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New Radicals? Digital Political Engagement in Post-Referendum Scotland

Interim Report to the Communities and Culture Network+

May 2015

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1.0 BACKGROUND

The referendum on Scottish independence was held on the 18th September 2014. For the first time in a formal United Kingdom political vote, 16 and 17 year olds living in Scotland were allowed to vote. The overall turnout for the referendum was just under 85 percent, with the proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who voted estimated to be over 70 per cent. The referendum campaign generated considerable enthusiasm and a very high level of political campaigning which contributed to the large turnout. Traditional methods of political campaigning, such as public meetings, rallies and door to door canvassing were conducted. The campaign was given wide publicity and coverage in traditional press and broadcast media. In addition, social media, such as Facebook and twitter, provided extensive coverage of the campaign and the issues and personalities around the debate about Scottish independence. The issues relating to the campaign were discussed in schools across Scotland.

Against that background, our research aimed to investigate the impact of the referendum on the political attitudes and activity of 16-19 year olds who voted for the first time in the referendum. Through interviews that would be conducted over the telephone, we proposed to collect information from 30 first time voters. The interviews would be set up to cover issues relating to whether or not respondents intended to vote in the forthcoming UK general election, if they were eligible to do so, and whether they intended to vote in the Scottish Parliament elections in 2016, if eligible. We aimed to use the interviews to gauge what impact the referendum has had on respondents' political attitudes and their interest in politics. We set out to gather information about respondents' membership of political parties or pressure groups and whether their memberships had changed since the 2014 referendum. Further interviews were also to be conducted with political parties and key campaign groups to obtain their perspective on how well sustained young people's levels of engagement have been since the referendum.

In addition to the individual interviews with young first time voters, we intended to analyse Twitter feeds from 16-19 year olds to gauge the level of political activity in the feeds. To do this, tweets from selected accounts would be collected from the 5th January 2015 and followed through to the end of the project. The intention was that we would track the level of tweets and the political component of the tweets to see if activity varied over time, particularly in relation to the UK general election in May. The tweets would be collected using Social Sensor, a computer system set up to collect and provide information about Twitter feeds and activity.

2.0 PROGRESS

So far we have conducted a range of primary research. This includes surveys, interviews and pilot analysis of social media output. We have also been engaged in regular dialogue with our project partner, the Scottish Youth Parliament. A brief overview of each of these will be discussed in turn.

2.1 Surveys

Following our initial dialogue with the SYP's Conveners' Group (made up of the directly-elected heads of the SYP's committees) in January 2015, it was agreed that a team from RGU would attend the SYP's National Sitting in March 2015. As part of this, the SYP Conveners' Group suggested that it might be useful to carry out a survey with the MSYPs¹ in attendance, based around levels of political interest/engagement before, during and since the referendum. Having done this, a second iteration of the survey was also subsequently released online to the general youth public. With the assistance of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, the youth wings of political parties and other relevant organisations, this was publicised on social media in April/May 2015 and to date, over 200 responses have been received from around Scotland.

While this work is additional to the proposals made in our application, the extra information collected will broaden the sample of young people whose opinions and experiences we collect and increase knowledge about the impact of the independence referendum on the political activity of young first time voters. The surveys were also used as a means of identifying additional potential youth interviewees (see below).

Analysis of the survey responses is ongoing, but early analysis has yielded some interesting findings.

- Contrary to wider discourse about youth disengagement from politics, the survey suggested that 75% of the general youth public (and 100% of the MSYP cohort) were interested in politics prior to the referendum.
- Partly confirming the premise of this study, around 73% of the general youth public indicated that the referendum had increased their interest in politics a lot. Only one respondent suggested that the referendum had decreased their interest in politics.
- Compared to the pre-referendum period, the proportion of young members of the public who actively campaigned on behalf of a campaign group (i.e. not a political party) during the campaign increased tenfold.
- Since the referendum, young people's engagement appears to have transferred to political parties rather than campaign groups: the proportion of young members of the public who are members of a political party quadrupled following the referendum campaign (again compared to pre-referendum campaign levels).
- A clear emerging narrative is that non-partisan political groups were the primary vehicle for young people's engagement during the referendum campaign, and that these have

¹ Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament.

largely been supplanted as vehicles of engagement by political parties since the referendum.

