YOUTH POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: LESSONS FROM THE USA

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In 2014, Kenny was awarded the number one position of Rare Rising Stars 2014 and acknowledged for being the most outstanding black student in the UK. In 2015, he was one of 16 people from across Europe featured in the Commonwealth Young Achievers list. Most recently, he was named by Impact Squared as one of 100 young leaders (under 25) across the globe making a social impact to transform our world. Kenny is also a trustee of Domestic Abuse charity, Strength With In Me Foundation (S.W.I.M). He is also a Winston Churchill Fellow and a RSA Fellow.
The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust is the UK’s national memorial to, former Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill and each year the Trust awards Travelling Fellowship grants to UK citizens, in a range of fields, to enable Churchill Fellows to carry out research projects overseas. These projects are designed to exchange ideas and best practice, and build greater understanding between peoples and different cultures, in order that professions and communities in the UK can benefit from these shared experiences.

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ClearView Research Ltd is a leading edge youth-led consultancy. They provide specialist research services and produce solution-focused reports.

Unlike traditional research companies, they do not rely solely upon desktop research. They take their research a step further and conduct advanced social action research. They believe it is vital that their researchers work with and, in many cases, co-create their reports with the same individuals, communities and groups of people that are the focus of their research.

Their social mission is to empower through research, grassroots organisations, and key stakeholders in society that are striving for social, racial and economic justice.

website: www.clearviewresearch.co.uk
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INTRODUCTION

Whether you are a political nerd or see yourself as totally disengaged or apathetic to it all, I think we can all admit that politics, whether for good or bad reasons, was a very hot topic of conversation in 2016 for many of us in the United Kingdom (UK). The shock emerging from the U.S. presidential election result and the EU referendum result means that we can no longer dismiss the lack of democratic engagement by saying “nothing ever changes” and “they are all the same”, two lines I have constantly heard over the past few years.

Politics and elections as we know them have changed, things are not as predictable as they once were (even the most credible pollsters are getting it wrong these days). People are desperate for change as they are disillusioned and frustrated with the status quo. With this being said, the lack of participation of young citizens in politics and the decision making process is affecting their lives and futures, and is still a big societal issue—globally! This is a topic that I have been interested in for several years, written a lot about, publicly spoken about, and provided solutions on. Across the globe different countries are finding innovative ways to try and solve this issue, solutions which I have been yet to discover or understand first-hand.

Through this Winston Churchill Fellowship, I had the opportunity to discover some solutions and understand them first-hand through visiting two interesting political states/territories politically— the U.S. and Hong Kong. The purpose was to expand my knowledge on the topic of youth participation in politics and more broadly political engagement. As part of my research, I met with various campaign groups, activists, academics and experts as well as, professionals working in politics in the U.S. and Hong Kong. The people I met also helped to give me a detailed understanding of the political system in both places.

The statement “young people are not engaged in politics” has been widely spread across the mainstream media and society. On one level, it’s understandable why people feel this way and would come to this conclusion. However, this conclusion is often too quickly drawn and is far from the truth, in my opinion.

Here’s why.

How we measure youth engagement (young people aged 18-24) in politics is generally based on two figures. These are voter registration and youth voter turnout figures. My generation are painted with the apathetic brush, as we significantly do not register to vote or vote in the same numbers, as the older age groups based on this formula of measuring the engagement of young citizens.

However, this way of measuring whether young citizens are engaged in politics, does not produce a true reflection of youth engagement in politics across the UK. All this formula can realistically show us at best, is the numbers of young people who are formally participating in elections and provide an indication of the number of those who are registered but do not vote. Though voter turnout or voter registration figures, in and of themselves, are not a valid source to indicate youth engagement in politics.

One thing though that is true about my generation, is that we are becoming increasingly uninterested and disengaged in party politics. We are less likely to identify with or support a political party than older age groups. The significant decline in the proportion of young citizens joining political parties over time is testament to this.

We cannot brand young people as politically disengaged simply based on the definition offered for ‘political engagement.’ Political engagement can be best described as “a psychological process, described as having interest in, paying attention to, having knowledge or opinions, being conscious, proactive and constantly informed about political matters.” Based on this definition above we should not casually label young people in the UK (an estimated 7.4 million people) as not engaged in politics because to do so, is to ignore two important things:

1. The (unquantifiable) numbers of young people in the UK who are; involved in campaigns to tackle social issues (e.g. the housing crisis, mental health and racism in the criminal justice system etc.), signing petitions, volunteering or working on projects for social good, blogging, vlogging on various issues and many other actions.

2. Secondly, the millions of young people who are talking, commenting, opinion sharing or expressing through one form or another about
politics (whether for good or bad). Politics was the most talked about topic on Facebook this year (2016). On Twitter also, politics was the most talked about topic with the following hashtags; #Election2016, #Brexit, #BlackLivesMatter (and #Trump - who was the only person who made the list) being in the top 10 most hashtags used in 2016.

