total number of 16 and 17 year olds at 1.5 million.



WHAT IS THE CASE FOR GIVING 16 AND 17 YEAR OLDS THE VOTE?

There are many strong arguments but they seem to fall into two categories:

- a) Encouraging more people to vote overall – This case contends that age 18 is not the most effective time to start voting because young people of this age are often in a transient environment (such as being in a new job or in their first year of university). At 16, however, most are still in an environment through which they could be educated about voting.
- b) The ethical arguments – particularly when it comes to referendums, 16 and 17 year olds have a stronger stake in the outcome of the election. Now that we have fixed-term Parliaments, in the current system many are 22 by the time they can vote for the first time and had no stake in the first four years of their adulthood. 16 and 17 year olds also pay taxes, particularly those who leave school early, and should therefore have a right to say how their taxes are spent.



Gen Y bother? Did the key messages appeal?

Research on referenda suggests that campaigns matter more than in general elections, where voting is more habitual and based on entrenched attitudes.⁴⁷ We have examined the issues which were most frequently cited by campaigners and politicians, comparing them to insights about younger people's attitudes and identities.

Prime Minister David Cameron made a speech to a group of students in April on the subject of the EU referendum. Urging younger voters to back Remain, his two main points seemed to be that “voting this way will be good for your future” and “you should vote because voting is important”. These broad brush sentiments were also echoed across social media and viral campaigns (for example on Tinder). Whilst these points are not necessarily incorrect, we would question whether they are compelling.

Meanwhile, the official Remain campaign's key messages centred on the EU's impact on jobs, prices and the cost of living, trade opportunities, investment,



Britain's place in the world

Being in the EU gives Britain a more powerful role in the world and a say in major global decisions affecting you and your family. World leaders including Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Justin Trudeau and Narendra Modi say our world influence would be diminished if we left. We would lose our say on climate change regulations, trade regulations, the economy and security, meaning less influence on the world you and your family live in.



The NHS

Being in Europe makes our economy stronger, meaning more money for public services including the NHS, and better schooling and healthcare for your family. Leaving the EU would damage our economy and would force government spending cuts of £40 billion, meaning less money for the NHS (Source: The Institute for Fiscal Studies) and longer waiting times for operations, GP appointments and A&E treatment. NHS England chief Simon Stevens says Brexit would be “very dangerous” for the NHS. Leave leaders including Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Nigel Farage have campaigned for privatisation of the NHS.

From the official Remain campaign website, www.strongerin.co.uk

crime and security, workers' rights, business, the economy, the NHS and Britain's place in the world. A prominent thread running throughout all these issues was about the risks of leaving and what the UK would stand to lose outside of the EU.

The key messages from Vote Leave on the other hand, focused on a simpler set of issues, emphasising the waste of money spent on the EU, immigration, and sovereignty – all centred on the core message of “Take control”.

Given the fact that younger voters were such a strong support base for Remain, how successful were the messages in mobilising them to not only turn up and vote? We identify three shortcomings.

Lack of optimistic debate. As discussed in Section Two, younger people are more optimistic about the future of the EU than older people, and more positive in general than older people, perhaps because of the benefits from international travel, education and job opportunities. However, the media coverage of the referendum debate was heavily negative.

Undermining confidence in the facts. Each campaign was quick to respond to the claims of the other side, presenting contradictory information and

Figure 15: Analysis of online headlines containing at least one positive word compared to at least one negative word (CoVi)

■ Negative ■ Positive

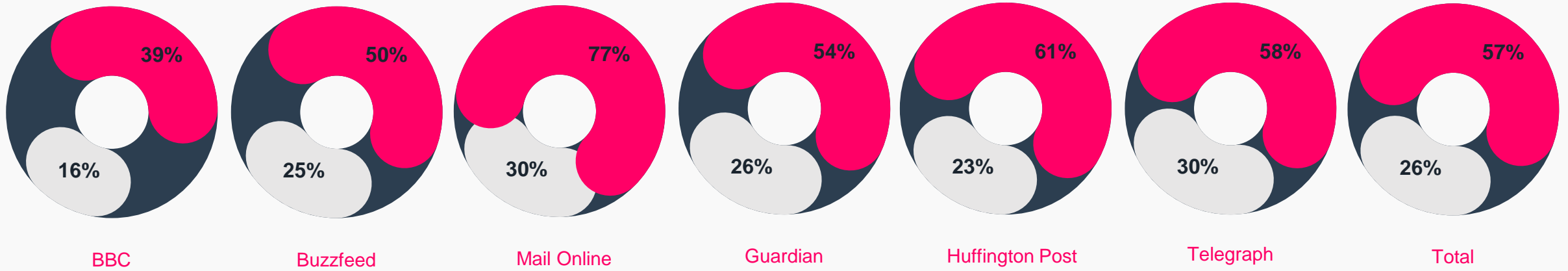
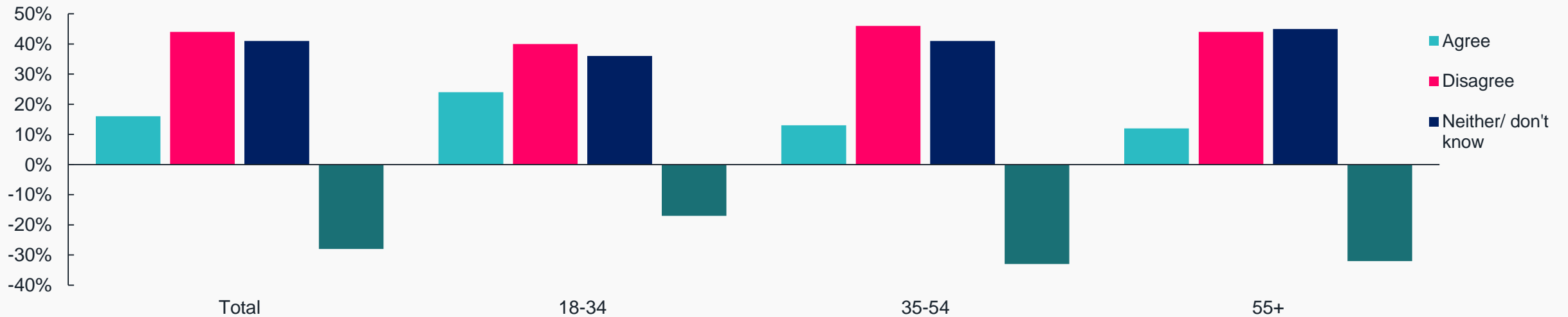


