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# New Radicals: Digital Political Engagement in Post-Referendum Scotland

## Final Report on Pilot Project to the Communities and Culture Network+

**Dr Peter McLaverty** (Dept of Management, RGU)

**Dr Graeme Baxter** (Dept of Information Management, RGU)

**Dr Iain MacLeod** (Dept of Management, RGU)

**Dr Elizabeth Tait** (Dept of Information Management, RGU)

**Prof. Ayşe Göker** (School of Computing, RGU)

**Dr Michael Heron** (School of Computing, RGU)

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## 1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Key Findings

The Scottish independence referendum in September 2014 had a turnout of 85 per cent. In this referendum, 16 and 17 year olds were given the vote for the first time in a British political election. It is estimated that 75 per cent of eligible 16 and 17 year olds voted in the referendum. These turnout figures represent a substantial improvement on recent voting figures for UK general elections and Scottish Parliament elections. In the light of the referendum turnout among young first time voters, our research set out to investigate the ways in which young people had engaged with politics during the referendum campaign and developments in their activism since the referendum. In particular, we focussed on young people's use of social media and specifically their use of Twitter for political purposes. We conducted an analysis of Twitter feeds by young people; carried out a survey of first-time voters; interviewed young first-time voters; and interviewed representatives of political parties and campaign groups.

Our main findings, based on the four areas of analysis, are as follows:

*The referendum mobilised young people politically:* Much has been said about the referendum's effect on young people's levels of political engagement. Our study largely corroborates this, with evidence of a 'referendum effect' clearly emerging from within our survey and interview data. People who had not been interested in politics before the referendum became interested during the referendum.

*The 'engagement' effect of the referendum has not been evenly distributed:* However, our research also shows that talk of a 'referendum effect' risks masking the fact that the distribution of engagement and activism among young people is strongly uneven. Political activity on Twitter is strongly skewed across time and users. Despite large increases in party membership, this has not necessarily translated into such widespread lasting engagement as our survey alone (which is primarily composed of young people who were already interested in politics prior to the referendum) might suggest.

*Transitioning activism: from groups to political parties:* Young people's activism changed in the aftermath of the referendum. Our survey and interview data suggests that the campaign groups which served as the predominant vehicle for engagement *during* the campaign were largely sidelined in favour of political parties *afterwards*. Young people moved from supporting campaign groups to supporting political parties.

*This engagement occurred despite limited efforts by political elites to appeal to first-time voters:* Our survey points to a low level of contact between first-time voters and politicians and/or parties during the campaign. In addition, interviews with the main political parties suggest that little was done to appeal directly to first-time voters. Rather, other agents were seen as being important sources of influence on political engagement.

*Social media use is largely monological rather than dialogical:* Many claims have been made about Twitter's potential as a democratic enabler, particularly for young people. However, whilst we found clear evidence that first-time voters are engaging with Twitter for political purposes, this is rarely done in the context of a dialogue: instead, Twitter is disproportionately used for one-off statements, with a disproportionate tendency towards retweets (rather than original contributions) when dealing with political content.

### **Next Steps**

On the basis of our research findings, there seem to be a number of areas where further research would significantly help an understanding of the political engagement and activity of young people. Research in the future would enable an investigation of whether those first-time voters in the referendum who engaged in political activities continued to do so. If their political activity dropped away, further research of those we surveyed and interviewed would enable the reasons for the changes in their political activity to be investigated. Further research would allow us to investigate the impact of schools, colleges and universities on young people's political activity. With further study, we can investigate whether, among those we surveyed and interviewed, their interest in politics and their political activity changed after they left full-time education.

Our research showed that, on the whole, political parties and campaign groups did not take particular measures to specifically engage with young first-time voters. There was an acceptance among interviewees from parties and groups that social media is important in engaging with young people. However, further research will enable an investigation of whether, and if so in what ways, parties and groups are adapting their campaigning, both in social media and in other ways, to specifically engage with young people.

Our interviewees from parties and groups stressed how impressed they were with the debates in schools in which they too part. School debates, with participants supporting and opposing independence, were a significant feature of the referendum campaign. Further research would enable an investigation of whether school debates have continued to play an important part in politically mobilising and informing young people.

Whether there will be another referendum on Scottish independence in the next few years is unclear. If there is, further research would enable an investigation of the impact of the next referendum in politically mobilising young people. The mobilisation in the 2014 referendum campaign could be compared with the mobilisation in the next referendum.

Our Twitter research would have benefitted from a control group. This might be achieved by looking at the political use of Twitter by young people in England in the run-up to the 2015 general election. Alternatively, the activity of our sample of Twitter users in the six months prior to the official independence referendum might be collected.

## **Impact and Dissemination**

Throughout our research project, we have worked closely with the Scottish Youth Parliament, feeding back and discussing our research findings. Suggestions from the SYP have fed into our subsequent work. Some of our findings have been disseminated through a blog written for the Democratic Audit Scotland. Press releases have resulted in members of the team being interviewed by BBC Radio Scotland and our findings being mentioned on BBC Radio Scotland news. Our research findings are being further disseminated through a White Paper, which will be sent to among others each MP and MSP in Scotland. Additionally, we are in the process of arranging a dissemination event with the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Children and Young People. Papers will be presented at academic conferences and journal articles will be written, based on our research findings.

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Writers have reflected on the state of representative democracy in Britain for some time. In 2001, the turnout in the UK general election fell below 70% of those eligible to vote for the first time since the Second World War, when it reached only 59.4%. In the three general elections that have followed, the turnout has increased but it has not climbed back to over 70%, being 66.1% in 2015. In elections to the Scottish Parliament, turnout has tended to be nearer to 50% of the eligible electorate than 60%. In addition, the age range that votes least in British elections is the youngest, the 18-24 age group. For example, in the 2015 general election, it is estimated that only 43% of 18-24 year olds voted (Ipsos Mori, 2015). A series of books and articles have tried to analyse the reasons for the low voter turnout, to assess the state of representative democracy and, in some cases, suggest ways forward (e.g. Hay 2007, Stoker 2006, Crouch 2003, Judge 2013, Tormey 2015).

Bucking all recent trends in the UK, the turnout in the Scottish independence referendum vote on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2014 was just under 85%. The referendum was unique because for the first time in British voting history, 16 and 17 year olds living in Scotland were given the right to vote (if they registered to do so). Exact figures on how many 16-19 year olds eligible to vote for the first time in the referendum actually did so are not known. However, it is estimated that 75% of 16-17 year olds voted, in comparison with just 65% of those aged 18-24 (Electoral Commission 2014). On the face of it, this represents a very considerable achievement and was claimed by a number of political figures as being evidence of having engaged a whole new generation in politics.

The campaign around the referendum established a level of enthusiasm and a scale of political campaigning and activism that is extremely unusual in Britain. Groups on both sides of the question were established to campaign in the referendum, and many schools, colleges and universities arranged debates between pro- and anti-independence speakers in order to keep first-time voters aware of developments in the campaign. Concurrently, the referendum campaign also saw a huge increase in the prominence of online campaigning. Although this was particularly prominent in the pro-independence camp (where there was a perception of an entrenched pro-unionist bias in the traditional media), the anti-independence camp also made strong use of social media. Given the claimed importance of social media for younger voters, we sought to further explore the two linked phenomena of how much of a lasting sense of engagement among first-time voters had been delivered by the referendum, and what role social media had played in the referendum and ongoing engagement.

### **3.0 APPROACH**

Our approach was mixed methodological in nature and comprised four distinct but related strands. These were: Twitter analysis; a survey of first-time voters; interviews with first-time voters; and interviews with political parties and campaign groups.