Taking all of this into consideration, we cannot conclude that young people are disengaged or apathetic in politics. We are just engaging in politics in non-formal ways that the establishment are yet to officially recognise and measure when considering engagement. We just do not have an active interest in government elections and party politics because we are disillusioned with the inability for the government to solve and fix problems. Also, we are not educated about citizenship yet people just expect us to be responsible participating citizens, who know how to hold our elected officials accountable. Then the question arises, if engagement is not necessarily the issue then what is? In this current political climate and given the post-factual nature of our politics both in the U.S. and UK (and rest of the world) the real problems are:

1. How do we increase the quality of engagement young citizens are having with politics?

2. How do we get those young citizens who are most marginalised from politics, engaged in it?

I seek to address the second question and I will discuss this throughout my report. There are several ways to increase this quality of engagement that young citizens are having but one of the best ways to do this is through the creation of safe spaces. These safe places can be created online and offline, for young citizens to share their views and opinions, have any of their common misconceptions challenged, learn more about politics and be inspired to be part of the decision-making process. The issue we have in the UK is that young people and other marginalised groups have a lot to say about politics, however, these groups are rarely given an opportunity to express themselves freely, safely and without judgement. The lack of spaces to empower these groups of people, amongst other factors, such as a lack of political education, has led to a lack of engagement and understanding of politics in these groups.
Youth Political Engagement: Lessons from the USA

Introduction

There are not enough projects that exist that create safe places for this quality engagement, despite the value they bring. However, Bite The Ballot’s ‘DeCafe’ project is a great example of how we can provide high quality and meaningful engagement to young citizens. DeCafe is a re-invigoration of the 17th century practice of communities coming together in coffee shops and tea houses to discuss issues they cared about and changes they wanted to make. DeCafe is a space where people can come along, share their thoughts, listen to others, constructively challenge misconceptions and explore solutions. DeCafe events are an effective and fun method of community engagement, which open up discussions around social and political issues, to the groups of people furthest away from mainstream politics.

Other key questions I think we should also consider on this topic are:

- Why socially-excluded young citizens are still yet to become politically engaged despite all efforts to date?

These are not questions I have the complete answers to right now as I write this but these are questions I will continue to explore and that I hope others in this space explore too.

This report aims to:

- Showcase my reflections from the U.S.
- Highlight best practice I have witnessed in the U.S.
- Provide recommendations that are applicable to the UK.

The report is based on my reflections of spending four weeks in the U.S., in Washington D.C., New York and Chicago. My aspiration is that these recommendations are useful and, if taken on-board can be utilised to ensure that more young people actively participate in our democracy and shape the world they want to live in. In addition to this, I would like my report to help young people to see themselves as young citizens and not just consumers. Finally, I hope that those who are disillusioned with the UK’s politics can be re-engaged constructively.
WHY THE U.S.

I decided to visit the U.S. as part of my research project because it is a country which shares various similarities with the UK, particularly when looking at political issues, such as; fairly low voter turnout compared to other developed democracies (the U.S. ranks 31st among the 35 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), low turnout of young voters in elections and citizens disillusioned with politics and the establishment and desperate for change.

However, with this being said, the U.S. is home to amazing people, organisations, and communities that provide world-class examples of social, and digital innovation, campaigning, activism and engagement.

There are also a numbers of laws and policies that can be considered best-practice and supported political innovation. I was keen to be exposed to this innovation and best practice.

My trip to the U.S. was very interesting and a great learning experience culturally, politically and historically. I enjoyed my time there as both a researcher and tourist. Conducting this research during the hype of a presidential election race between Senator Hillary Clinton and businessman, and now President, Donald Trump, made things even more real for me.
MY REFLECTIONS: FINDINGS FROM THE U.S.

Based on my analysis of my interviews, informal conversations, my personal reflection of this Fellowship trip and my work in this research area till date, I would like to discuss the following topics, in relation to how we engage more of my generation into politics and democratic participation in the UK:

* Schools need to become a more democratic place
* Voter registration reform in the UK is needed
* How are organisations and activists engaging young people and marginalised voters in the U.S. to register and vote?
* National Voter Registration Day 2016 in the U.S.

SCHOOLS NEED TO BECOME A MORE DEMOCRATIC PLACE

Young citizens have to be in school legally until they are of voting age (18 years old). So, why don’t we make the most of their time in education by providing them a ‘curriculum for life’ which involves political education being taught from primary school?

The U.S., similar to the UK, has seen over the past few decades less schools teach politics (i.e. political education, civic education and citizenship education) and even less take a real interest in teaching it, as they are under pressure to get results in other subjects that are given priority. Also, when politics is taught it tends to be taught in a boring lecture format and not in an engaging and fun way.8

6 years ago in the U.S. retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, who is pushing to revive civic education stated “today, at least half of the states don’t even require high school students to take civics; only three states require it in middle school.”9

The lack of political education in the U.S. was a concern for many that I spoke with during my trip. As many believed that this affected turnout figures and the lack of active engagement amongst the younger generations was caused, to a high degree, by the lack of civic education in schools. There was also a fear amongst those I spoke to that young people leaving school with no political knowledge or understanding of how the system works were more likely to make uninformed decisions or have extreme views. People I spoke with were all in agreement that citizenship education in school was a key cornerstone to growing an informed and engaged future generation.

