



'What's it got to do with us?'

Young voters and individual electoral registration



THE SHM
FOUNDATION

Key findings from roundtable event

Introduction

On 17th January 2012, a diverse group of 25 young voters came together at the House of Commons to discuss the government's proposal to move from household to individual electoral registration (IER) and what this might mean for young voters. The event was driven by a group of partners with a shared interest in engaging young voters – Bite the Ballot, the SHM Foundation, and the Electoral Reform Society. The event was also supported by the Electoral Commission as the body responsible for overseeing the implementation of the new system.

The event sought to engage young voters as partners in addressing some of the current questions about electoral registration:

- What do you people think about registering to vote at the moment?
- What are the implications of IER for young voters?
- What needs to happen to ensure young voters register to vote under the new system?

Key findings

Registration doesn't mean much to young voters

Most young voters are not aware that they need to register to vote. The information about registration is not reaching them at school or at college. Even young people who are on the register are not necessarily aware of the process because they have been registered by family members. Those who are aware of the need to register are not clear about why they need to register and what the benefits of registering are. The young voters at the event pointed out that many of the benefits, such as the credit rating and jury service, just don't feel relevant to their age group.

- *"55% under 25s registered to vote. I guess that the majority of those people were registered by their parents"*
- *"The schools don't teach us about how and why it's important"*
- *"Young people don't often understand how they can make a difference just by registering – how does a tick in a box help me?"*

The system of registration is seen as ‘backward’ system

In the eyes of these young voters, electoral registration seems like a ‘backward’ system which does not reflect the modern world and the way that they are used to doing things. When they compared the system of registration to other systems they use such as online banking and online selling, they simply could not understand why electoral registration had failed to keep up with modern technology.

- *“You can sort out your bank account through a text message, why not be able to register?”*

The change to IER is not a solution

For these young voters, individual electoral registration does not address the main problem. Some of the young people welcomed the change to individual registration as a means of helping people to be more independent, many of them felt that the system of household registration was fine and did not need to change. Overall, the group felt that there were much bigger challenges that need to be resolved.

- *“IER won’t make much difference to young people – it’s still a form to fill in”*
- *“Household registration doesn’t need to be changed, it’s fine, but why can’t we look at alternative ways to reach young people?”*
- *“IER – we’re rebranding and not fixing the problem”*

The biggest barrier to registration is lack of belief in voting itself

Many of the young people raised the point that registration will never be meaningful unless young people are motivated to vote. They were passionate about the need to engage young people in politics and voting, which they saw as more important than the system of registration. They argued that the biggest barrier to electoral registration is the low level of engagement and trust in politics among their age group – many of whom have become increasingly disillusioned as a result of cuts and tuition fee rises, and who feel that the votes cast in the General Election were wasted votes. They also pointed out that the negative portrayal of young people in the media, particularly since the riots, has further compounded the alienation of young voters from the system.

- *“Young people who voted in last election were disappointed”*
- *“They are not seeing voting as a direct way of creating change”*
- *“The cost of voting outweighs the benefits for young people”*
- *If politics or voting was a brand – this country has the worse marketing department in the world!*

Registration should not be forced on people

The majority of young people felt that incentives and threats were not the most helpful way to increase registration rates among young voters. Many of them felt that incentives were more like ‘bribes’, and that people should not need to be bribed to register. There was also strong concern around the issue of the £1,000 fine. Many young people felt keenly that the threat of a fine should not be the only method used to encourage them onto the electoral register. They argued that young people would register off their own backs if only they felt more inspired by the process and by politics in general.

- *“If you don’t know the purpose, your hearts not in it”*
- *£1000 fine – you’ve put a value on my registration but no value on my vote”*

Priorities going forward

The young voters at the event identified a number of practical solutions to the issues raised:

- Target young voters directly by sending out voter registration forms with National Insurance Cards
- Text young people when they reach the age they can register to vote alerting them that they can now register
- Educate young people about voting and registration in schools, including the history of democracy
- Build an early relationship between young people and local politicians, including Q&As with MPs
- Hold mock elections in schools on the same day as election day
- Make better use of online and social media to promote registration, including videos

These are the key priorities for the young voters in this age group, and we hope that this will provide a positive starting point for further dialogue and partnership working. We are keen to hear feedback, comments and questions from individuals and organisations with an interest in these issues.

If you would like to find out more about what young voters think, please contact

mike@bitetheballot.co.uk or rose@shmfoundation.org. We would be happy to hear from you.