#### ***Twitter Analysis***

Our Twitter analysis was based around two key aspects. These were: publicly available Twitter accounts of a range of first-time voters; and publicly available accounts of a range of 'youth-oriented' organisations. We had originally also planned to carry out tracking and analysis of dedicated youth-related election hashtags in the lead-up to the 2015 General Election. However, no such hashtags emerged.

#### ***First-time voters***

We wanted to gain an idea of how first-time voters in the referendum were subsequently engaging with political issues. If the referendum could be said to have produced a lasting sense of engagement among first-time voters, then we might reasonably expect to see a sustained level of political output in their tweets. We used Twitter hashtags and geotags to identify a sample of 616 first-time voters who attended 'the Big, Big Debate', a pre-referendum event involving 7,500 first-time voters drawn from every secondary school in Scotland. Using RGU's SocialSensor<sup>1</sup> tool, the output of these Twitter accounts was collected from 5/1/15 to 30/6/15. This provided us with a dataset of more than 315,000 tweets.

#### ***'Youth-oriented' organisations***

We also identified a range of 'youth-oriented' organisations with publicly available Twitter profiles, and collected their output over the same period. This sample was composed of the youth wings of political parties, student associations, youth advocacy groups and membership groups. This provided us with a further 65,000 tweets. However, since many of these groups are adult-led, our interest here was primarily in considering what was tweeted *to* these organisations, as opposed to what the groups themselves tweeted. This is based upon an assumption that most of the people who engage with these groups will be young people.

In order to establish the extent to which the tweets within these two samples were political, we used Excel's autocode function to check if tweets contained any of a list of keywords including political parties, referendum-related terms, election-related terms, key political topics, politicians' names etc. This data was then subjected to exploratory analysis in SPSS.

#### ***Survey of first-time voters***

Originally we had not planned to conduct a survey, but a scoping meeting held with the Scottish Youth Parliament raised the possibility of conducting a survey of Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs). The survey was also subsequently rolled out to the general youth public, and was publicised by a range of youth organisations and agencies, including the SYP, Scotland's

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see: <https://www.rgu.ac.uk/research/research-home/institute-for-innovation-design-and-sustainability/digital-technologies/smart-information-systems/socialsensor/socialsensor>.

Commissioner for Children and Young People and the youth wings of some of Scotland's political parties. In total, over 250 responses were received. This data was also analysed in SPSS.

### ***Interviews with first-time voters***

Our survey allowed us to identify a range of 16-19 years old first-time voters. We interviewed 21 of these in greater depth about the impact the referendum had upon their levels of engagement. We tried to focus on interviewees who had little/no interest in politics prior to the referendum, but who subsequently developed a greater interest in politics. A small number of these first-time voters were identified through a 'snowballing' technique, drawing upon existing contacts with student groups/associations and schools around Scotland. The interviews were conducted by phone in the weeks prior to the 2015 general election.

### ***Interviews with political parties and groups***

We also conducted a series of ten interviews with campaign groups and political parties. The purpose of these was to explore their experiences of referendum-related engagement, with a particular focus on how well this engagement had been sustained in the post-referendum period. We purposely conducted these interviews *after* the 2015 General Election in order to capture the impact of this engagement on election campaigning. We spoke to representatives of the youth wings of the SNP, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Scottish Conservatives and the Scottish Greens. Repeated attempts to secure an interview with a representative of Scottish Labour met with no response whatsoever. We also interviewed representatives of four national organisations involved in the referendum debate, either as a campaigning organisation and/or as a point of information for young people: Women for Independence, Common Weal, Generation Yes and the Scottish Youth Parliament.

### ***Analysis***

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS. Interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis by members of the research team.

**Figure 1: The Big, Big Debate**



Source: BBC 2014

## 4.0 FINDINGS

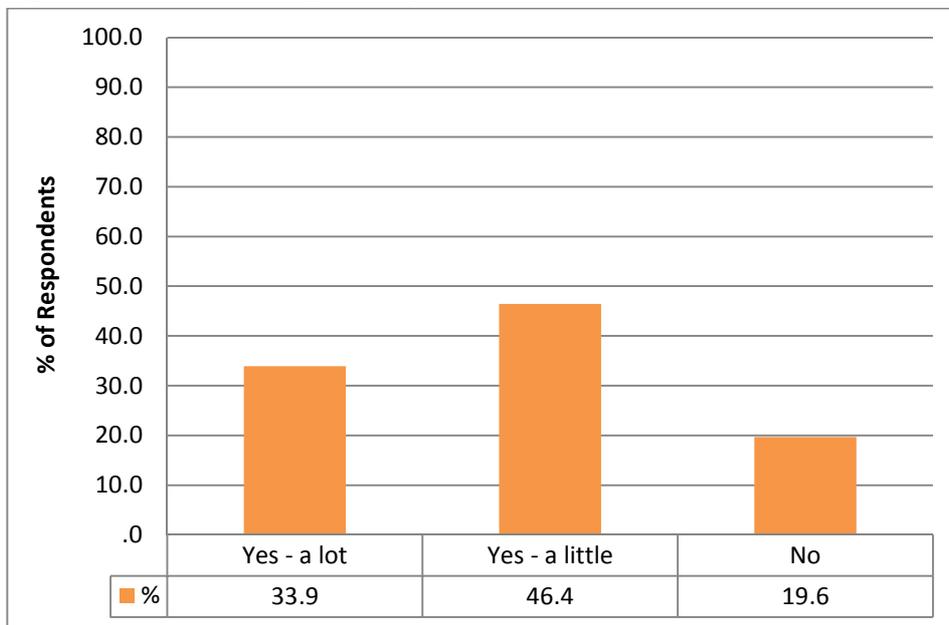
We have identified the key emergent themes from our different streams of data, and present them here in turn.

### 4.1 *The referendum mobilised young people politically*

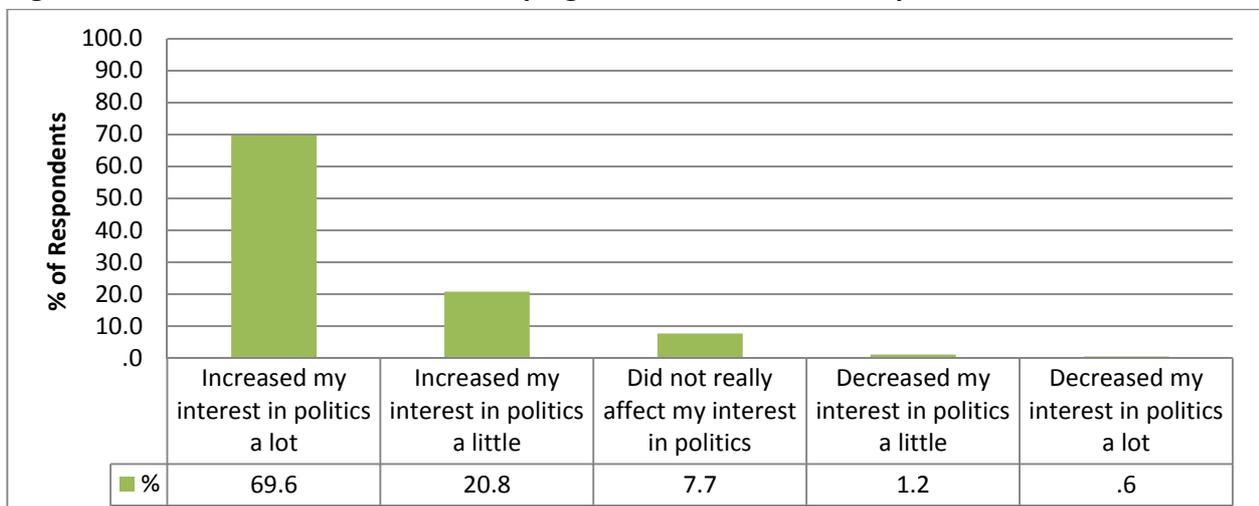
A major finding from across our different data streams was that the referendum had a very strong mobilising effect upon young people in Scotland, and particularly upon first-time voters.