Schools in the UK need to become a more democratic place too. Citizenship education is not taught in all UK schools, particularly in schools in England. What I’ve discovered is that the student experience of those being taught citizenship education varies massively. Some are taught it in a very inspiring, engaging way whilst many others have a bad experience of it. One thing we know for sure is that it is not being taught to a high standard like mandatory subjects such as English, Maths and Science. Some schools just squeeze a citizenship class into registration/form time at the end of the school day whereas some teachers teach it as an hour class. The take up of citizenship classes across UK schools is patchy. Headteachers need to take this subject more seriously and then standards would drastically improve and more students would leave school informed and empowered to become active citizens.

However, just teaching citizenship education in a school alone does not make it a democratic place. Schools should also offer consistent opportunities for students to get involved in decision-making and participatory-type politics. Students could be involved in decisions concerning school budgets, school trips, hiring of teachers and the subjects chosen for the school curriculum and more. Schools should also run elections for school council positions that the entire school has to participate in. This could be seen as a form of experiential learning of voting for representatives, as this is something that they would be expected to do almost every year once they have left the bubble of school. Schools could also organise activities or invite external organisations to help get students registered to...
vote, once they are 16 years old. Schools could also get involved with initiatives such as WE Day, who work with thousands of schools in the U.S. and the UK to inspire and empower students to become global citizens. Schools should encourage students to get involved in volunteering, fundraising or raising awareness around causes that matter. Activities such as these would make school a more democratic place, where students do not just learn about democracy and politics but actually practice and experience it.

When young citizens are not educated and informed about politics, it makes it hard for them to hold elected politicians to account who make decisions on their behalf. It also makes it difficult for them to exercise their rights by law and self-identify as citizens.

Why should we allow young citizens to leave school with no clue about politics or an understanding of the system they are in? We should be empowering young citizens to have the confidence, skills and knowledge to become active changemakers and hold their decision makers to account too. One simple way to mould young people into responsible individuals who will fulfil their civic duties and can make a positive impact on their communities is through citizenship classes at school. Schools are not just responsible for teaching students skills to be employable, they are also responsible to ensure that all students leave well-rounded and prepared for life outside of the bubble of school.

**Voter Registration Reform in the UK is Needed**

The U.S., similar to the UK, has an individual voter registration system where the burden is always on the voter to find out how to register and get themselves registered. This sort of system is problematic, as I feel voter registration should just be automatic in this day and age when we have more information on people than ever before. The fact that in the UK our Government is planning to have our last census in 2021, is testament to this fact. The UK Government are hoping that by combining existing statistics such as council tax records, school admission statistics, tax records or NHS data, statisticians could provide a similar level of data to the census, but at a lower cost and on a more frequent basis.

However, the U.S. unlike the UK have made more strides to make voter registration easier, more accessible and convenient to get more Americans on the electoral roll, particularly through the implementation of the National Voter Registration Act (also known as the “Motor Voter Act”) in 1993 and Automatic Voter Registration. The Motor Voter Act reformed voter registration in U.S. and made the following changes:

- It required state governments to allow voter registration when a qualifying voter applied for, or renewed, their driver’s license or applied for social services.
- It required state governments to make the voter registration process easier by providing uniform registration services through drivers’ license registration centres, disability centres, schools, libraries, and mail-in registration.
- It allowed the Department of Justice to bring civil actions in federal court to enforce its requirements.
- It gave the responsibility to the Federal Election Commission (FEC) to provide states with guidance on the Act, to develop a national mail voter registration form, and to compile reports on the effectiveness of the Act.
- In addition to the methods of voter registration offered by the states, the Act requires states to provide the opportunity to apply to register to vote for federal elections by three means:
  - providing individuals with the opportunity to register to vote at the same time that they apply for a driver’s license or seek to renew a driver’s license, and requires the state to forward the completed application to the appropriate state or local election official.
  - offering voter registration opportunities at all offices that provide public assistance and all offices that provide state-funded programs primarily engaged in providing services to persons with disabilities. Each applicant for any of these services, renewal of services, or address changes must be provided with a voter registration form of a declination form as well as assistance in completing the form and forwarding the completed application to the appropriate state or local election official.
  - citizens can register to vote by mail using mail-in-forms developed by each state and the Election Assistance Commission.
It created requirements as to how states should maintain voter registration lists for federal elections.

The Act applies to 44 states and the District of Columbia. Those states which did not have voter registration requirements or had election-day registration at polling places were exempted from the requirements of the Act.

Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) is gaining more momentum in the U.S. and in March 2015, following the successful campaign of The Oregon Bus Project, which is a youth-led organisation that gets young people active and engaged in democracy.

The state of Oregon, became the first state to automatically register any citizen who obtains a driver’s license or a state ID at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Since Oregon passed this law, registration rates in the state have quadrupled. Five more states have put in AVR laws. Overall, 29 states plus the District of Columbia have considered measures in 2016 that would automatically register citizens.

The benefits of AVR are clear. Countries where AVR exists such as Iceland, Israel, Chile and Australia show promising results of high voter registration rates AVR would create a straightforward process that would in summary have the potential to boost registration rates, update the electoral roll, save money, make voting more convenient, and reduce the potential for voter fraud.

