**‘#Votebecause: youth mobilisation for the referendum on British membership of the European Union’**

**Introduction**

For several decades, academics and political commentators have lamented the decline in electoral participation amongst younger citizens (Wattenberg 2002; Franklin 2004). The fall in youth turnout was particularly sharp in the UK, where the proportion of 18 to 24-year olds voting in general elections fell from over 60 percent in 1992 to an average of 40 percent between 2001 and 2015. However, the equally dramatic increase in youth turnout for the 2016 British referendum on membership of the European Union and the 2017 General Election demonstrated that young people will vote if they are interested in an issue or can identify with a political party.

Young people in the UK are interested in politics – as interested as their peers elsewhere in Europe and in the United States – but are put off by the political system (**Sloam** 2007). They have developed new conceptions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘politics’ (Marsh ***et. al*** 2006), and (as elsewhere) are ready to employ alternative, issue-based modes of civic and political engagement (Norris 2002). These non-electoral forms of participation have been facilitated by new technologies, which have reduced the costs and increased the speed of political communication (Bimber et al. 2005).

In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, young people participated in an international wave of political protest over issues that had a tangible meaning for their everyday lives: from demonstrations opposing rising university tuition fees in London, to Occupy Wall St. in Manhattan, to rallies against transport costs in Rio de Janeiro, to protests against the infringement of political freedoms in Istanbul, to occupations of public squares to oppose political corruption and youth unemployment across Europe. This recent and ongoing wave of youth protest has been characterized by the pictures and slogans popularized by Occupy (‘We are the 99%!’) and the Spanish Indignados (‘The Outraged Young’), which emphasize the expressive and performative nature of these political acts.

A large number of recent academic studies have focussed on the transformation of youth participation in democracy (Marsh et al. 2007; Dalton 2009; Furlong 2009; Henn and Foard 2012; **Sloam** 2013; Vromen et al. 2015). However, very little has been written about the individual motivations for such actions (Zani and Barrett 2012 is one exception) – the *triggers of* and *thresholds for* such engagement. Other research has analysed efforts to mobilise young people into electoral politics (Aldrich et al. 2016) and into alternative forms of democratic engagement (Castells 2012; Bennett and Segerberg 2013). However, there is little analysis of *why* these mobilizations take place. What is more, much of the work on political participation relies heavily on survey data, which fails to shed much light on what the motivations for (or barriers to) youth engagement might be, and why many young people are reluctant to get involved.

This article presents a study of ‘#Votebecause’ (#VB), and offline and online initiative to encourage university students to register for and vote in the EU referendum on 23 June 2016. #VB encouraged students to picture themselves holding up a board stating why they would vote (Figures 1 and 2, below), and to post this image on social media. Using a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews (conducted by student ‘activists’) and focus groups (with *activists*), the study investigated the impact of #VB on student mobilisation and engagement. The EU referendum provided a unique opportunity to observe and understand how political mobilisation took place amongst a coherent group of young people in a *vote* on an *issue* of some importance for their futures.

The study begins with a brief examination of key pathways to youth political engagement. It also presents descriptive data from a representative survey of young people and students, to establish the relative engagement of the qualitative sample. After discussing the qualitative methodologies used in the research, the article describes the main findings of the research: that *spaces* for engagement and *social networks* were pivotal; and, that interviews with students provided an extremely valuable tool for *communication* and *deliberation*. However, the threshold for posting ‘political’ photos on social media was very high. Participants were often deterred from doing so by a lack of internal efficacy and concern about the social and economic consequences of such actions. In this regard, the personal qualities of the individual student – their social skills and outward self-confidence – were of paramount importance in determining the depth of their engagement.

**Pathways to Youth Political Engagement**

Four main drivers of participation emerged from the piloting of the project (see ‘methods’ below) as being of central importance: *performance*, *communication* (through social networks), *place*, and *knowledge* of and *deliberation* about the EU referendum. This section provides a short review of what the existing literature has to say about these pathways to political participation.