When asked about the effect the referendum campaign had on their level of interest in politics, 69.6% of the first-time voters we surveyed stated that the campaign had increased their interest in politics a lot, 20.8% said that it had increased their interest a little and only 7.7% said that the referendum did not really affect their interest. 1.2% said that the referendum campaign had decreased their interest in politics a little, and 0.6% said that it had done so a lot.

**Figure 2: Interested in politics prior to the referendum?**



**Figure 3: Effect of the referendum campaign on level of interest in politics**



In addition to sparking interest in politics, we also saw young people prompted to *act* upon this interest. We sought to explore this by asking first-time voters about their membership and campaigning behaviour before, during and after the referendum campaign. Prior to the referendum campaign, only 12.1% of the first-time voters we surveyed were members of a political party, with 8.6% stating that they had actively campaigned on behalf of a political party. This is higher than the proportionate level of party membership across the UK more broadly and is presumably a reflection of the fact that many of the first-time voters in our survey were already politically engaged prior to the referendum campaign. 13.8% had been members of a campaign group (e.g. Amnesty International), and 7.5% had actively campaigned on behalf of such a group. During the referendum campaign, a further 8.6% of respondents stated that they joined a political party and 16.7% stated that they actively campaigned on behalf of a political party. However, the referendum campaign saw a large minority of the first-time voters we surveyed (32.2%) joining a campaign group (e.g. Better Together, Yes Scotland) and 27.6% actively campaigning on behalf of such a group.

Young first time voters who were interviewed elaborated on how their interest in politics had been developed during the referendum campaign. All 21 interviewees indicated that they had little or no interest in politics before the Scottish independence referendum began. For those who indicated a 'little' pre-referendum interest, this tended to revolve around watching news and current affairs television programmes, or reading newspapers, either print or online:

*When it came to politics I would just switch off completely. My parents would talk about politics, but I just couldn't care less.*

– Female, 18, Elgin

*I sort of followed it occasionally. I'd watch the news and see, 'Oh, the Prime Minister's doing this'. I sort of knew the views of the parties – this is what they stand for.*

– Male, 18, Glasgow

There was a general consensus amongst the interviewees that the independence campaign had sparked increased interest and engagement in political and policy issues. For some, this interest appeared to have been influenced by the extensive media coverage of the campaign:

*I think it was because there was a lot more information going round about it.*

– Female, 17, Perth

*Obviously there was a lot more news coverage and Internet articles at the time. And also the television debates as well.*

– Male, 16, Nairn

For others, the perceived importance of the referendum, at both a national and personal level, was a key factor in their increased levels of political interest:

*It was such an important debate for Scotland, so I don't think you should really not take an interest in it. It would be my future, like employment and stuff.*

– Female, 18, East Renfrewshire

*The referendum was about the country that we live in, so it was going to affect me. I think it was closer to home.*

– Female, 17, Dumfries

A number of interviewees spoke about the extension of the franchise to those aged 16 and 17, and a desire to feel fully informed before making their voting choice:

*I started to think, 'Oh, right, I've got to have my opinions about this now', and I started to get really interested.*

– Female, 17, Stirling

*As it got closer, I sort of realised myself that I'd better make a decision about how I'm going to vote. So I just started to get more interested and more involved.*

– Male, 17, Nairnshire

Some of the interviewees reported what might be described as 'unofficial' campaigning; largely their personal efforts to influence the voting choice of family, friends, classmates or work colleagues through informal debates and discussions, either face-to-face, or online via social media:

*I was at school at the time and quite often I'd speak to my friends about it. With the collective efforts of myself and a few others we managed to convince a few others of my friends to vote in favour.*

– Male, 18, Glasgow

Aside from independence and devolved powers, the interviewees described the referendum campaign's effect in stimulating their interest in a wide range of political and policy issues. These included: education; student tuition fees; the state of the NHS; equality; women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights; welfare benefits; immigration; wealth distribution; international affairs; defence; nuclear disarmament; assisted suicide; childcare; zero hours contracts; and the abolition of the House of Lords.

Many of those interviewed from political parties and campaign groups had been involved in going into schools during the referendum to participate in debates or, in the case of the interviewees from the Scottish Youth Parliament, to develop and provide information resources about voter registration and voting in order to de-mystify the process for young people. The interviewees who

participated in school debates were overwhelmingly positive about the experience and drew attention to how engaged and informed the young people were. In several cases interviewees reported that the standard of debate was more civilised in the school debates than in general public debates. Several interviewees commented that it was a myth that young people were not interested in politics.

*Young people love being involved in campaigns and advocacy. There was much more ground roots issue based advocacy radical feel to both sides of the campaign and the referendum, and a much more cause element to it than there is for traditional party manifesto campaigns.*

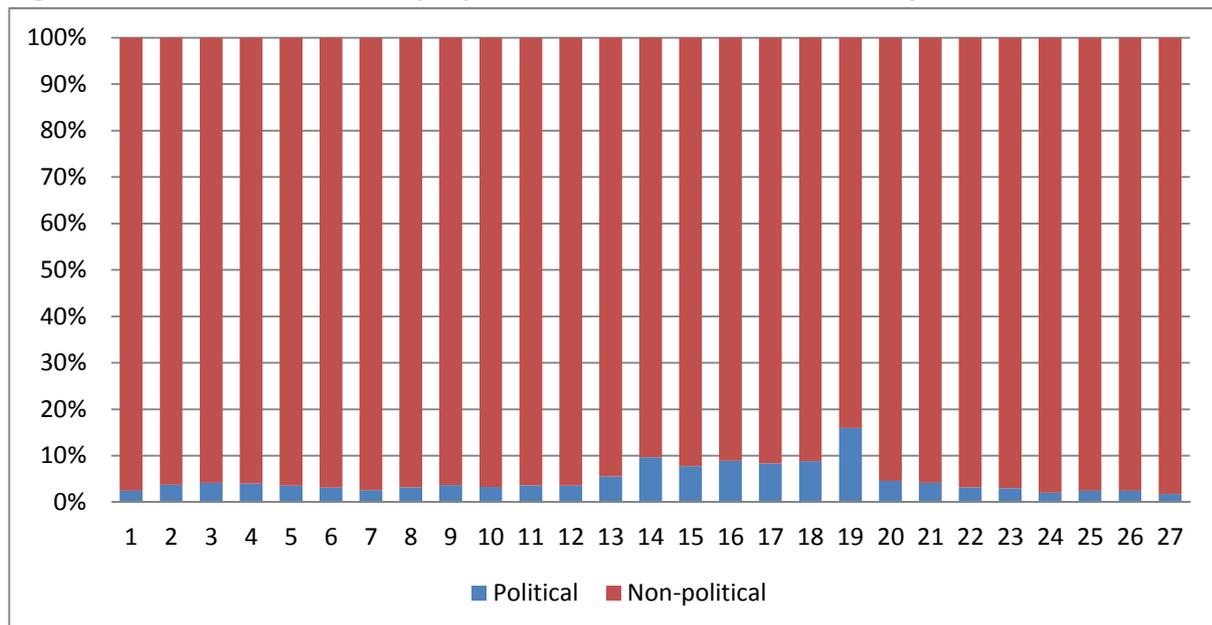
– Scottish Youth Parliament

#### 4.2 The 'engagement' effect of the referendum has not been evenly distributed

Despite the talk of a referendum effect, our research finds that political output across a convenience sample of 616 first-time voters on Twitter is not evenly distributed. Of the 300,000 tweets we collected from these first-time voters across the six-month period of study, only 5.4% were political in nature. As well as being a relatively low proportion overall, we found that 22.0% of our sample population did not engage in any political activity at all over the course of our research. Whilst all of the remaining members of the sample engaged to at least some extent, this was also strongly skewed: four single Twitter users were collectively responsible for 27.2% of all tweets classed as political. Over half of the active Twitter sample had no more than 10 tweets which contained political content, and over a third had fewer than 5 political tweets in their feed.