Figure 16: Do you agree or disagree that the public debate around the EU referendum was optimistic in tone? (CoVi/Opinium)



all age groups thought there was too much conflicting information over the course of the campaigns. However, this is likely to have had more of an impact on younger people, who report having the least amount of knowledge about the EU.⁴⁸ This doesn't mean they are actually the least knowledgeable, as on knowledge tests they score the more or less the same as other generation, but implies they are less confident that their knowledge is substantial enough to make a decision. The antagonistic, contradictory tone of the debate therefore could have undermined levels of confidence in making this decision. Indeed, anecdotal evidence on younger voters' attitudes indicates that many younger people may have felt that this was not a decision that should have been left to the public.

Absence of values and morals. Very little was emphasised on the Remain side about the key values of solidarity, tolerance and collective purpose on which the EU was founded. Perhaps this was because the messages about economic certainty and risk were seen to be more of a priority across all age groups. But as younger voters' key points of difference with older age cohorts lie in their identities as global citizens, it was a missed trick for the official campaign to not emphasise the "moral" issue of international collaboration and friendship across nationalities and borders which would influence turnout at the polling booths on the day. Indeed, campaigns

targeting younger voters to support Leave emphasised the opportunities for collaborating with other non-EU countries, appealing to their internationalist outlook.

Figure 17: Do you agree or disagree that there was too much conflicting information in the public debate around the EU referendum? (CoVi/Opinium)