- 69% of members of the public (and 75% of MSYPs) reported that their use of social media to discuss political issues increased during the referendum campaign. Since the referendum, around 44% of young members of the public (and around 39% of MSYPs) report that their use of social media to discuss political issues has increased even further.
- The nature of their social media usage appears to represent more of a ‘civic monologue’ rather than an ‘elite dialogue’. There is little direct engagement with politicians, journalists, commentators etc. but a much higher incidence of giving their own opinion or reposting someone else’s opinion. The proportion of MSYPs engaging directly with other people was higher than among the general public, although subsequent discussions with the SYP Conveners’ Group suggests that this is likely to reflect their duties as MSYPs i.e. lobbying, agenda-setting etc.

2.2 Interviews

Survey respondents were asked if they would be prepared to take part in a short telephone interview to further explore their level of political engagement. We received a very encouraging level of interest in participating, but we decided to focus on exploring the experiences of survey respondents who indicated that the referendum had resulted in a large increase in their level of interest in politics. In addition, a small number of interviews were conducted with people who had been recruited before the surveys took place. To date, 20 interviews have been conducted and more are in the pipeline.

We have started analysing our youth interview findings already. More refined and detailed analysis will be completed in the weeks ahead, but for now a summary of headline findings² across the main themes of the interviews can be provided.

Interest in politics

- All interviewees indicated that they had little or no interest in politics before the Scottish independence referendum campaign began, but that the campaign had sparked increased interest and engagement in political and policy issues.
- Aside from independence and devolved powers, interviewees expressed interest in a wide range of policy issues, including: education; the state of the NHS; equality; women's rights; LGBT rights; welfare benefits; immigration; wealth distribution; international affairs; defence; assisted suicide; childcare; zero hours contracts; and abolition of the House of Lords.

² This is based on an analysis of 18 of the 20 interviews conducted thus far.

- Whilst all of the interviewees have retained an interest in politics since the referendum campaign, many of them have reported a drop in interest in the build up to the 2015 General Election. This was largely due to many of them not being eligible to vote in 2015, and/or the 'distraction' of exams at school.

Voting behaviour, party membership and 'activism'

- Of the 18, 9 joined a political party during, or in the aftermath of the referendum campaign. 8 of the 9 had joined the SNP; the other had joined the Conservatives.
- 10 of the interviewees had actively campaigned during the build up to the independence referendum, all of them on behalf of Yes Scotland and/or the SNP. Their activities included: door-knocking, delivering leaflets, staffing street stalls, and attending or participating in rallies and debates. Most talked positively about their experiences, although some reported receiving verbal abuse from opponents.
- Many of the interviewees reported 'unofficial' campaigning e.g. their efforts to influence the voting choice of friends and work colleagues through informal debates and discussions, either face-to-face or via social media.

Use of social media

- The interviewees are largely regular users of social media, some estimating that they spend perhaps 2-3 hours each day on various social media applications, mostly on Facebook and/or Twitter.
- 17 of the 18 believe that social media are generally useful tools for political communication and engagement, particularly amongst the younger generations. Reasons cited include: their ubiquity; their ease of use and accessibility; that they can give rise to a feeling of community and shared values; and that they serve as an alternative information source to the 'biased' press and media.
- The majority follow, or are social media 'friends' with, a wide range of political parties, individual politicians, political commentators and bloggers, newspapers and other online news sources, journalists, and campaign groups. The most frequently cited included Nicola Sturgeon, Alex Salmond, Patrick Harvie, James Cook of the BBC, BBC News, *The Guardian*, *The Herald*, various regional/local newspapers, Wings Over Scotland, and Scrap Trident.
- The majority will at least occasionally 'like', 'share' or 'favourite' the posts of those parties, groups and individuals they follow. And there were some reports of two-way online dialogue having taken place with local MPs, MSPs, councillors, etc.