In addition, we see that the consistency of political output is highly variable across the 27 weeks covered by our data. Thus, whilst the proportion of political tweets in our first week of data collection was well below the average at only 2.5%, this rose and fell over the course of the six month period, peaking in the week of the General Election, during which 16.0% of tweets sent and received by our panel were political in nature. However, in the week following the election, the proportion dropped sharply back to just 4.6% before returning to a low of just 1.8% in the final week of our dataset.

**Figure 4: Political content as a proportion of all individual tweets, by week**



Further exploration of these trends suggests that the way in which first-time voters engage with political content on Twitter seems to be strongly reactive to contemporary external stimuli. For example, we found a correlation between weeks containing a televised election debate (or the General Election itself) and an increase in the proportion of political tweets. We can consider this by filtering out all tweets sent/received on the day of each debate in order to compare the overall proportion of political tweets sent/received for the week as a whole and for that week minus the day of the debate. In each case, including the tweets from the day of each debate leads to a rise in the proportion of political content, but only by around 2% in most weeks. More interesting from

our perspective was the incredibly sharp drop-off in political output in the week immediately after the General Election.

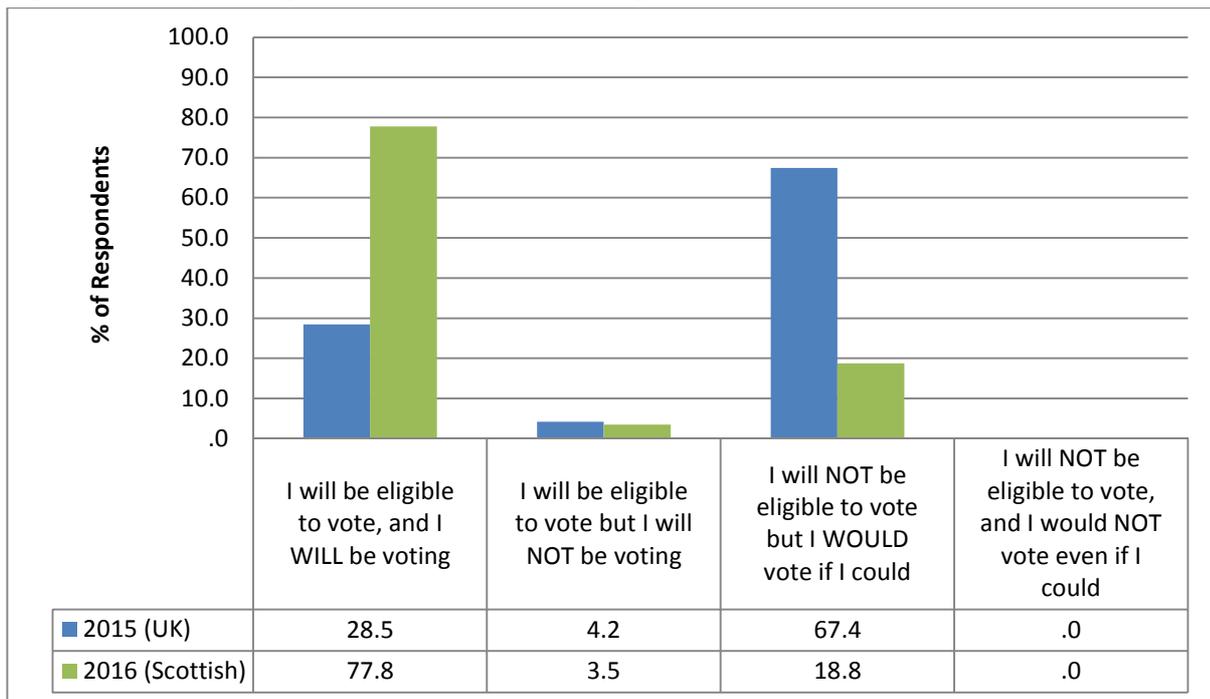
However, such differential levels of engagement do not necessarily disprove an engagement effect. Indeed, varying levels of individual engagement are broadly similar to what we would expect to see offline: in other words, a relatively small number of very active voices, a tendency for engagement or activity to increase in response to external stimuli such as televised debates or the election itself, and a large proportion of people who take little or no active interest in the issues at hand.

Our survey results suggest that following the referendum, engagement with the processes of formal politics is consistently strong. Figure 5 below shows that for the 2015 UK General Election, 28.5% of respondents said that they would be eligible to vote and planned to do so. 4.2% said that they would be eligible to vote but would *not* do so. 67.4% said that they would not be eligible (e.g. being too young, not being a UK/Irish/Commonwealth national) but would vote if they were eligible to do so. No respondents said that they would *not* be eligible and would *not* vote if they were eligible.

Conversely, 77.8% of respondents said that they would be eligible to vote in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election and planned to do so. Only 18.8% said that they would not be eligible (e.g. too young) but would vote if they could. Similar to the UK General Election figure, 3.5% of respondents said that they would be eligible to vote but would not do so. Again, no respondents said that they would *not* be eligible and would *not* vote if they were eligible.

As such, we see mixed messages: whilst our Twitter data clearly shows varying levels of political output, our survey findings suggest a clear level of engagement across our sample. However, it must be borne in mind that most of our survey respondents had *some* degree of interest in politics prior to the referendum. As such, they may not be a truly reliable barometer of the referendum's engagement effect, and we therefore used our interviews to explore impressions of activism following the referendum.

**Figure 5: Likely voting behaviour at forthcoming elections**



The 21 first-time voters we interviewed (all of whom were interviewed on the basis of having had little or no interest in politics prior to the referendum) stated that their engagement had been sparked by the referendum but nurtured by other people (this is explored in section 3.4 below). However, whilst all of the young people interviewed had retained an interest in politics since the referendum campaign, many of them reported a drop in levels of engagement in the build up to the 2015 General Election, largely due to not being eligible to vote in 2015, and/or the ‘distraction’ of school exams:

*I think my interest has probably decreased slightly, by the fact I’m not eligible to vote. So it doesn’t feel much like I can affect it – it feels a little bit separate.*

– Female, 17, Fife

*I’ve got my exams in that time as well, so a lot of my time will be focused on revision. But it’s less so, compared with the referendum, maybe because I can’t vote.*

– Female, 16, Edinburgh

The interviewees from the Scottish Youth Parliament reported that expressions of interest for their elections in 2015 had doubled from the year before. Some attributed this increase in political engagement as being due to the fact that the referendum campaign was inclusive with votes for 16-17 year olds and engaging a broad range of groups such as BME and LGBT groups.

*I think the referendum really brought that out [...] It was a huge movement on the day regardless of what your party politics were, what you thought on the referendum, everybody was engaged and motivated, and I think perhaps the parties are trying to rebuild that and re-energise that. But I think with 16-17 year olds not being included in the*

*Westminster election you might have lost a bit of that spark. So the Scottish Parliament elections will be interesting.*

– Scottish Youth Parliament

On this note, there was a general consensus that political interest/activity will probably increase again in the build-up to the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary election, when (with the extension of the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds) all of the interviewees will be eligible to vote. Again, this points to a degree of *reactive* political engagement among many first-time voters, rather than a consistent level of *proactive* engagement. The over-riding perception was that whilst the referendum may not have engaged *everybody* to a uniform degree, it has certainly sparked a degree of engagement among young people who might otherwise not have engaged with party politics at all.