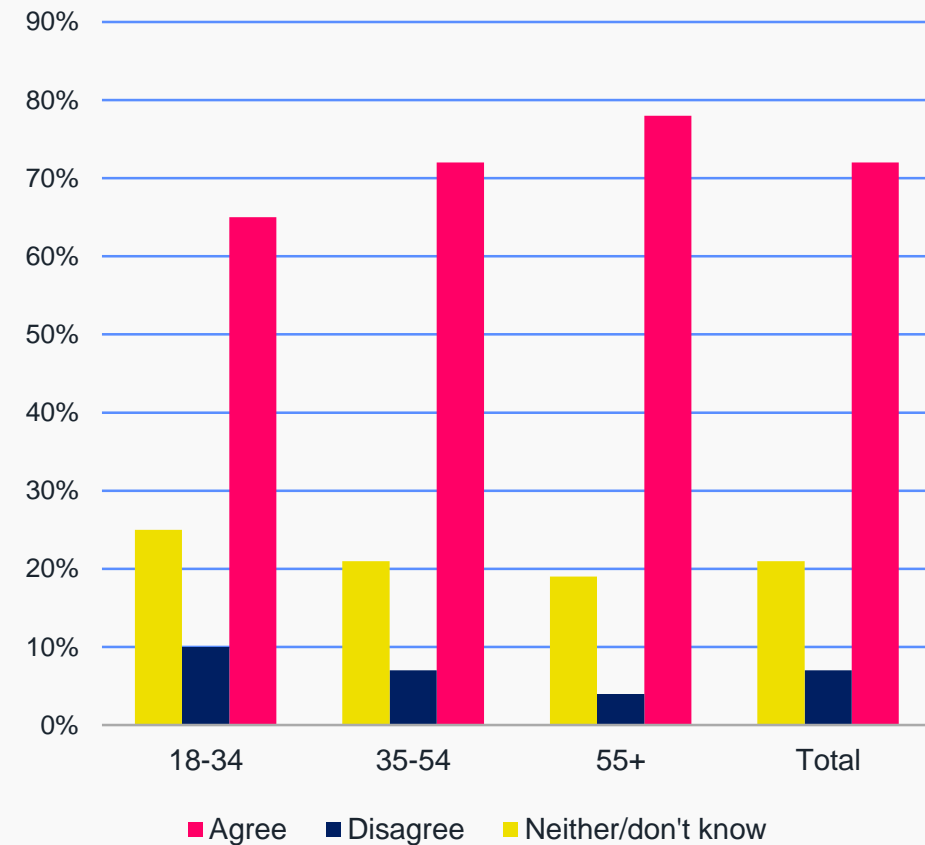
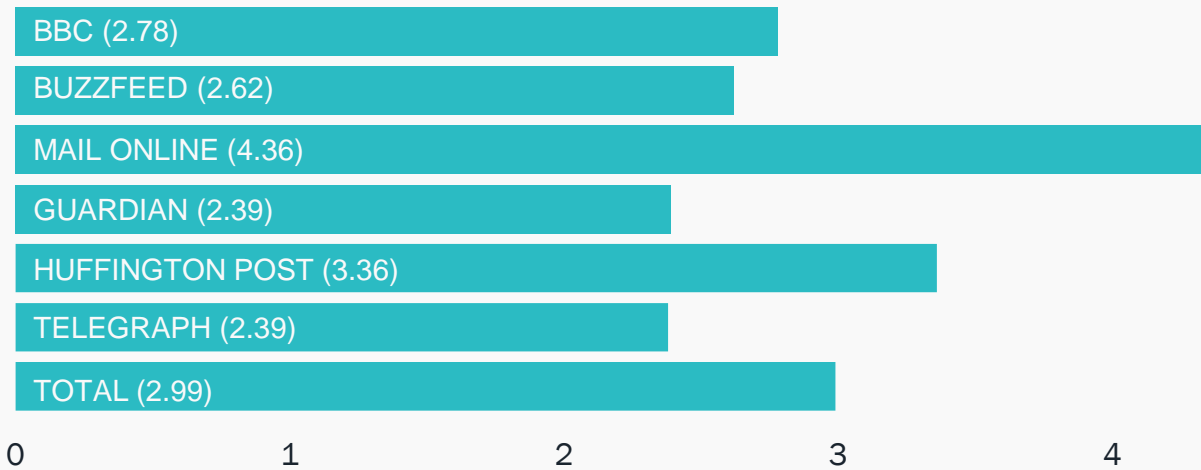


Figure 18: Ratio of negative to positive words in online headlines in three months before referendum (CoVi)



The short campaigning period may have been the reason why the campaigns prioritised the “fear factor” in their drive to make daily “wins” in the mainstream media. Our research has suggested an overwhelmingly negative public debate, as evidenced by online news coverage.

Across the six online media outlets we analysed, negative words appeared around three times more often than positive words. The most negative outlet was Mail Online with 4.4 negative words for every positive word. Over half of online headlines