The performative nature of participation has often been overlooked, but is very relevant within the context of self-reflexive modernism. Expressive modes of engagement, such as displaying a badge or sticker, or taking part in a public demonstration, are much more common amongst younger than older citizens (Sloam 2013). Performative acts can build internal efficacy (confidence in one’s own democratic skills), be considered as political participation in their own right (e.g. posting pictures of a demonstration), and provide inspiration for other young people to get involved. With regard to internal efficacy, two of the most important indicators of whether a child engages in politics in later life are participation in debating clubs and school plays (MacFarland and Thomas 2006). Studies in drama similarly illustrate how stage productions can make socially excluded young people feel connected to society and confident enough to engage in democracy (Nicholson 2011).

Performance has long played a part in political protest, but has traditionally focussed on public acts, such as those carried out by the Suffragettes or the US Civil Rights Movement. Public performance continues to play a prominent role in protest – from comedian-turned-political leader Beppe Grillo’s political stage shows in Italy, to the 2013 Deolinda song that inspired the Portuguese indignados (Sloam 2014) – but the quality and quantity of performance has changed. Advances in political communication and the rejection of traditional political institutions mean that the ‘presentation of self in everyday life’ (Goffman 1949) can today take place simultaneously across private and public spheres (Dahlgren 2005). This article investigates what motivates (and inhibits) such performance beyond the well-documented influence of socio-economic status (Schlozman et al. 2010).

Political communication has changed remarkably over recent decades. One-way, transmission-based forms of communication have become less effective at capturing the interest and attention of today’s young people. Young Millennials have grown up in a horizontal and interactive media culture, and many of them feel distanced from traditional news media that are dominated by, and primarily aimed at, older adults (Buckingham 2000; Russell 2004). Non-traditional actors, such as the US-based platform Change.org and the UK campaign group 38 Degrees, have established themselves in new the political niches created by political, social and technological change (Chadwick and Dennis 2017). Mainstream politicians and political parties have, on the whole, been slow to adapt to these new demands. And, this is especially the case in countries such as the UK, where political parties are highly centralized and hierarchical institutions.

It has been known for some time that social networks can promote political participation, as they significantly reduce the costs of obtaining political information (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In the United States, the Dean, Obama and Sanders campaigns for the Democratic Party nomination and the US presidency (Hindman 2005; Kreiss 2012) successfully utilised new technology to engage younger citizens in politics through social networks. In the UK, the 2017 Labour Party campaign group Momentum was also effective at appealing to younger cohorts through these networks (Pickard 2017). Bond et al. (2012) show how these strategies can also be successful in bring-out-the-vote initiatives. In these examples, young people became ‘the conduits and forces behind their own participation in offline politics because of online political activity’ (Garcia-Castanon et al. 2011: 134).

New communication technologies have been prominent in the recent and ongoing wave of youth protest (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In this regard, the sharing of pictures and images through social media is particularly important. Gaby and Caren (2012: 272) calculate that ‘in roughly 60 percent of the top 100 [Occupy] posts that drew in new users, pictures and video were the medium of these messages’. Gerbaudo (2015: 917) shows how young people in these protests adopted images on social media – such as the Anonymous mask, and the ‘We are the 99%!’ protest badge – as ‘manifestations of the new forms of collective identity that characterize protest movements in a digital era.’ These images and slogans represented the public face of the protests. But what motivated young people to post and tweet these images? This article sheds further light on this topic in the context of the referendum on British membership of the EU.

*Place* can be a physical or virtual location where young people interact with one another and – for the purposes of this article – discuss political issues and are mobilised into political action. Conversely, young people may be put off from expressing their views in spaces where they feel that discussion of politics is inappropriate, or where they feel intimidated by older citizens or people in a position of authority. Physical location remains important to young people’s politics: in fostering a sense of identity, in offering spaces to practice democratic skills, and in providing symbolic locations (such as city squares and university campuses) for political action (Weller 2003; Hopkins and Todd 2015). However, the increased diversity of young people, coupled with the rise of new technologies has led to the reformation of communities across traditional territorial boundaries, so that political action has become increasingly channelled through social networks across ‘hybrid public spaces’ (Castells 2012). This study examines how #VB worked at different locations across campus and online, and also shows how social networks constructed students’ senses of community and political agency.

It is well known that political knowledge is a key ingredient of political participation (Gastil and Levine 2005). The strong association between political knowledge and political interest is also well established. If a young person is knowledgeable about politics or a political issue they are already cognitively engaged – both aware of and interested in relevant political events. Similarly, if a young person is interested in politics or an issue, they are more likely to seek out or simply tune in to news and other relevant forms of information. The existing literature shows that young people are more receptive to new ideas and information than older citizens.