### **4.3 Transitioning activism: from groups to political parties**

Earlier, we discussed the way in which the referendum seemed to prompt an increase in the proportion of young people who were joining political parties and – to a greater extent – campaign groups. However, in the aftermath of the referendum campaign, we see a reversal of the predominance of campaign groups as a vehicle for activism, with a far greater proportion of young people moving towards political parties instead. 20.1% of the first-time voters we surveyed stated that they joined a political party following the referendum, and 24.7% said that they have actively campaigned on behalf of a political party since then. Conversely, only 6.9% of respondents have joined a campaign group (e.g. Radical Independence) since the referendum campaign ended, and only 9.2% have been active campaigners on behalf of a campaign group since September 2014.

Our Twitter study of young people's tweets to a range of youth-oriented political parties and campaigning groups also seems to support the position that young people engage more with political parties than with groups. Having studied the tweets sent to a range of 49 different organisations over the course of our study, we again see a very clear spread. Two accounts alone accounted for 44.3% of all political tweets received, these being @SNPStudents (the student wing of the SNP) and @ConsFutureScot (the youth wing of the Scottish Conservatives). @SNPStudents was by some distance the most heavily tweeted organisation, accounting for 27.6% of all political tweets received. These are both strongly politicised accounts: although the third most heavily tweeted organisation was civic rather than formally party political in nature (@YoungScotsUnion), it was anomalous among other non-partisan accounts (e.g. @youngwomenscot, @OfficialSYP and @YouthLinkScot) all of which accounted for a far smaller share of political tweets than might be expected, based upon their stronger level of representation in the total dataset of tweets (i.e. political *and* non-political). Again, this suggests that whilst young people do engage with these organisations, they seem to reserve their *political* engagement for more strongly aligned party political groups than groups which are civic and issue-based in nature.<sup>2</sup>

Of the 21 interviewees, 16 had voted Yes in the independence referendum, three had voted No, one preferred not to disclose their voting choice, and the remaining individual (aged 16 at the time of the interview) had not been old enough to vote at the time of referendum.

None of the 21 interviewees was a political party member prior to the independence campaign. However, 11 joined a political party during, or in the immediate aftermath of, the campaign. Of these, nine had joined the SNP, one the Scottish Greens, and the other the Conservatives.

Ten 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 experience, describing it variously as 'exciting', 'utterly

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<sup>2</sup> To some extent, this may also be a reflection of the keywords used in the autocoding process. Although this sought to include a range of party political and civic/issue-based keywords, we recognise that there is always scope to make this type of process more comprehensive and/or balanced.

rewarding', 'brilliant', and having 'a real buzz about it'. Some, however, reported receiving verbal abuse from opponents; with, interestingly, one 16-year-old interviewee suggesting that his age had made him an 'easy target' for such attacks:

*Since I was younger, and I didn't know as much about the Yes campaign as the people who were campaigning at the age of 30, I was quite an easy target. If I didn't know something, or I didn't understand what the person was saying, I would get some verbal abuse.*

– Male, 16, Inverness

*I remember knocking on one person's door and receiving some rather verbal language from them. And we were, like, 'We'll leave right now – thank you for your time'.*

– Male, 18, Glasgow

In the interviews with representatives from parties and groups, there was almost universal belief that the referendum had had a lasting impact on political engagement in Scotland that went beyond the actual outcome of the vote. However, some interviewees also drew attention to the fact that the political landscape had already been shifting prior to the referendum with the declining support of the Labour Party (who did not participate in this research) and the rise of the Scottish National Party. None of the interviewees reported increased membership of formal political parties *during* the referendum and in fact it was reported that political parties had been very unsuccessful at recruiting students during Freshers' Week 2014. All representatives from political parties who were interviewed reported increased membership after the referendum although in the case of the Liberal Democrats this was reported to be around the time of the May 2015 election rather than in the immediate post-referendum period. Interviewees reported that the diversity of members was also increasing and that people were joining political parties who had never expressed interest in politics prior to the referendum. The representative from the Scottish Conservative party indicated that they felt that their campaigning for Better Together had rehabilitated the party's image in Scotland, even in areas that had never been traditional Conservative strongholds.

As described elsewhere in our results, it was reported that the surge in memberships had come as something of a surprise to the parties themselves and that the SNP in particular faced challenges of managing and co-ordinating a large number of new members. The representative from the SNP believed that there had been a genuine increase in political engagement of young people because of the referendum:

*When you get people engaged that first time with people their own age, with people they can identify and relate to, then I think it comes much more naturally to get actively involved with the party as a whole.*

– Scottish National Party

The interviewee from the Scottish Greens indicated that their membership had increased by a factor of around five, and that Young Green groups had been set up around Scotland which were

organised and run by young people. The representative from the Scottish Conservative Party also indicated increased engagement of young people:

*[Previously] I tended to be the only young person who was there, which is a contrast to the way we have it now.*

– Scottish Conservatives

Interviewees also reported that the diversity of members was also increasing and that people were joining political parties who had never expressed interest in politics prior to the referendum.

*We're not just getting more young people, but they tend to be different kinds of young people.*

– Scottish Conservatives

While the membership of political parties has gone up since the referendum, interviewees from the other referendum campaign groups indicated that they had not seen the same level of surge post-referendum. As described elsewhere in this report, the campaign group representatives we interviewed generally confirmed the tendency for the engagement they saw during the referendum campaign to be redirected towards parties afterwards. There were two exceptions to this: firstly, the interviewee from Women for Independence indicated that they had increased their number of registered supporters threefold since the referendum (although this was largely due to older members). Secondly, as described earlier, the interviewees from the Scottish Youth Parliament reported that expressions of interest for their elections in 2015 had doubled compared to the year before.

Opinions varied as to why this shift from groups to parties had taken place. Interviewees who had campaigned with the 'Better Together' campaign indicated that they had no immediate plans to continue campaigning on that issue. Interviewees indicated that a lot of the 'Yes' support had been redirected into support for the SNP. An interviewee from Common Weal indicated that support had dropped off. The reasons for this were attributed to being that there were fewer donations to maintain the same level of visibility and, in the case of Better Together, the formal structures of the organisation had been largely dismantled. Interviewees did, however, report an increase in activity in other forms of political activism such as protests against fracking and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which cross party boundaries.

As reported earlier, interviewees were quite measured in their beliefs about the strength of the impact of social media on political engagement but a few interesting observations were shared about the legacy of social media activism.

*I think some of that is a reflection of the structures of social media in that when those young people, during the referendum, wanted to be engaged and informed, they were following or liking various Twitter accounts and Facebook pages to do that. They've not unfollowed or un-liked them, so they're still getting political information now. It's obviously*

*not about the referendum anymore, it's about broader issues, but that flow of information continues; it's just on a wider range of subjects now and they're still engaging.*

– Scottish Greens

#### **4.4 This engagement occurred despite limited efforts by political elites to appeal specifically to first-time voters**

Only limited evidence of planned engagement between young people and politicians on social media emerged from our survey. Whilst 27.0% of all first-time voters surveyed said that they used social media to engage directly with politicians, this proportion was inflated by the presence of MSYPs in the sample, for whom engagement with politicians is likely to be part of their representative role. When removing MSYPs from our analysis, we see that only 20.3% of non-MSYP first-time voters stated that they had used social media to engage directly with politicians.