- There were, however, mixed opinions and experiences amongst the interviewees, concerning the posting of personal political thoughts and opinions on social media. This was largely related to concerns about receiving online abuse from those with differing views. Some had no qualms about the process and were happy to share their own views more widely, apparently shrugging off potential or actual abuse. Some, aware of others' experiences, were far more cautious, being 'careful' about what they posted, or declining completely to make their own thoughts publicly available online.

We are also arranging interviews with representatives of political parties and political organisations now that the general election campaign has ended. This will involve interviewing a representative of the five main political parties in Scotland³ and a range of campaign groups/movements⁴ that were active in the referendum campaign. In each case, the aim is to explore their experience of youth engagement before and during the referendum, as well as exploring the extent to which this engagement has been sustained since September 2014. Our intention is to have completed the interviews by the middle of June. Analysis of the findings of the interviews will be conducted towards the end of June and in July.

2.3 Social Media Analysis

We have also been active in terms of aggregating relevant Twitter output. We intended to explore three key strands: this has since been reduced to two (see below).

Firstly, we aimed to track and analyse the activity around any youth-related hashtags emerging in relation to the general election. However, no such hashtags emerged and as a result, the focus has moved to the other two strands of our Twitter strategy.

The second strand sees us capturing all tweets sent to and from the accounts of a range of youth organisations. This includes the youth branches of political parties, youth groups and advocacy organisations. The intention is to analyse the development of trends over time (particularly around the election) to see whether engagement levels have been rising or falling. Around 50 organisations are being tracked in this way. This work is still ongoing.

The final strand involves capturing all of the ongoing activity from the accounts of around 600 young people. These young people were present at the Big Big Debate (a referendum-focused debate for young people held at the Glasgow Hydro in September 2014) and represent a relatively randomised sample from across Scotland. Again, the intention is to monitor (anonymously and in aggregate) the output of these accounts with a view to tracking the proportion and volume of politics-related tweets being sent.

³ The Scottish National Party, the Labour Party in Scotland, the Scottish Conservatives, the Scottish Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Greens.

⁴ For example, the Scottish Youth Parliament, Radical Independence, Women for Independence, the Common Weal and Generation Yes.

This work is also still ongoing, but we have conducted some early pilot analysis based on a sample of 11,000 tweets (our total dataset currently stands at around 250,000 tweets). These were tweets that took place during the first general election leaders' debate, and many of the tweets related to the debate. We found that approximately a quarter of the young people in the sample had tweeted something political. Overall, political tweets made up about 17% of the total sample of tweets, but some users were very prolific tweeters – this obviously skews the overall number. Additionally, many of the 'political' tweets were retweets e.g. celebrity tweets or humorous memes with pictures. Very few represented original comments on policy and only a few users in the analysis were engaging in a dialogue or discussion with other users.

2.4 Engagement with Scottish Youth Parliament

As outlined above, there has been considerable joint working between Robert Gordon University and the Scottish Youth Parliament since the project's inception in January 2015. RGU representatives attended a National Sitting (March 2015) and two meetings of the SYP Conveners' Group (January 2015 and May 2015). This has resulted in crucial formative input to the research process, as well as facilitating the interview stage.

Between these face-to-face meetings, there has also been regular 'offline' project liaison between the key contacts at Robert Gordon University and the Scottish Youth Parliament, both in relation to specific activity (e.g. meetings, publicising the survey link etc.) and in terms of general updates between the two teams.

3.0 FUTURE PROGRESS

As outlined above, we will continue to arrange and conduct interviews with young people. In addition, we are also in the process of arranging interviews with representatives of political parties and political organisations. In these interviews, respondents will be asked about their work with 16-19 year olds before, during and since the referendum campaign, and about their efforts to promote political participation among young people. In this way, we will be able to not only understand how and why young first time voters have reacted to their experiences during the referendum campaign, but we will also be able to see how political parties and other campaigning groups view their relationship with young voters.

We will continue to collect social media output from our selected groups, and aim to analyse this in aggregate in mid-June.

Our findings on the political activity of young voters will be compared with that of the Demos report into the voting intentions of young voters across the UK (Birdwell *et al.* 2014) and survey work conducted by the Institute of Governance at the University of Edinburgh (Paterson *et al.* 2015).

4.0 REFERENCES

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