I spoke with Nikki Fisher, the Executive Director of The Oregon Bus Project about their campaign for AVR in Oregon and she spoke about the need for more States to adopt AVR laws in order that the "barriers to access our democracy can be removed."

States Considering Automatic Voter Registration in 2017

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<td><em>AVR Approved</em></td>
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<td>Vermont</td>
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The implementation of laws like the ‘Motor Voter Act’ alongside the hard work by campaign groups has been successful in getting Americans registered to vote. Particularly under the Obama Administration, which oversaw for the first time in U.S. history over 200 million Americans being registered to vote.

The question now arises, why don’t we take a similar approach here in the UK? With up to an estimated 8.3 million people missing from the electoral register in the UK.15 There is a serious need to reform how we do voter registration in the UK. The law and policy in this area is not fit for purpose in a 21st century (and digital) society. The reforms that are specifically needed, and the case for them, is something I have already explored (alongside other knowledgeable experts) in more detail, in both the ‘5 Steps Forward’ report (December 2016) and in the ‘Missing Millions’ report (April 2016). There are many changes that could be made to increase and maintain the number of people on the electoral register.

Speaking to organisations who coordinated or ran voter registration campaigns in the U.S. it is clear that there is still a lot of work to do in terms of registering those who are most turned off by politics or disillusioned by it all. There is still a high number of people who do not want to engage in the political system and do not want to register to vote, as they do not plan on voting at all. I even saw this for myself whilst I was in Chicago trying to get young citizens to register to vote. Some people I approached just told me straight up that they were not planning to vote, so they were not going to register in the first place. However, it is important to understand that though the voter registration system in the U.S. is more advanced than the UK, it is still not perfect as an estimated 50 million plus Americans are still not registered to vote, many of these people being young people or those from marginalised communities.16 So, passing a law similar to the ‘Motor Voter Act’ here in the UK will not be the silver bullet to having everyone (who is eligible to be) registered in the UK but it will be a very positive step towards removing barriers to voter registration and make it more accessible, which is key and needed. Also, if we were to implement such a law we would need to ensure that the law is being complied with.
HOW ARE ORGANISATIONS AND ACTIVISTS ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE AND MARGINALISED VOTERS IN THE U.S. TO REGISTER AND VOTE?

I had the privilege of meeting some amazing people and organisations running voter registration and engagement campaigns in the U.S. ahead of the 2016 presidential election. I will highlight two examples of innovative campaigns that harnessed the power of community engagement and online tools/technology:

I. Color Of Change PAC – #VotingWhileBlack

Color Of Change is the largest online racial justice organisation in the U.S. They seek to “strengthen Black America’s political voice”, largely through the use of the Internet. Color of Change helps people respond effectively to injustice in the world around them. With over one million members, they are a national online force that campaigns to move decision-makers in corporations and government to create a more humane and less hostile world for Black people in America. In 2015, Color of Change was ranked 6th on Fast Company’s list of the 50 Most Innovative Companies in the World, for creating a civil rights group for the 21st century.17

Whilst in Washington D.C. I attended the first-ever Black Battleground State Text-a-Thon event organised by Color Of Change. This was part of their #VotingWhileBlack campaign. #VotingWhileBlack is a voter mobilization movement led by Color Of Change PAC using digital tools to reach Black voters in battleground states. As part of the Text-a-Thon I, all volunteers were introduced to a new form of groundbreaking technology, which allowed us to directly text message African American voters living in key battleground states, to encourage them to get out to vote as well as educate them on black issues and what was at stake in this presidential election. It was nothing like I have ever seen before.
The technology was easy to use and through directly messaging eligible Black voters we were able to have one-on-one conversations in real time with them, which you cannot have via an email campaign, also, we were more likely to get the voters attention and encourage them. This is the type of technology you expect commercial companies trying to market us something would love to use but instead we were using this for social good. This was volunteering unlike anything else I have seen. There was good food, good vibes and good people, so it was a great atmosphere for a diverse group of passionate people. In the run up to the U.S. presidential election, Color Of Change had been mobilising Black voters across the country, hosting Text-a-Thons in New York City, Washington D.C., Houston, Miami, Oakland, Durham, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Volunteers at Text-a-Thon events had sent more than 715,000 texts to eligible Black voters. There is definitely potential for an organisation to take the same form and approach as Color of Change in the UK. The Black community in the UK, similar to Black Americans are still facing institutional racism, discrimination and socio-economic inequalities. There is a need for a strong political voice for the Black community, particularly online. We should be following the best practice of Color of Change and begin using technology to reach and mobilise people in the Black community (or any other marginalised community) that are least likely to participate in the decision-making process (i.e. elections).
2. HeadCount

Whilst in New York, I had the opportunity to meet with Laurie Lenninger, the Managing Director of HeadCount to speak about their campaigns for 2016 elections and the work they are doing on the ground and online with partners such as, Spotify and Pandora.