The first-time voters we interviewed also pointed to a largely sporadic relationship between political parties/campaign organisations and young people, rather than a sustained and targeted attempt to engage with first-time voters. The majority of our interviewees followed, or were social media ‘friends’ with, a range of political parties, individual politicians, political commentators and bloggers, newspapers and other online news sources, journalists, and campaign groups. These included Nicola Sturgeon (probably the most frequently cited), Alex Salmond, Kezia Dugdale, Patrick Harvie, BBC News, *The Guardian*, *The Herald*, various regional/local newspapers, Wings Over Scotland, and Scrap Trident. A few spoke appreciatively of receiving social media messages from individual politicians, suggesting that this can help to create a closer, less distant relationship between members of the public and their elected representatives:

*I was actually getting personal tweets from [SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon], which is quite interesting, because it seems like quite a direct link to the politicians who are representing you.*

– Female, 17, Stirling

*I’ve got George Adam [SNP MSP for Paisley] on Facebook as well – he’s one of my friends on Facebook. It just feels a bit more personal – something behind just the face and the name.*

– Female, 17, Paisley

*John Swinney [Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth], he did a Q&A regarding Scotland’s economy during the referendum. And I was actually doing a project on Corporation Tax at the time, for Modern Studies. So I spoke to him on a Q&A Facebook page, and he got back to me.*

– Male, 17, Clackmannanshire

The party representatives we interviewed pointed to similarly sporadic experiences of engaging young people in the referendum campaign. On the one hand, they could point to experiences of engaging with older young people through university societies, or with existing young members of the party.

*In terms of our campaigning, to be honest, not particularly [much].*

– Scottish Conservatives

*We do a lot supporting the party during election campaigns, so we organised specific action weekends for young people during the referendum.*

– Liberal Youth Scotland

However, they also suggested that efforts to engage specifically with the youngest first-time voters (16 and 17 year-olds) were far more limited. Where this *had* happened, there was a sense among our interviewees that those on the ‘Yes’ side of the debate had employed it to better effect than those on the ‘No’ side, and that politicians across the political spectrum were now making increased use of social media, including to engage with young people. Some interviewees reported that in order to maximise the level of engagement it is important for parties and campaign groups to continue to specifically target and engage young people in issues that matter to them and to work in collaborations with organisations such as the Scottish Youth Parliament and Electoral Commission.

Even the SNP and Green Party’s large increases in membership following the referendum were unplanned and unexpected.

*After the referendum we saw quite a spontaneous number of people joining the SNP. It wasn't like after the referendum we started a massive recruitment campaign [...] It definitely wasn't something that anyone was expecting.*

– Scottish National Party

In the absence of concerted efforts to engage directly with first-time voters, we sought to explore exactly which actors *were* the main influencers of young people’s interest in politics. In our survey of first-time voters, the most frequently mentioned source of influence on young people’s level of interest in politics was their friends (76 respondents; 43.7%), closely followed by parents (73 respondents; 42.0%). Classmates/colleagues were cited by 56 respondents (32.2%), teachers by 46 respondents (26.4%). 19 respondents (10.9%) mentioned their brothers/sisters, and 16 (9.2%) pointed to other family members.

The majority of our young interviewees also spoke about the influence of particular individuals:

*My Mum’s a member of the SNP – she goes to the once-a-month meetings [...] When I saw my Mum really enjoyed it, I thought I would, because we’ve got a lot in common.*

– Female, 17, Dumfries

*One of my teachers, she always just encouraged us to look beyond what the media are saying, and to actually look into it ourselves.*

– Female, 17, Paisley

The role of teachers in particular was also highlighted by a number of the political parties and campaign groups we interviewed. Many schools sought to promote discussion around the

referendum within schools, including inviting in external speakers to help build students' knowledge or to contribute to debates, as one party representative explained.

*That was probably by far our most effective way of engaging with young people, was through stuff that had been set up by your third-party neutral bodies, like a school, or a Scout group or something like that. We reached young people far more easily through that than through anything else.*

– Scottish Greens

This role was seen as being a hugely important one, and a key differentiating factor between young people becoming engaged or remaining relatively disengaged.

*We were all people who have always argued for votes at 16 and political engagement with young people, but even then [we were] blown away by how engaged people were. I think we thought that even if young people were engaged they would maybe be – I don't want to use misinformed, but misinformed – about the situation or go to obvious positions. No, they were far more switched on, far more educated and far more engaged than we thought they were going to be, and it was incredible actually. Under 16s as well, it wasn't just those voting.*

– Liberal Youth Scotland

In this respect, some schools were seen as being significantly better than others. In some cases, a lack of engagement with the referendum debate on the part of schools came through a fear of encouraging discussion about such a political 'hot potato'.

*Some schools were very, very good [...] and they were completely engaged and seemed to be having a really good open conversation [...] [Others] didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to touch it with a barge pole.*

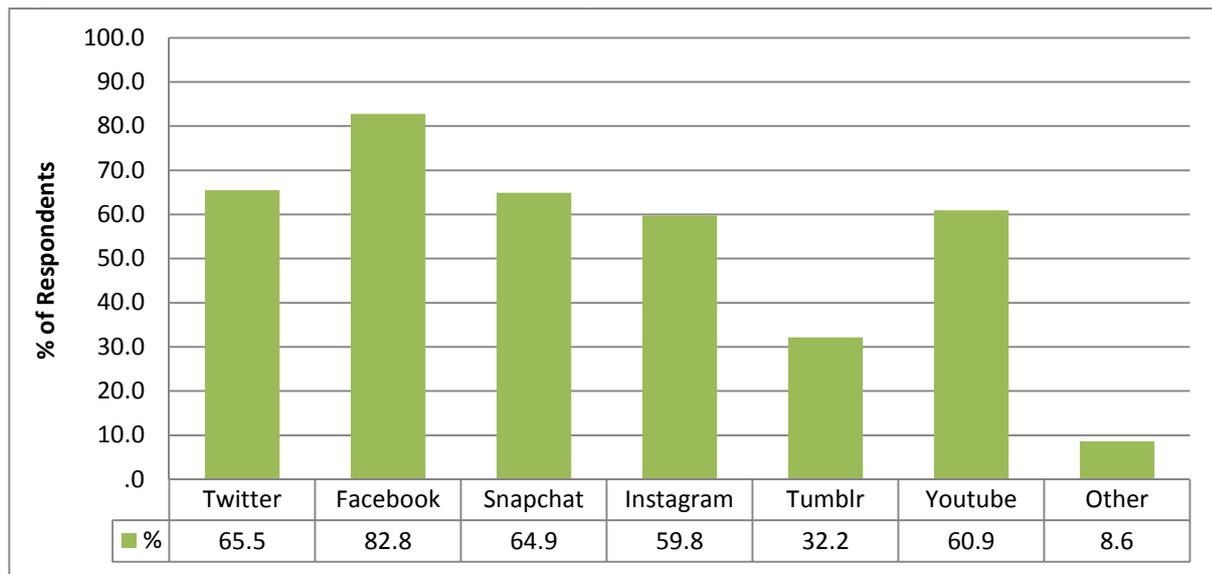
– Liberal Youth Scotland

Although only 42.0% of first-time voters surveyed stated that teachers were an important source of influence on their interest in politics (see above), the apparent lack of referendum debate within many schools would appear to suggest that the role of teachers may have been even stronger if more schools had chosen to engage more fully with the debate.