However, it is not only knowledge per se that provides a pathway to political participation, but also the application of that knowledge through discussion and deliberation on and deliberation (Eveland et al. 2005; Fishkin 2011). This is particularly true with regard to complex issues such as British membership of the EU. This project also explored the extent to which #Votebecasue was able to inform and stimulate deliberation about the referendum.

A representative survey (n=1351) of **18 to 30 year olds** attitudes towards Europe and the referendum was fielded six weeks prior to the poll, to establish base levels of youth and student *knowledge* about the EU, interest in the campaign, the likelihood of voting and the prioritisation (or not) of Europe as an issue, as well as support (or not) for British membership of the EU.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, the descriptive data is used to ascertain relative knowledge, interest, voting intentions of the student sample in the qualitative analysis.

Table 1 shows that just over a third of young people were interested in the EU referendum. The figure was considerably higher for students (44 percent). Only a quarter of young people believed that Europe was one of the three main issues facing the country (six weeks before the referendum). Interestingly, the figure was no higher amongst full-time students. These patterns of engagement were reflected by respondents’ intentions to vote. Around a half of 18 to 24-year olds (and 56 percent of full-time students) declared that they were certain to go to the polls. By comparison, 49 percent of this cohort were certain to vote at a similar point in time before the 2015 General Election (IpsosMori 2016).

**Table 1**

UK citizens are known to have low levels of knowledge about the EU when compared to their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, and this lack of political knowledge is particularly pronounced amongst younger cohorts (Hix 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2) In our survey, only 50 percent of young people (57 percent of students) claimed to know ‘a great deal’ or ‘a fair amount’ about the European Union and what it does. In this context, it was not surprising that the informational and deliberative dimensions of the initiative emerged as central features of the research.

In sum, the survey raised as many questions as it answered. How were students’ feelings about the referendum and the EU translated into engagement or disengagement with the campaign? And, for those who were engaged with the referendum, what were the triggers or motivations for their activism?

**Methods**

The motivations for youth political participation are multi-factorial and ‘complex’ (Sherrod et al. 2010). Therefore, it is important that we, as researchers, become ‘literate’ in young people’s conceptions of politics and political action (O’Toole et al. 2003). This article employs a suite of qualitative methods to investigate how younger citizens understand and experience politics (Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2012) and shed new light on their motivations for political engagement. It explores the processes by which young people become politically active, as well as identifying significant barriers to political action in the run-up to the referendum on British membership of the European Union through a combination of participant observation, focus groups and interviews and the use of *key informants*.

The #VB initiative was set up to encourage students to register and vote, given low youth turnout in recent general elections, and the problems in youth voter registration that have arisen since the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration in 2014 (James 2015). It took place at Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham campus, where approximately 9,000 students are enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. #VB sought to engage students by holding a stall at a central campus location, handing out information leaflets and talking to students about voter registration and why they should vote in the referendum, and – in the best case scenario – encouraging students to post pictures of themselves with a placard (stating why they believed other young people should register and turn out to vote) on social media with the hashtag ‘Votebecause’ (Figures 1 and 2, below).

The participant observation was conducted by the author (‘researcher’) and began at the planning stage, when the researcher teamed up with fifteen ‘key informants’ (or ‘activists’) three months before the referendum (March 2016) to establish the initiative on campus.[[3]](#footnote-3) Seven meetings took place between March and the ‘hot phase’ of the initiative (the first two weeks of June), to deal with logistics and also to discuss the research. This study adopted an interpretative approach, whereby the theoretical underpinnings of the study emerged from the piloting and planning of the work with student activists. Therefore, two of these 60-minute sessions were designed to investigate the potential motivations for young people to take part in the referendum. A further two sessions were devoted to the piloting of the interviews amongst activists. The focus of the research was refined in accordance with these discussions, from which emerged the four pathways to participation set out in the literature review.