HeadCount are a non-partisan voter registration organisation, who were set up in 2004. The organisation has worked with musicians and the music industry to increase youth participation in democracy. With over 15,000 volunteers nationwide organising activities at over 1,000 concerts, festivals and community events each election year. As a result, HeadCount has been able to help register nearly 400,000 new voters.

Ahead of the 2016 presidential election, HeadCount innovated their campaign approach and launched an app called “HelloVote”, which is a new technology that allows anyone to register to vote via text message or Facebook Messenger. With 96% of Americans owning a cell phone, the app was available to nearly every American to use to register.

The groundbreaking HelloVote mobile voter registration technology was developed by Fight for the Future, a non-partisan, non-profit organisation dedicated to protecting and expanding the internet’s transformative power. HeadCount’s HelloVote tool, is the first tool that allows voters to register over text message or Facebook, in just a minute. It is also integrated with 20 different states’ online voter registration platform, making it the only technology that allows for true online voter registration in a variety of states. HelloVote uses SMS and chat bot technology to enable voters to register on Facebook Messenger or on any cell phone or tablet, even a flip phone, meaning not just smartphones.

HeadCount launched the app on 27 September 2016, in support of National Voter Registration Day (NVRD). On the launch date artist posts were directed to their followers to register to vote by texting “COUNT” to 348-387 or to access the technology at HeadCount.org/RegistertoVote. Each social media post made by artists also featured a photo of the artist holding up HeadCount’s “Register to Vote Now” clipboards.
HeadCount also partnered with music streaming services Spotify and Pandora Radio to help encourage listeners to register and get out to vote. American Spotify users received a message from President Barack Obama directing them to HeadCount.org for voter information.\(^{19}\) Pandora provided audio messages that enabled listeners to register to vote online or by text message, through the Pandora app.\(^{20}\) Musicians also recorded Artist Audio Messages (AAMs) to encourage their listeners on their Pandora station to register and get out to vote.\(^{21}\)

As part of NVRD, HeadCount also hosted voter registration drives in public places in over 50 cities across the U.S. including Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Denver, San Francisco, Miami, Columbus (Ohio) and Richmond (Virginia). HeadCount’s largest NVRD event happened in conjunction with MTV in New York City (NYC), where over 70 NYC high school students helped to register voters outside MTV’s TRL studio in Times Square.
MY REFLECTIONS: FINDINGS FROM THE U.S.

NATIONAL VOTER REGISTRATION DAY 2016 IN THE U.S.

In the UK I have worked on the 2015 and 2016 National Voter Registration Drives (NVRD) with Bite The Ballot, who have been coordinating the UK-wide voter registration campaign since 2014. In 2015 we coordinated the most successful registration drive (per capita) in any western democracy with a record-breaking 441,500 people registering to vote during our campaign period of 2-8 February, with 166,000 registering on 5 February alone.

The NVRD campaign we run in the UK, originated from the U.S. and it has been running since 2012 in the U.S. The NVRD campaign in the U.S. was born in reaction to the U.S. presidential election in 2008, which saw 6 million Americans not vote because they missed a registration deadline or didn’t know how to register. As part of NVRD in the U.S., volunteers, celebrities, and organisations from all over the country get involved in a single day of action to register Americans to vote. The campaign has been going from strength to strength and is considered a national day to celebrate citizenship with the call to action of registering to vote. This campaign has also been very successful with getting young Americans registered to vote.

There are four fundamental differences between NVRD in the U.S. and in the UK:

1. NVRD in the U.S. is a government-backed initiative. The National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) have endorsed National Voter Registration Day to encourage eligible citizens across the U.S. to get #ReadytoVote. The White House in 2016 issued an official proclamation designating September 27, 2016 as National Voter Registration Day. President Obama quoted this:

   “Each year on National Voter Registration Day, we reaffirm the strong sense of civic pride among our people and encourage friends, family members, and neighbors to get involved in civic life by registering to vote.”

2. More influential key stakeholders (i.e. platforms, organisations, influencers, celebrities etc.) get involved in the campaign, as there is a clear understanding this is a non-partisan and citizenship campaign. Whereas in the UK some key stakeholders are reluctant as they see this as a political campaign even though voter registration is an issue bigger than party politics and is something all parties are in agreement needs to be done anyway.

3. NVRD is a not coordinated or owned by any one organisation, meaning that it is a brand (organisation) in itself and the campaign has its own team and budget.

4. NVRD in the UK has been turned into a week-long campaign drive as opposed to NVRD in the U.S., which is still a single day of action.