contained at least one negative word, whereas just a quarter contained at least one positive word. The top three negative words, “warns”,

“risk” and “fear” sum up this mood accurately.

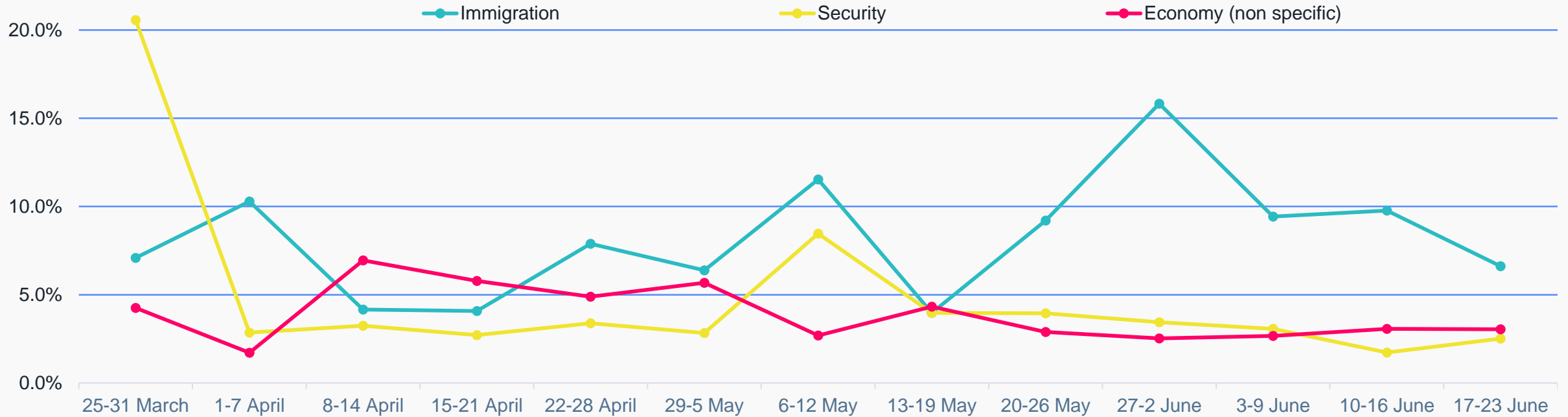
Immigration was referred to more than any other issue and this increased over time while other issues became less prominent in headlines as the campaigns continued. In the last month before the referendum, immigration featured in almost 10% of the online headlines we analysed. Younger people are much less likely to be concerned about levels of immigration and therefore the top issue covered online in the run up to the referendum was overwhelmingly an older person’s concern.