#### 4.5 Social media use is largely monological rather than dialogical

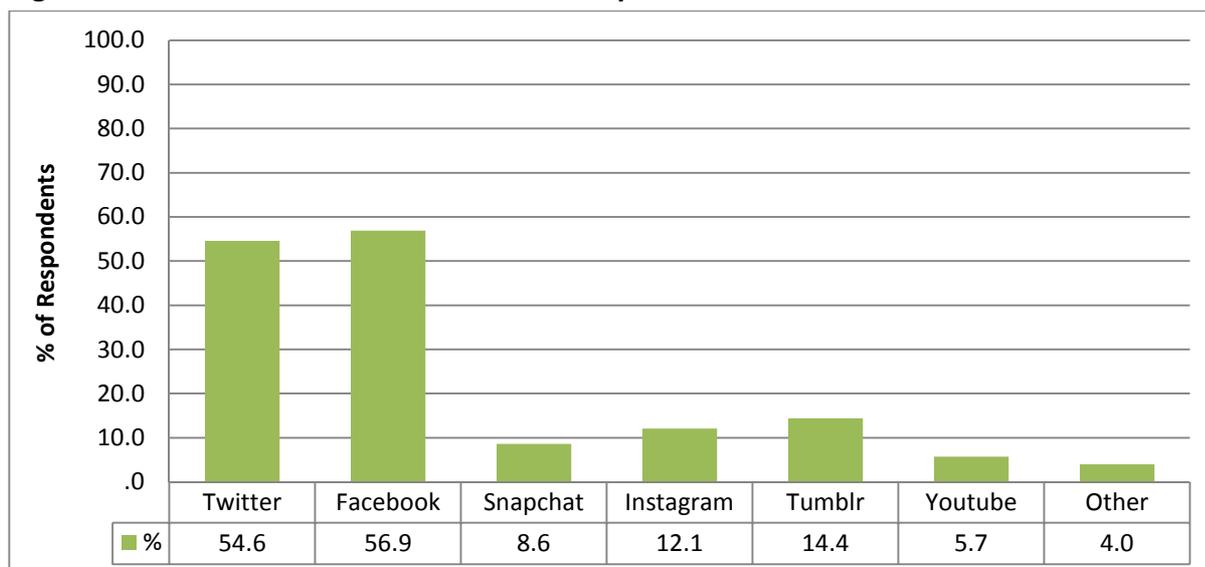
Part of our focus also fell upon young people’s use of social media in relation to the referendum. We began by asking our respondents to identify the social media outlets they use regularly. As laid out below in Figure 6, the most frequently identified form of social media was Facebook, used by 82.8% of respondents. Twitter (65.5%) and Snapchat (64.9%) were the next most popular, followed by YouTube (60.9%) and Instagram (59.8%). Tumblr was identified by 32.2% of respondents, and 8.6% identified another outlet.

**Figure 6: Social media outlets used regularly**



We developed this further by asking our respondents to say which of these they used for discussing political issues. The results are laid out below in Figure 7, and show that the most popular response was still Facebook, used by 56.9% of our respondents to discuss political issues. This was closely followed by Twitter (54.6%) though, with each of the remaining options identified by less than 15.0% of respondents. This clearly points to Twitter and Facebook as being the pre-eminent forms of social media in relation to political issues.

**Figure 7: Social media outlets used to discuss political issues**



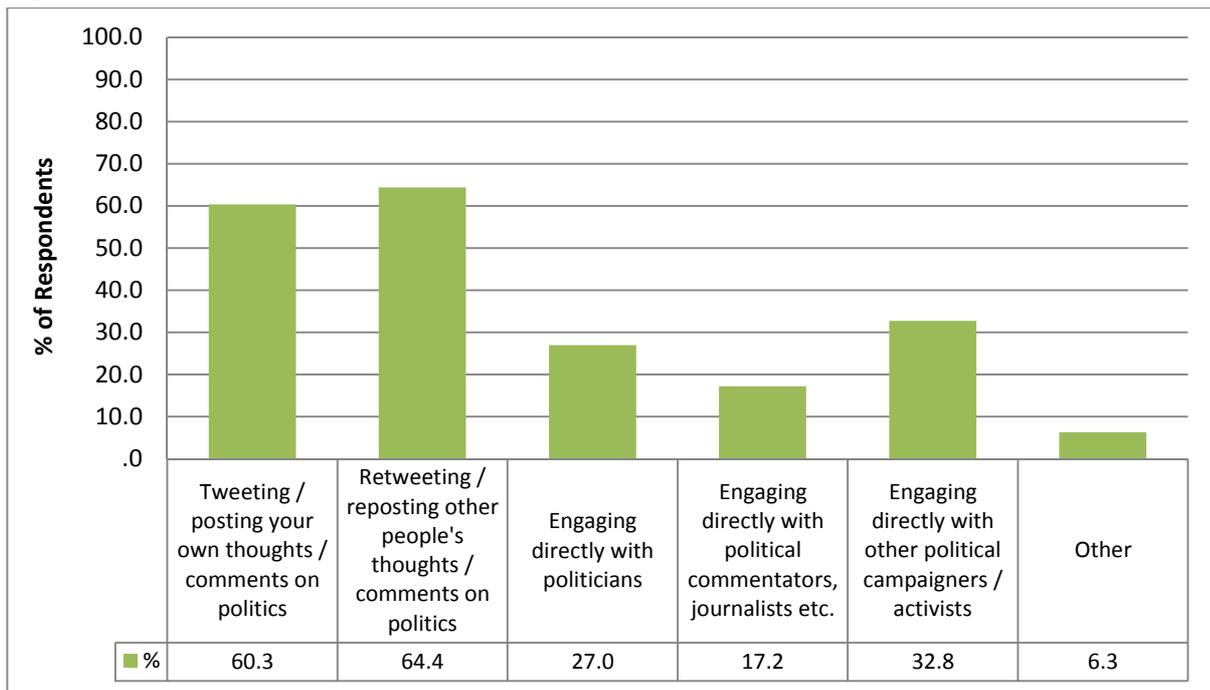
We also asked respondents to tell us how their use of social media to discuss political issues changed during the campaign, how it has subsequently changed since the referendum, and how it is likely to change in future.

67.8% of our respondents stated that their use of social media for political purposes increased during the referendum campaign, with 29.5% stating that it stayed the same. Only 2.7% said that their use of social media for political purposes decreased during the referendum.

Since the campaign ended, the increase in usage has continued, with 42.5% of respondents saying that their use of social media for political purposes has increased even further since the referendum campaign ended. 43.2% said that their use has stayed roughly the same, and 14.4% stated that their use of social media for political purposes has decreased since the referendum. Going forward, 64.2% of respondents said that their use of social media for political purposes will probably increase further in future. 30.4% said that their use of social media for political purposes would stay roughly the same, and 5.4% said that it would decrease.

Finally in relation to social media, we wanted to obtain an idea of exactly what kind of politics-related activities young people were involved in on social media. The results are laid out below in Figure 8, showing that the most common activity is retweeting/reposting other people's thoughts/comments on politics (64.4% of respondents). This was followed by tweeting/posting your own thoughts/comments on politics, selected by 60.3% of respondents. Engaging directly with other political campaigners/activists was selected by 32.8% of respondents. Perhaps surprisingly, engaging directly with politicians was less popular, selected only by 27.0% of respondents overall. Similarly, only 17.2% of respondents said that they used social media to engage directly with political commentators, journalists etc. This suggests that in most cases, the use of social media seems to be a unidirectional activity (announcing something) rather than an attempt to start a dialogue with political/civic groups or campaigners.

**Figure 8: Involvement in politics-related activities on social media**



This was largely corroborated by our Twitter findings, in which we found clear differences in the approach to tweeting political content. In our dataset, 52.5% of tweets containing political content were retweets, compared to just 31.4% of non-political tweets. On this basis, there clearly seems to be an elevated tendency to retweet somebody else’s opinion when dealing with political issues than when dealing with non-political issues. Similarly, we established a greater propensity to include links in political tweets. Whilst 36.2% of political tweets included a link (for example, to a website, image or video), the equivalent proportion for non-political output was just 25.7%.

This theme also emerged from our political party and campaign group interviewees, who explained that whilst social media could be good for encouraging debate and strengthening group ties (e.g. Women for Independence began as a Twitter movement), there were also views expressed that it was an ‘echo chamber’ with little reasoned debate and dialogue between opposing sides. Interviewees were generally more positive about Facebook rather than Twitter as a medium for engaging young people in politics: several interviewees from the ‘Yes’ side of the debate reported that their organisations had spent money on targeted Facebook advertising towards young people on Facebook.