In 2016, I had the privilege of witnessing this campaign in the flesh for myself and it was an amazing experience. It was great to see so many partners involved in the campaign. I took part in NVRD in the U.S. through working with Chicago Votes, in Illinois, Chicago. In 2016, the campaign registered over 700,000 American voters across the country in just a single day of action. I saw NVRD being promoted by big platforms such as Google, Bing, Facebook, Spotify, Pandora, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, YouTube, Instagram, MTV and many more. I saw various celebrities and influencers such as Justin Bieber and Leonardo DiCaprio and a huge number of organisations and non-profit organisations such as HeadCount, League of Women Voters, Rock The Vote, Chicago Votes, Nonprofit VOTE and more, all getting involved in NVRD.
See key campaign achievements of NVRD 2016 in the U.S. below (taken from NVRD 2016 Report):

**REACHING MILLIONS**

3,524 partners across the country
10,353 volunteers
359,954,794 social media impressions
1,200 events nationwide

771,321 voters registered

**REMARKABLE GROWTH**

Since its founding in 2012, National Voter Registration Day has grown into a massive cultural and civic event with nationwide reach. In 2016, the holiday had more participants and reached more eligible voters than ever before.
IN THE NEWS

More than any prior year, National Voter Registration Day dominated the news media in 2016. From small town local news to nationwide broadcasts, the holiday could not be missed on television, radio, in print, and online. The media coverage of National Voter Registration Day far exceeds what we can include in this report, but we have included a few of our favorite stories here.

Story Highlights

- National Voter Registration Day in September 27: Register to Vote for 2018 Election by The Huffington Post
- A massive voter registration effort is taking place Tuesday — and thousands of companies are involved by Business Insider
- Internet for everyone: Register to vote by SF Gate

359,954,794

# OF SOCIAL MEDIA IMPRESSIONS

ENGAGING SOME OF AMERICA'S MOST TRUSTED BRANDS

To reach truly exceptional impact, National Voter Registration Day relies on the support and partnership of America's largest businesses and brands. A tremendous portion of Americans eligible voters have no interaction with traditional political organizations, so these corporate partners are the only way to reach some of our country's most underserved citizens. In 2016, National Voter Registration Day's business partners contributed some impressive results.

GOOGLE

MTV

INSTAGRAM

PANDORA

WEST ELM

BET

VGN

#GAMERSVOTE
If we want NVRD to be more successful and impactful in the UK, then it is important that four things happen to NVRD in the U

1. NVRD becomes a government-backed initiative;
2. NVRD becomes a ‘brand’ (organisation) in itself (i.e. not coordinated by Bite The Ballot);
3. NVRD has more partners involved from private, public and voluntary sectors; and
4. NVRD is a properly funded campaign.

By doing this we can ensure more people, particularly young people are registered to vote in the UK. You can also see some screenshots I took during NVRD 2016 in the U.S. on this page.
OTHER KEY OBSERVATIONS

These are some other thoughts and recommendations for us to do in the UK that I took away from my trip to the U.S.:

- **Bringing more diverse talent into the Civil Service**: The government should use their influence and prestige to recruit more diverse and skilled talent into the Civil Service. This would bring more skills and diverse experience to the government and further help to tackle issues of the day. Speaking with senior people in the Obama Administration, it is clear they did this very well and offered various opportunities for really skilled people to work for the U.S. Government, for example for a year on sabbatical from their normal jobs.

- **Participatory budgeting**: There should be more opportunities for members of the public across the UK to influence policy and government budgets. A great way to do this is through participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting is a way for local people to have a direct say in how, and where, public funds can be used to address local needs. In New York, I was made aware of the City Council who practices participatory budgeting and allows members of the community to directly decide how to spend $1,000,000 of the public budget and come up with ideas to fund. New York City council states that participatory budgeting “gives real power to people who have never before been involved in the political process. And it results in better budget decisions—because who better knows the needs of our community than the people who live there?”

- **Social media platforms have to play more of a role to encourage citizenship, particularly amongst young people**: Social media companies from Facebook to Twitter to Snapchat have millions of millennials that use their platforms and when they do get behind elections and campaign we see the impact they can have but imagine if this happened more often. Political engagement would become more normalised and something to engage with outside of election time.

"gives real power to people who have never before been involved in the political process. And it results in better budget decisions—because who better knows the needs of our community than the people who live there?"
Other Key Observations

• **Nothing beats face to face engagement:** Grassroot engagement is the most powerful form of engagement, despite the rise in online engagement campaigns. Nothing beats genuine and authentic face to face engagement. Online engagement can be extremely effective to inspire people to participate in politics. Online we can reach more people at a period of time and cost-effectively. I have worked on a number of successful online voter engagement campaigns but I am still convinced that for real quality engagement and mobilisation there is nothing like grassroots engagement (i.e. community organising). Yes, it is more costly and timely to engage and mobilise people in person but it is certainly worthwhile and produces the best results from my own experience in terms of inspiring citizens to participate in our democracy. However, any effective campaign needs both an on-the-ground and online element to it.

• **Technology is key to engaging young people and marginalised groups in our democracy:** In this digital age it is important we harness the power of technology when we want to engage voters. Over 92% of all adults aged 16 to 24 in the UK are internet users, so there is a great opportunity for us to engage young citizens on their smartphones. 87.9% of adults in the UK (45.9 million) had recently (in the last 3 months of 2016) used the internet. We are all using technology and the internet more than ever before. We are using technology to do things in our day to day lives, such as shopping, banking, messaging, booking a cab, getting our clothes dry cleaned etc. So why don’t we bring politics more into the digital world too? Various campaigns have been able to fully harness the power of online to mobilise social change but none better than the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) campaign. The BLM campaign, was created in 2012 after Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman and then was acquitted for his murder. #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the violence and systemic racism towards black people. BLM also have an on-the-ground presence and have executed the online-offline campaign method very well. They are known internationally for the regular protests they hold against the deaths of black people by police and wider racial inequality issues. Their most known protests were in response to the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson and Eric Garner in New York City. The BLM campaign following these events has become a viral one. They are the only campaign to be in top 10 most hashtagged topics of 2016 on Twitter. Even though the BLM campaign is not a campaign to get young people registered or vote, it is a very powerful campaign to take lessons from on how to get young people and marginalised groups engaged in the political process.