Economic issues were more of a concern to younger people in the referendum campaign. However, headlines most frequently referred to “the economy” in the abstract or macro- sense, or covered issues about businesses, investment and the stock market. The more pragmatic and personal lifestyle implications on the real topics which younger people are more likely to care about, such as public services, jobs and prices, were much lower in frequency.

“The most toxic display of politics and reporting I’ve ever witnessed.”

Ben, 27

Figure 19: Issues appearing in online headlines over three months to referendum (CoVi)



We are aware that there were more nuanced debates that the above analysis does not credit. There were a number of alternative sources such as In Facts, the European Movement and We are Europe which sought to plug the gap on knowledge confidence and assert a positive, values-led case for Remain. It was perhaps down to the short campaigning period that these initiatives did not achieve a high level of prominence amongst the

public. Whether or not it was a deliberate intention of the official campaigns or not, the media were largely focused on a disappointingly narrow set of issues, even notwithstanding their predisposition to emphasising individual politicians over comprehensive analysis of the issues at hand.

The messengers: Experts, fools or liars... or just too many politicians?

Younger people are more likely than any other group to say they were persuaded by someone else in the referendum.⁴⁹ From a list that included experts, politicians and business leaders, the most likely group to have persuaded them is their friends and family. As Dr James Sloam has

“When I look at the TV its all white old men, nobody that relates to me.”

Shakira, 30

emphasised, the context of the internet and social media’s facilitation of young people’s preference for non-hierarchical, non-institutionalised forms of political engagement, means that peer-to-peer communication must play a role in electoral politics for younger people.⁵¹

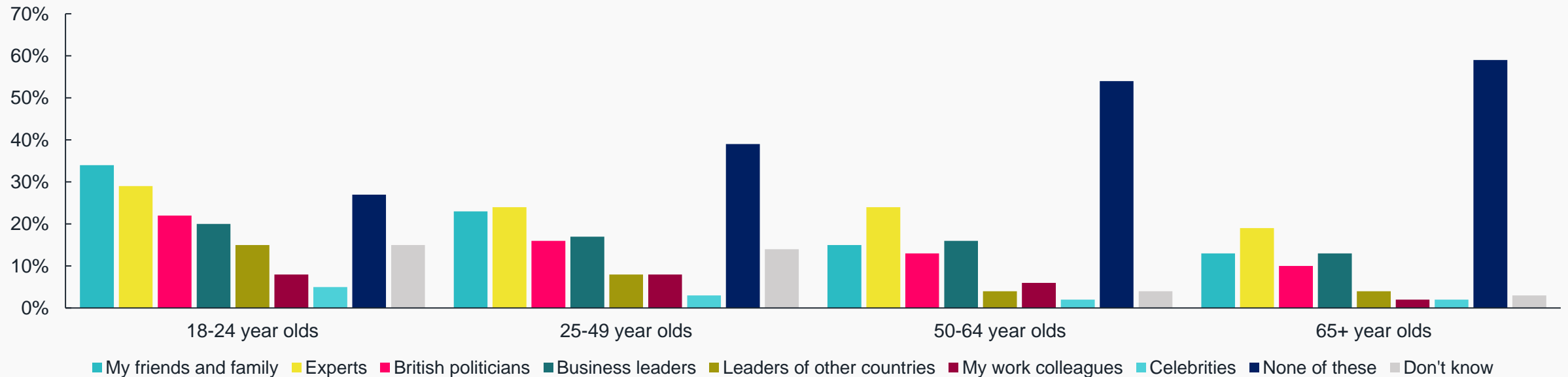
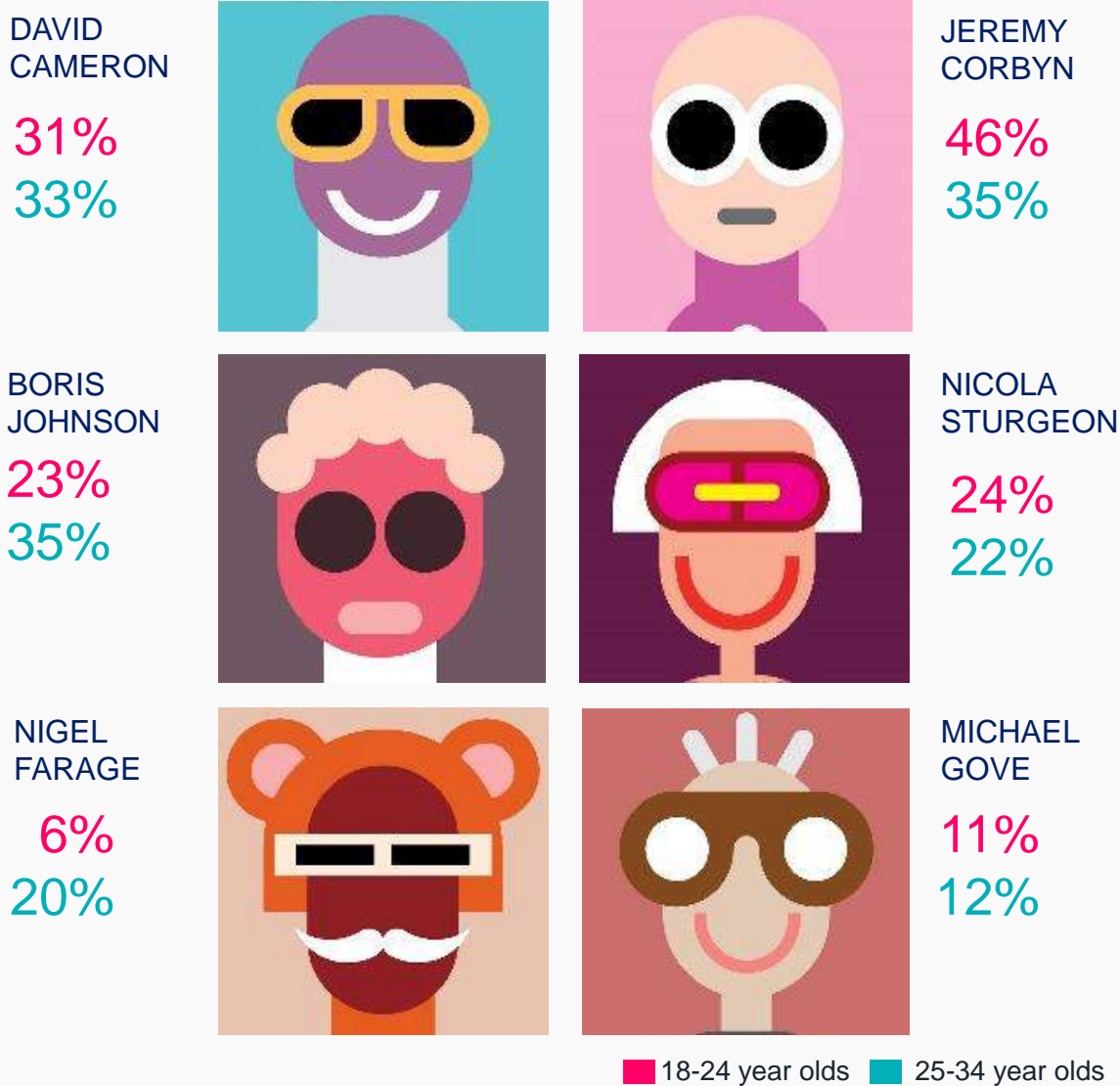