To encourage participation, confectionary was offered to anyone who passed by and £10 retail vouchers were offered to anyone who was prepared to participate in an interview.[[4]](#footnote-4) The student activists modified #VB as it proceeded, to enhance the success of the initiative. They also played an important role in promoting the initiative through their own social networks e.g. by posting pictures of themselves supporting #VB (Figure 1). Eventually, 67 Royal Holloway students (non-activists who were not involved in the campaign) took part in face-to-face interviews, which lasted approximately thirty minutes each. These interviews were coded and recorded, and are presented in the results below. Finally, twelve of the fifteen key informants took part in two separate 60-minute focus groups after the *hot phase* (but before the day of the poll), to reflect on issues that arose with #VB and the research project in general.

There were some significant advantages and dangers, as a researcher and lecturer at the college, in investigating student political mobilisation. On the one hand, I was able to engage with my key informants on a regular basis, and have some familiarity with the participants, gaining first-hand experience of the subjects of the study (Whyte 1991). This proximity to the research subjects shaped my understandings of how activists mobilised other young people, and my evaluation of the impact the initiative had upon non-activists e.g. interpreting their answers to the student survey. On the other hand, there are clearly issues of bias inherent in such an immersive study. To address this problem, multiple methods were used to cross-check the data. The researcher also made extensive fieldnotes, which were reviewed prior to the data analysis stage of the project.

The *key informants* were a central feature of the research. They acted both as subjects of the research and as researchers themselves. Several authors have pointed to the value of ‘participatory action research’ (Whyte 1991), where young people become partners and agents for change (Kallio and Häkli 2011). In this study, the key informants were used to understand the ‘aims and purposes’ of the research (Halperin and Heath 2012: 299), and provide ‘local knowledge’ about the way in which non-activist students could best be approached and studied (Jupp 2007). The activists’ knowledge of how to reach their fellow students was very important for: piloting the research, testing the survey questions, getting other students to stop and talk, and moving the initiative to a more appropriate location on campus. They also provided entry points, through their participation in #VB and the research, into the ‘friends-based networks… underpinning young people’s everyday political engagement’ (Vromen et al. 2015: 95). Whilst recognizing the role of the activists as central nodes of communication and mobilisation, the triangulation of participant observation and focus group data with the non-activist student interviews and representative survey lessened the danger of seeing the research too much through the eyes of key informants – of merely ‘ventriloquizing’ their experiences (Mizen 2005).

This article concentrates on young undergraduate students. It is well known that an individual’s level of educational attainment is a key predictor of their political engagement. Young people who graduate from higher education are, on the whole, much more likely to become politically engaged in both electoral and non-electoral forms of participation than the average young person (Sloam 2013). As discussed in the previous section, they were also more likely to be interested in and knowledgeable about the referendum campaign, and be supportive of British membership of the EU. In the Royal Holloway student interviews, engagement in the referendum was even higher. 70 percent of the student interviewees claimed that they were knowledgeable about the EU, and 90 percent wanted the UK to remain in the Union.

The sample for this study was clearly not representative of young people as a whole. However, the selection of young people with similar levels of educational attainment allowed the researcher to control for educational attainment and thereby focus more clearly on the individual characteristics associated with political engagement. Taking into account the differences between the average young person and our student sample, the research tested ideas about the motivations for youth political participation that emerge from the existing body of literature.

**Results**

One of the central aims of #VB was to engage students in the EU referendum by encouraging them to post images of themselves with placards stating their reasons for voting. The recent wave of youth protest has shown that: ‘Combining pictures with words makes messages more memorable… [making] it easier to identify with people and situations’ (Graber 1996: 87). From an individual perspective, however, posting a selfie with political content (even for a non-partisan prompt to register and turn out to vote) requires an individual to strongly identify with an issue and possess a strong sense of self-efficacy. It was shown, above, Europe was not a salient issue amongst young people and students, and that young people did not feel well-informed about the EU and referendum campaign. The participant observation, focus groups, and interviews all suggested that this lack of resonance raised the threshold for student participation via social media.