• **The Government should provide access to data for organisations running voter registration or engagement campaigns:** Organisations who are putting in all their resources, sweat, blood and tears doing non-partisan work to get people registered and voting in the UK, should be given more data on where they should concentrate their efforts. This would allow for more targeted campaigns and better use of resources. These NGOs should be given access to information such as the electoral roll that will help them effectively collaborate and target their efforts with the limited resources they have available. Whilst in the U.S. I was made aware that under the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), all 50 states (and DC) are required to create an electronic central voter file. However, the content and availability across the states vary dramatically. Most voter files mainly contain the following: a voter’s name, address, date of birth, date of registration, political party, and voting history. NGOs in the U.S. can access voter files to help them campaign effectively. Even though they have to purchase these voter files, there are instances when they are given access for free through State Voices, if they meet certain requirements. NGOs in the UK, need to be able to access this kind of data as it would help organisations doing voter registration and voter engagement campaigns to allocate their resources where there is greatest need.

• **Cross-sector collaboration and leadership:** Collaboration and joint-up working from organisations in the private, public and voluntary sector is key and much needed if we want to tackle the democratic crisis we are in. This problem we are in is a societal one that will not be solved by NGOs only. That’s for sure. One thing for sure is that the non-profit sector and youth sector will need to work closer together around mobilising political participation. We need organisations such as Nonprofit VOTE in the UK, who I spoke with in States. Nonprofit
Youth Political Engagement: Lessons from the USA

VOTE are key in engaging non-profits in the U.S. to integrate voter engagement into their ongoing activities and services. They also engage non-profits to get involved in campaigns such as NVRD, in order to increase voter participation and active citizenship, especially among voters new to the process or with a recent history of lower participation.

- **Campaigns aimed at young citizens should be youth-led too:** Organisations set out to engage and mobilise young citizens into politics should be led by them also. From my experience, this brings a lot of authenticity to the organisation and makes them more effective. It’s human nature to respond or engage better with someone you can identify with, so generally young people are more likely to engage with other young citizens. Youth-led campaigns can be most effective if executed properly.

In the U.S., I had the pleasure of meeting with campaign group, United We Dream (UWD). They are a great example of youth-led social justice campaign group. United We Dream is the largest immigrant youth-led organization in the nation. Their powerful non-partisan network is made up of over 120,000 immigrant youth and allies and 55 affiliate organisations in 26 states. They organise and advocate for the dignity and fair treatment of immigrant youth and families, regardless of immigration status. UDW were successful in getting a policy that President Obama passed under Executive Order to protect undocumented people who came to the U.S. as children or who have children who are American citizens from being deported as well as allow them to get work permits. This policy change helped up to 5 million undocumented people.

- **We need better quality leaders:** Nobody really talks about this but it is an important one. We cannot also complain that people are not voting if we continuously do not put up better quality candidates for them to vote for. In politics we need a more diverse, skilled, authentic and community-centric leaders.

- **Campaign financing rules needs to be stricter and transparent:** We are already spending a lot of money on elections in the UK. The amount of money spent continues to grow. Many of the people I spoke with in the U.S. spoke about the fact that there was too much money in politics and that money was a key factor in influencing the outcome of elections and many decisions made in congress. The 2016 presidential race between Senator Hillary Clinton and, now, President Donald Trump cost over $2.3 billion. Some have argued that the ruling of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (2010), has opened up the door to increasing the ever-rising cost of elections in the U.S. because political spending has been ruled to be a form of protected speech under the First Amendment. The ruling prevents the government from stopping corporations or unions from spending money to support or denounce individual candidates in elections. While corporations or unions may not give money directly to campaigns, they may seek to persuade the voting public through other means, including ads, especially where these ads were not broadcast. In order to prevent campaign spending from getting ridiculously high in the UK, we need to ensure rules are in place, so no party or individual can feel that money can buy them an election.

- **Open primaries for party leadership and candidacy:** I am a fan of open primaries to select party leaders and candidates. An open primary is a primary election in which any registered voter can vote in any party’s primary. Voters choose which primary to vote in; they do not have to be members of that party in order to vote. Generally, a registered voter will simply select a party’s ballot at the polling place on the day of the primary. I feel in a time where there is not much trust in political parties and politicians, an open process such as this allows for more people to engage in politics and the decision-making process. The use of more open primaries could also increase party membership too, as more people can get involved in the process of choosing their party leader or local party candidate. This also allows the true opportunity for all people regardless of their background to stand for leadership positions. However, open primaries can only truly be effective if people vote in them.
• **Language accessibility**: It’s a really big issue for people in politics. If we want everyone to be able to get involved in politics and be active citizens then we need to ensure there is no language barrier. If not then it can make it difficult to engage for those furthest away from politics. Let’s keep the language simple and explain things better about politics.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on my research I have conducted in the U.S. it is clear that despite the incredible efforts by non-governmental organisations and campaigners to engage young citizens in both the U.S. and UK, the respective governments have not done enough to create the environment for these efforts to be sustained.