Figure 20: Who has influenced your decision? (YouGov, June 2016)⁵⁰

Figure 21: Who will be important to you in deciding how you vote at the EU referendum? (ComRes, April 2016)⁵²

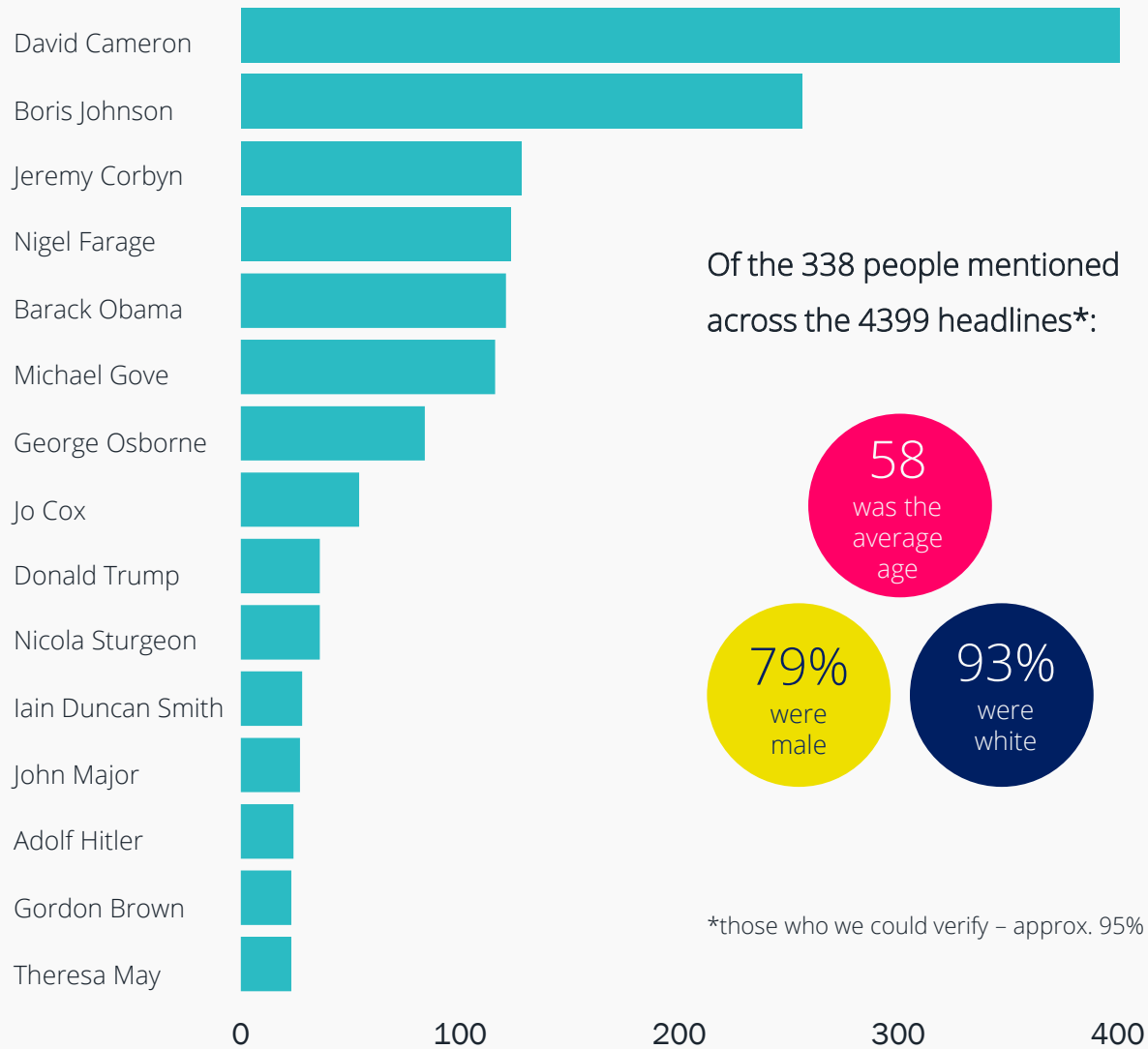


This means that the lack of positive campaigns that motivated younger people on the basis of the issues that mattered to them, potentially not only made them less likely to vote on the day, but also made them less likely to share news and discuss with peers.

Instead the voices and the messengers which carried the campaign became the focus of the stories. In our analysis of the headlines, David Cameron's name was mentioned more times than the issues of jobs, healthcare, housing, pay and human rights combined. Indeed, 45% of young people told YouGov that the debate resembled a "group of old men shouting at each other".⁵³

Did any of these "old white men" carry more appeal than others? When it comes to politicians, younger people are more trusting of Jeremy Corbyn and Barack Obama than older people.⁵⁴ Indeed, an ITV news/ComRes poll from April suggested that almost half (46%) of 18-24 year olds saw the Labour leader as important to them in deciding how they would vote in the referendum, compared to only a quarter of the population as a whole.⁵⁵ However, our analysis of the headlines finds that Corbyn was mentioned significantly less than Cameron.

Figure 22: People mentioned more than 20 times in headlines (CoVi)



On the Leave side, Boris Johnson was (slightly) more trusted than any of the other key figures with strong name recognition. In this case, our analysis found he was the most mentioned.

As well as being involved in the drive for voter registration, many celebrities came out in favour of one campaign or another. However, just 5% of under 25s said they were persuaded by a celebrity to vote one way or another – it should therefore not be assumed that celebrity endorsements work to persuade younger people in elections.

The most frequently mentioned people in online news headlines in the run-up to the EU referendum were older, male and white, clearly not representative of the population as a whole. The average age of all the people mentioned was 58, while almost four in five were men and 90% were white. This dangerously risks reinforcing the idea that younger people, ethnic minorities and women do not know enough to have an opinion about politics. This relentless focus almost exclusively on politicians excluded other civil society voices who may have been more trusted or compelling to younger people. This probably also meant that the referendum was seen as the “same old politics” rather than something deeper and more long term that required a different set of behaviours on voting day.



4. Conclusions and next steps

The feelings of fear and shock over the result of the referendum, particularly among younger people, scarcely needs evidence to back it up, so widely has it been covered in the press since the result was announced.

Whilst polling cannot be relied on to predict the outcome of elections, it did consistently indicate that this was going to be a close vote. But their feelings of betrayal and anxiety, summarised by the rhetoric that “the older generations have stolen our future”, are unsurprising given that the millennials are more likely to believe that a Brexit would result in a weaker economy, worsened jobs market and less international influence.

Whether these concerns will be realised remains to be seen. What seems highly likely is increased feelings of economic insecurity and democratic deficiency among younger people as a result of the vote to leave the European Union.

Although some would argue that if younger people do not turn out to vote in as greater numbers as older generations then they have less cause to complain about the result, this view would not account for the likelihood that younger people did in fact turn out in higher numbers than the last general election.