The high threshold for students posting images of themselves for #VB was reached only by *the activists* and other very politically engaged students (Figure 2). Even amongst a student sample that was much more interested in politics (91 percent described themselves as ‘very interested’ or ‘quite interested’) and better informed about the EU referendum (75 percent described themselves as ‘very’ or ‘quite’ well-informed) than the average young person and student, only 22 percent of those interviewed were prepared to post images of themselves supporting the initiative on social media. An even smaller proportion – just 13 percent – answered that they would be ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to try to persuade a friend to post a selfie of themselves supporting #VB. Yet 68 percent of those who participated in the interviews reported that #VB had encouraged them to persuade others to vote in the EU referendum. And, over half (54 percent) of students interviewed said that they would ask others to register to vote, or vote, via social media. Focus group participant F confirmed that: ‘people are wary of posting a photo’ – one visitor to the stall asked him: ‘Can I just write something?… why it’s important to register to vote… I’d be more likely to do that.’ Key Informant N (female, aged 20) divided young people into those who would make political posts and those who would not:

‘There’s two streams out of social media… Those people who post about it [politics and the EU referendum], like myself… I post about it all the time, and happily discuss with people on social media… And, the other extreme – some people don’t post anything politically related.’

**Figure 1**

The campus interviews identified the type of person who would engage in this form of political action. All of the interviewees who had posted (or declared that they were very likely to do so) described themselves as *very* or *quite* interested in politics, and had above average trust in the UK Government (4.9 out of 10 compared to 4 out of 10 for the whole student sample) and in the EU (6.3 out 10, to 5.2. out of 10). Another characteristic that marked out those people who posted from those who did not was group membership. Over half of those interviewed (55 percent) were not members of political parties or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) campaigning for ‘environmental’, ‘animal protection’, ‘human rights’, or ‘peace’ causes. Yet 80 percent of those who had already posted, or who were likely to post, were members of one or more of these organisations.

Political performance, both offline and online, requires trust – social and political – to scaffold a young person’s or student’s participation. This was a very clear observation during the fieldwork. The political and social trust of the average university student is significantly higher than that of the average young person. However, when comparing undergraduate students with one another, an individual’s self-confidence came to the fore. At least a quarter of the interviewees admitted that they were deterred from posting a selfie supporting #VB due to concern about the social and economic consequences:[[5]](#footnote-5) from one’s physical appearance in the photo, to the impact of social media engagement on friendships and even employment prospects. Key Informant J (male, aged 21) recounted:

‘Someone’s friend – I’ve forgotten whose – came up at the end. She was very keen to post on social media, but she was thinking of it in terms of applying for jobs and stuff like that, so she didn’t do it.’

The second feature of #VB was *communication*. In the piloting and design of the initiative, it became obvious that #VB faced some major obstacles in communicating with students. The first was to overcome a lack of passion regarding British membership of the EU. Students were overwhelmingly supportive of the Remain campaign – 92 percent of the Royal Holloway sample compared to 82 percent of full-time students in the YouGov survey – but did not view Europe as one of the most pressing political issues. A second challenge was that the bring-out-the-vote message often became conflated with the consensus view (amongst students) that the UK should remain in the EU. These different messages are contrasted in the two ‘non-activist’ posts shown in Figure 2. As Key Informant F (female, aged 19) noted: ‘if it was mainly about the EU referendum it would be fine, but if it’s a voting drive and a kind of way to get people to register to vote, that’s a different thing’. Key Informant I (female, aged 21) agreed, and added that the difference between support for voting and support for one particular side in the EU referendum campaign was ‘difficult to grasp… especially if you’re not interested in politics’. In this regard, some of the activists felt that the stall could have been more clearly marked out as promoting voter registration and voter turnout, and that the leaflets could have been better geared towards information on voter registration e.g. ‘with maybe a list of country nationals who can vote’ (Key Informant P, male, aged 20).

**Figure 2**

When students actually stopped at the stall a surprisingly large proportion were prepared to spread the voter registration and turnout message to their friends: 75 percent were prepared to persuade others about the importance of the referendum for their futures, whilst 92 percent were willing to talk to friends about turning out to vote. This last finding emphasizes the fact that the communication of the initiative principally took place through social networks – friends with whom the activists, or people who stopped at the stall, were already engaged. Conversely, it was difficult, even for committed activists, to move beyond their own social networks when encouraging people to stop at the stall for information and interviews.