*Facebook is much better at going into detail [for things] and it's probably a better environment to share the likes of infographics as well actually. If somebody had given a really good speech, one of our young people had given a really good speech and had a brilliant quote in there, a picture of them and their quote. That sort of thing took off exponentially every time we did it.*

– Generation Yes / Common Weal

Facebook was also viewed as being a useful way to invite people to events and one interviewee indicated that they felt that it was a less confrontational space than Twitter for discussing politics and that they believed that women in particular were more comfortable discussing politics on Facebook. However, it was also reported that the average age of Facebook users is increasing and that there is growth in other social media such as Vine, Instagram and Snapchat amongst younger people, including 16-17 year olds. Interviewees urged caution about making assumptions that young people used social media in particular ways or to assume that this was the best way to engage them politically.

On this last point, however, there was a general consensus amongst our first-time voter interviewees that social media were, indeed, useful tools for political communication and engagement, particularly amongst the younger generations. The reasons cited included: 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:

*I think it's really good, because that's where everyone is these days, on social media.*

– Male, 17, Nairn

*What we had, in the nationalist community, was strings of Facebook pages, and groups, and people that were all linked together, sharing and compiling information, relaying it back and forth to each other. It was an incredibly efficient and useful campaign tool to have.*

– Male, 17, Clackmannanshire

*I think it's a great thing, actually, because you get a lot of people's views from both sides. I think, obviously with the media being biased, I don't think you can really trust what the media's saying. So on social media you can get both sides, and hear both sides of the story.*

– Male, 17, Dumfries

Also in line with the survey results, only a minority of our young interviewees had entered into any kind of online dialogue with elected representatives (at the local council, Scottish Parliament or UK Parliament levels) or with political commentators:

*On Twitter I tweet quite a lot of our local SNP councillors, since I got involved with Yes in Paisley. In the Renfrewshire area we all sort of seem to work together.*

– Female, 17, Paisley

*I've got quite a good relationship with John Finnie MSP on Twitter. There's quite a few MSPs follow me, and we quite often discuss issues. I recently had a very good conversation with James Cook, the BBC broadcaster, on Twitter. He put out a tweet about how people were declaring him as biased for one side or the other, and I said 'To be honest, although I*

*support one side, I think you do a very good job of balancing it'. And he tweeted me back saying 'Thank you very much.'*

– Male, 17, Glasgow

Our interviews with first-time voters also reaffirmed the survey finding that retweeting/reposting other people's thoughts and opinions was the most common politics-related activity on social media. The majority of interviewees noted that they would occasionally 'like', 'retweet', 'share' or 'favourite' the social media posts of those parties, groups and individuals that they follow:

*I follow the likes of Nicola Sturgeon and Alex Salmond. If I see something I agree with, I'll maybe retweet it or favourite it or something.*

– Male, 17, Nairn

Interestingly, with regard to sharing, or expressing agreement with, others' political views on social media, there was a suggestion from one interviewee that this was somehow 'safer' than posting her own opinions, in her own words, online:

*On Twitter you can favourite or retweet tweets, so I'd done that with some more harsher ones. Because then it wasn't me writing it, it was just me still expressing it, in a way.*

– Female, 17, Dumfries

Indeed, there were decidedly mixed opinions and experiences amongst our young 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, based on previous, personal, negative incidents, or being 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:

*People, even ones that I know, will tweet you, 'Shut up, you don't know what you're talking about'. And you think, 'You can't just say that'. But you just need to brush it off, because it's the same both ways – each side has people that will just attack the first thing you say, whatever.*

– Female, 17, Paisley

*I don't ever put particularly strong opinions up. I tend to be quite careful about what I do on the Internet, because I've had a history of trolling and stuff like that.*

– Female, 18, Edinburgh

*I have to confess I didn't use it for expressing my own opinions that much. I was conscious that some of the stuff I read on Twitter got very heated very quickly, which made me a bit uncomfortable so I didn't really engage with that bit.*

– Female, 17, Fife

## 5.0 NEXT STEPS

Based on our research findings, we argue that there are a number of areas in which further research is needed to improve understanding of young voters' involvement in politics and to improve the quality of the data collected. We have talked about a 'referendum effect' in the report and have suggested this may not be straightforward. To assess this issue more fully, further research into the political activity of the young people we interviewed and surveyed in this pilot project would enable their political activity to be assessed over time. This would enable their activity to be tracked and related to political developments, including, but not confined to, how people respond to future voting opportunities. This would enable questions to be asked about fluctuations in political activity and the reason for the fluctuations. Moreover, if young people who voted for the first time in the independence referendum subsequently become politically inactive, further research will enable the reasons for the inactivity to be assessed. Further research with the young people involved in this research will also enable questions around the role of schools, colleges and universities in people's activity to be addressed. Is it the case that as people leave school, college and university their political activism drops away and, if so, how and why?

Our interviews with political parties and campaign groups revealed that, with the exception of groups directed at young people (such as, Generation Yes and the Scottish Youth Parliament) little effort was made specifically to engage with first time voters in a unique way. Our research shows that political parties recognised the importance of social media for their campaigning (as did campaign groups) but a further area of research would investigate how the use of social media by parties and groups develops over time, if it does, and whether organisations try to engage more directly with young people in their campaigning. How will parties and groups in the future try to gain and maintain the interest in politics of young people?

Debates in schools played an important part in the independence referendum. A number of those interviewed from parties and groups spoke highly of the school debates in which they engaged. Further research could investigate whether school debates, with representatives from outside the school, such as party candidates, become a central part of political mobilisation and campaigning.

It is unclear whether there will be another Scottish independence referendum in the next few years. If there is another referendum, further research could investigate its impact on 16-19 year old first time voters and assess whether there is the same 'referendum effect' as there was in the run up to the 2014 vote. The opinions and activity of first time voters in the next referendum could be compared with those of the same age cohort in 2014.

Finally, on a methodological point, our analysis of social media would have benefitted from a broader range of social media analysis tools, particularly in light of our finding that Facebook seems to be a more effective and dialogical vehicle for political engagement. It may also have been helpful to try to use of a control group (although we recognise the difficulty of establishing any such group in a truly representative way). This might comprise of people from England who voted for the first time in the 2015 general election (though we recognise that 16 and 17 year olds did not have the vote in that election). The political use of Twitter by such people, who would not

have experienced the intense political campaigning around the Scottish independence referendum campaign, could be analysed and compared with that of our sample from Scotland. An alternative approach might be to look at the output of our Scottish sample over a six months period before the start of the 'formal' referendum campaign.

## 6.0 IMPACT AND DISSEMINATION

Throughout the project we have worked with the Scottish Youth Parliament. We have fed back the findings from the interviews with 16-19 year old first-time voters to MSYPs and discussed the findings with them. The outcomes of the discussions have been incorporated in our subsequent work. We have shared and discussed our overall research findings with the SYP. We have written a blog for Democratic Audit Scotland setting out some of the key findings of our research. Our findings are also being disseminated through a White Paper, which will be sent to each MP and MSP in Scotland. At different times in the project, we have issued two press releases which were reported on the BBC Scotland website<sup>3</sup> and by the *Press and Journal* newspaper. Members of the team were also interviewed following each press release by BBC Radio Scotland and our research and parts of the interviews were reported on the news.

We are currently arranging an event to disseminate our research findings with the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People. The membership of this CPG includes not only Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) but representatives and members of the Scottish Youth Parliament and other organisations (e.g. YouthLink Scotland and Children in Scotland) that work with and represent young people. A further press release is about to be sent to media outlets in Scotland which will lead to the further dissemination of our findings. A local radio station, Northsound, has expressed an interest in reporting the final outcomes of our research.

On the academic front, we intend to present a conference paper to at least one, and possible two, academic conferences in spring/summer 2016. We also intend to write academic journal articles around the changing patterns of young adults' engagement in politics, and their use of social media for political purposes.

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-north-east-orkney-shetland-30880644>.

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