The reasons why the campaigns – and in particular the Remain campaign which had the most to gain – failed to mobilise more young people to turn up and vote are complex and of course do not just apply to younger voters. Based on what we know about the differences in attitudes, behaviours and identities of millennials we can summarise the shortcomings as follows:

The negative debate undermined confidence to vote: The quality of public debate was poor and the official messages, whilst potentially appealing to younger people's perceptions of risk and uncertainty, did not appeal to their optimistic view of the EU or their internationalist identities. Whilst it is fair to say that most people were thoroughly tired of the referendum debate after ten weeks, the short time frame meant that attention was focused on the antagonistic messages which achieved quick headlines, whilst alternative, often more positive, campaigns and initiatives were launched relatively late in the day and did not receive media cut-through. Considering that many millennials do not feel informed enough to vote, the conflicting messages between the campaigns did not help inspire confidence.

The messengers became the message: The fact that David Cameron's name was mentioned in headlines more frequently than jobs, healthcare, housing, pay and human rights combined, demonstrates the extent to which

personalities and specific individuals saturated the public debate. The referendum therefore was not clearly distinctive from the terms of a general election where political leadership is the main question. This raises important questions about accountability of the media and its responsibility in terms of impact on meaningful political debate and public understanding.

Voting logistics excluded young people: Individual electoral registration and a voting day outside term time were factors that were notable in this instance. But more generally, the mechanics of voting were not optimal to younger people's behaviours and the ways they are used to expressing preference.

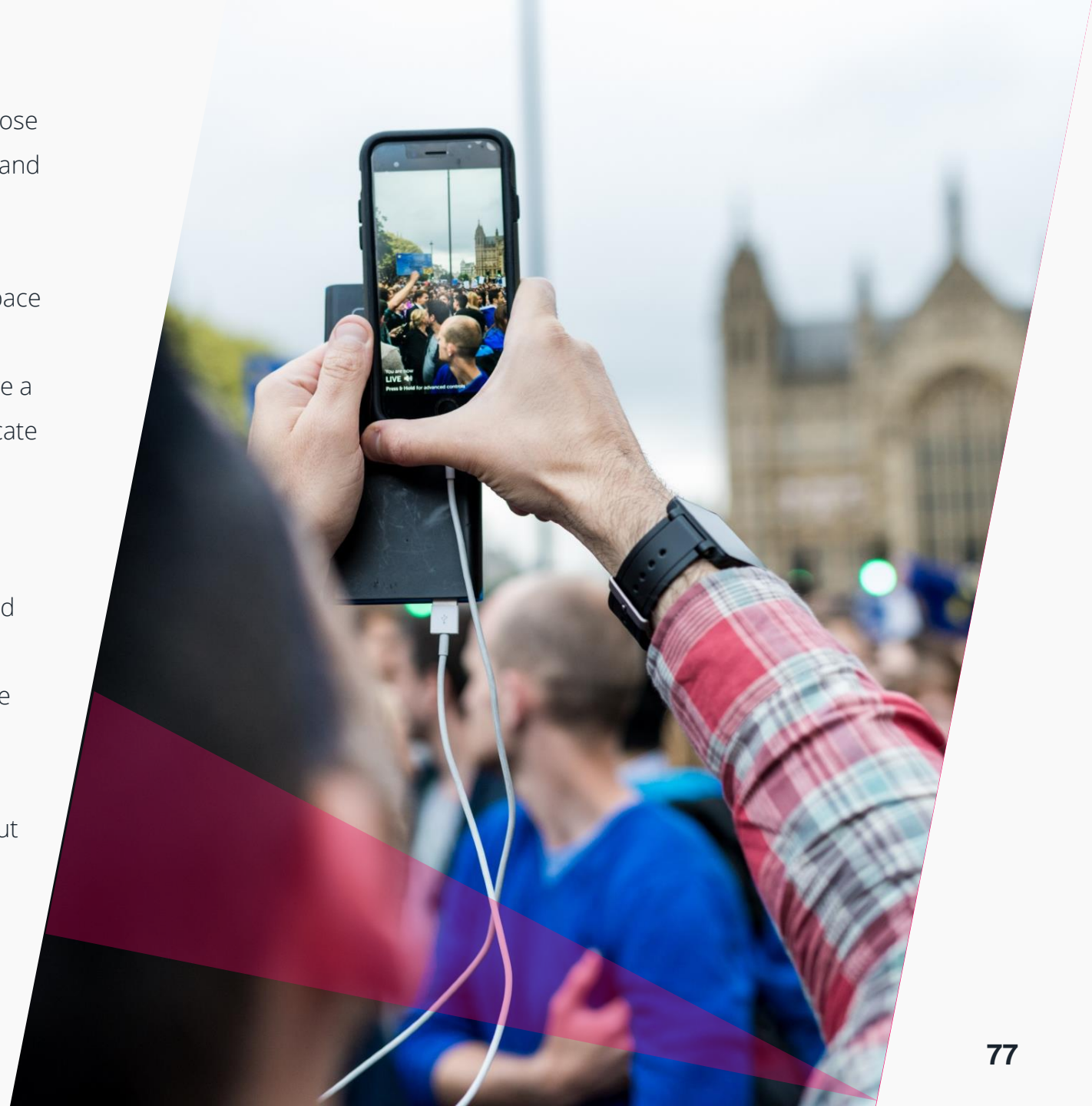
The growing crisis that is low voter turnout among Generation Y in general elections requires innovative solutions. The mechanics of the UK electoral system and the opportunities to increase youth engagement are not insignificant and could be the subject of a parliamentary review by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee or the Cabinet Office.