The Government in the UK needs to create opportunities for NGOs to have access to the data and analysis they need to engage young citizens in the political process and empower them. The fact initiatives like NVRD in the UK, despite its huge success, is not a government-backed initiative is very surprising. The UK Government is missing a trick that the U.S. Government has caught on to. NVRD in the UK should be an official national day or week to celebrate our democracy and the government should use its resources to support, promote and aid in facilitating the initiative.

The UK Government have talked a good game but have yet not delivered on a democracy that works for everyone. There are still far too many barriers to engagement that stop young citizens from engaging. Voter registration is still a big issue in both countries but in the UK, we are steps behind in taking the commonsense move to have an automatic voter registration system or a system where citizens are prompted to register every time they engage with tax-payer funded services. The writing’s on the wall that we need to reform our voter registration system and make it more easier, convenient and accessible. However, we also need to understand that voter registration is just the first step.

The Government also need to provide more opportunities for citizens to be involved in the decision-making process, in order that even those most socially-excluded can be empowered to influence policy and budgets. Through doing this more citizens will feel they have a stake in society and engage with the political process.

However, the UK Government does not bear this burden alone of getting young citizens engaged.

Educators and the leadership in schools have a part to play to make our schools a democratic place that do not just teach young people politics and democracy in theory but also in practice.

We need schools to inspire students to leave as well-rounded citizens, who are empowered to play their part in leading the society that they want to live in. Civic society too, also have a responsibility to inspire and empower our disillusioned or apathetic or unaware friends or family to get engaged in politics and be part of the solution to bring about change and not the problem.

NGOs need to follow best-practice and collaborate more on and better on campaigns to engage young people. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. NGOs are already stretched for resources. By collaborating we ensure these limited resources are maximised and that everyone is focused on what they are good at. It’s important, now more than ever that NGOs collaborate to achieve their joint outcomes. We need to work better to effectively engage young citizens and translate this enthusiasm they have once engaged on an issue or cause into voting (and standing for elections), as this is key to ensure we have a true representative government.

As a last thought, I would like to add that young citizens are also being failed by the misinformation of the media and the rise in fake news online. News consumption by young citizens tends to be mobile devices via online platforms and social media. The problem young citizens face, and this was demonstrated during Brexit, is that they constantly told they are uninformed on issues and then flooded with so much information that they ultimately become misinformed. The combination of being told that you are either uninformed or misinformed from the main sources of information results in disengagement. Young citizens are ‘punished’ for their disengagement with unfavourable policies and are told it is the result of them, as a mass, not exercising their civic responsibilities. This constant cycle needs to be addressed if serious change is desired and can be done so by implementing recommendations outlined in this report.
**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Schools in the UK need to become a more democratic place** and ensure that students are involved in, where reasonable, in the decision-making process of the school. Students should be taught citizenship education. Schools should work with external organisations to give students a better and rounded experience of politics and democracy. Schools should encourage students to get involved in volunteering, fundraising or raising awareness around causes that matter.

2. **An automatic voter registration system should be applied across the UK.** This would enable us to have very high registration rates and reduce the costs of updating and maintaining the accuracy of the register.

3. **The Government should introduce legislation similar to the “Motor Voter Act” in the US.** This would be valuable in order to increase awareness and provide more opportunities for people to register to vote, particularly those from marginalised communities.

4. **The National Voter Registration Drive (NVRD) in the UK should be a government-backed campaign, with cross-party support and funded to continue annually.** The NVRD campaign in the U.S. has become an official annual day, where the country celebrates democracy and citizenship with the call to action to register to vote. NVRD in the UK has been proven to be effective with getting young people engaged in politics and registered. So, we need to ensure this initiative continues to exists, this way we can create the same similar spirit in the US for NVRD, whether we are in or outside a General Election cycle.

5. **Participatory budgeting should be used by all UK councils.** There should be more opportunities for members of the public across the UK to have a direct say in how, and where, public funds can be used to address local needs. This would engage more local people into the political process and the democratic process, particularly those most socially-excluded and young people.

6. **Politics and those working in politics, need to speak in an accessible language.** One of the biggest barriers to young people getting involved in politics is that we just do not understand what people are saying most of the time. People working in politics struggle to keep the language simple for everyone to understand them other than the people who are fully engaged in it all. By doing this less young people and those most marginalised do not engage with politics.

7. **The Government needs to provide access to data to organisations running voter registration or engagement campaigns that fit a criteria.** Organisations doing non-partisan work to get people registered and voting in the UK, should be given more data on where there should concentrate their efforts. This would allow for more targeted campaigns and better use of public and private resources. These organisations should be given access to information such as the electoral roll that will help them effectively collaborate and target their efforts with the limited resources they have available.
REFERENCES