However, low voter turnout is a symptom not a cause of malfunctioning democracy. A widespread argument against compulsory voting, as in Australia, is that it could potentially mask rather than solve the problem and

the same could be said for the other “mechanical” interventions we propose here. We must therefore also look at ways to address the broader social and political environment.

The break in the status quo as a result of Brexit may prove to open up space for fundamental restructuring of our politics. The uncertainty around the Brexit process is coupled with opportunity. Clearly the process will require a lot of work, resources and technical expertise. But this should not obfuscate the need to rebuild trust and confidence in the government and in particular from those who voted against leaving the EU.

We strongly object to the interpretation by some that negotiations around Brexit should be wholly led by those who campaigned to leave. This referendum was a decision on whether or not to remain a member of the EU, not the explicit nature of how and in what manner we should leave. Instead, this presents an opportunity to regain the trust of the younger generation and the electorate more generally. The next few pages sets out some ways in which government, parliament and younger people themselves could harness this opportunity and shape the new political settlement.



Lessons for democratic design: Engaging the youth vote

VOTES AT 16

Votes for 16 and 17 year olds are now more important than ever, especially in the cases of decisions that will take decades to implement. On a more pragmatic level, introducing voting at an earlier age seeds political participation at a life stage where more young people are still in formal education and/or living at the parental home. Making this decision earlier may help reduce the trend that lower-educated young people are the least likely to vote.



RULES ON REFERENDA

A root and branch review of the rules on referenda, as proposed by the Electoral Reform Society, should be held and include an examination of who is tasked with independent fact-checking and public education, monitoring accuracy of campaign materials and media coverage, and the timing of the referendum itself.



ONLINE VOTING

Online voting must be re-considered by the government. Whilst concerns about privacy and fraud need to be taken seriously, if we are able to make financial transactions, apply for a passport and file our taxes online, then the mechanisms of government must keep up. A move to online voting should also include a review of the case for and against individual electoral registration and the extent to which it promotes personal responsibility for voting.



EXTENDING ELECTION DAY

Holding elections over more than one day or weekend would help overcome the most common reasons for not voting, identified by our post-referendum survey were illness and being too busy. It would be more than worth the extra resources and logistics to allow people a significant amount of time to make their decision.

Uniting the country: Bridging the generational divide

THE “BREXIT UNIT”



A detailed public consultation process must be held before any parliamentary decision or referendum on the terms of Britain’s future relationship with the EU. This process should aim to have a similar public profile to the government’s 2012 public consultation on same sex marriage, which had 228,000 responses and 19 petitions over 13 weeks. To be inclusive of young people the process should be conducted online and seek to encourage deliberative rather than binary decision making, whilst making the most of young people’s interests in issue-based engagement.

Negotiations with the EU on the single market and trade deals must take account of the opportunities for younger workers and students. The government should explicitly set out clearly how different options and plans meet younger people’s priorities.

THE PRIME MINISTER



The new Prime Minister has a key role to reunite the country. As the individual who will likely feature most prominently in the media headlines they will have a personal responsibility to ensure that the public debate is balanced and not antagonistic. It is important that plans are effectively communicated in terms of relevance to tangible issues, rather than intractable comments about the economy.

PARLIAMENT



Other Parliamentarians and the Opposition also have a clear role in ensuring a balance of interests. In recent days there has been the launch of a new “Vote Leave Watch” group which aims to hold Brexiteers to account on the commitments they made whilst campaigning. We would counter that it is a better use of time and resources to ensure ongoing promotion of the views of the 48% in a process that will affect all of us, particularly younger generations, rather than promoting further antagonistic debate. At CoVi we will be exploring the potential for a cross-party group to do this.

A generation together: How millennials can take back control



TALK TO YOUR MP

Find out who your MP is, and when they are holding meetings in your local area to discuss Brexit. It is Parliament that will need to vote on new laws, policies and deals that we make with the EU and with other countries. You don't have to wait for another referendum to make your views known to decision makers.



JOIN SOMETHING

Whether a political party, a campaigning or membership organisation, or a voluntary group working with refugees, joining a group will help amplify your voice. Being part of a group also helps to share the work when it comes to responding to public consultations or parliamentary enquiries for example.



DO MORE POLITICS

Commitments made by MPs and the manifesto of the next government will be of crucial importance to the new political landscape. And on a local level Brexit will inevitably have an effect on public spending cuts and therefore electing local authorities who make these spending decisions is important too.



CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

The referendum was the start, not the end of the process. Don't just talk to people who hold the same views as you and try and find out about other peoples' perspectives. This is not the time for intergenerational warfare or to blame others for their views. Everyone will need to work together to shape a common vision for the next generation.



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