The successful communication of #VB goals was highly dependent upon the social skills of the individual activist. The fact that some of the #VB team very successfully communicated the aims of the initiative and also stimulated discussion and deliberation was largely due to their dynamic and engaging personalities. Although, the existing literature places much emphasis on economic resources (at the aggregate level), in this case it was notable how a quarter of activists were able to convert their significant social skills into democratic skills and move beyond their own social networks, to engage with ‘passing strangers’ (see below). For example, Key Informant I (female, aged 21) described how:

‘whenever I introduced myself I just said “I’m working for this department. This is what we do. I would love to hear what you think”, and people would open up to you, because they knew they could say whatever they wanted’.

It is also important to note the impact that the incentives had upon the #VB team’s ability to communicate to *strangers* beyond their own networks of friends. Even small incentives made a difference in opening channels of communication: ‘So, what would work better… if you said, “Here’s a leaflet, have a Twix!”, or something like that… they’d more or less take it’ (Key Informant O, female, aged 19). The other activists agreed that these small incentives encouraged students to stop and sometimes participate in an interview (for a further incentive), which was particularly useful in attracting students who admitted to not being interested in politics (10 percent of the sample).

Another determinant of the success and failure of #VB was the *place* in which the initiative happened. The physical location of the stall on campus was much more central to the campaign than had been apparent in the planning of the initiative. The primary location of #VB was (initially) the Windsor Building (Figure 3) – a central location on Royal Holloway campus, where activists could engage with the greatest number of fellow students passing by. Although students were ‘generally receptive to taking the leaflets’ (Key Informant J, male, aged 21), engaging *passing strangers* more deeply in #VB was challenging (even for activists with good social skills). As Key Informant N (female, aged 20) noted, outside the Windsor Building ‘people have places to go, and they’re stressed, and they’re in a rush, and they don’t want to stop’. Whilst many people were prepared to take an information leaflet – either out of politeness or genuine interest – the activists were concerned that this form of engagement was superficial (see below).

As a consequence, after the third day of campaigning, the activists resolved to move the stall into the South Quad of the main Founder’s Building. The location was changed for two reasons. First, it was believed that students sitting outside the main dining hall and café would be more relaxed and open to engagement (Figure 3). Second, the activists determined that some of them could man the stall, whilst others roamed the quad (armed with the incentives), engaging with groups of students (as opposed to individuals) at rest. This change yielded better results – more leaflets were distributed, more interviews were conducted and discussion was more common – as participants: ‘felt comfortable with their surroundings… I saw it that when I approached one person… their friends would want to join in’ (Key Informant E, male, aged 20). In other words, the new location provided easy entry points into social networks and a better space for discussion of and deliberation on the issues surrounding the EU referendum. Furthermore, activists could seek out people they knew, who had turned up for lunch or coffee, and plug more effectively into their own social networks (some key informants, in addition, encouraged friends to turn up through emails and appeals via Facebook). The change in the physical location of #VB, thus, enhanced the activists’ engagement with other students, moving from often superficial engagement with ‘passing strangers’ to – at the other end of the spectrum – deep deliberation with ‘settled friends’.

**Figure 3**

The literature on youth political participation often refers to the importance of *hybrid public spaces* (or arenas of action) for civic and political engagement. However, in the analysis of #VB, it was found that these ‘spaces’ (online and offline) were frequently segmented, or walled up from one another. Key Informant M (female, aged 18) commented that: ‘you have, like, this split personality thing going on… they have to go on social media and go online to say things about [the EU referendum]… but never mention anything in real life’. Nevertheless, on the few occasions when hybrid public spaces were a reality, this was found to be empowering. Key Informant N (female, aged 20) expressed her surprise that ‘people have come up to me and asked me about it in real life, which I think is pretty cool, because it means they’re actually engaging with it.’

The final theme that emerged from the study is that of *knowledge* and *deliberation*. In this sense, the initiative had two primary aims: to inform students about the process of voter registration and voting, and to encourage them to spread the word, through discussion about the main issues. It is well known that political knowledge is an important indicator of political participation, and this was clearly the case for student engagement in the EU referendum. However, it became increasingly apparent, as #VB progressed, that the acquisition of more detailed knowledge – and the *development* of attitudes towards British membership of the EU – through discussion and deliberation was just as relevant.

Levels of knowledge about the EU have been discussed above. But, for the initiative, knowledge about the process of voting was equally important. The key informants agreed, without exception, that ‘there isn’t enough education in the first place, or there isn’t enough awareness of voter registration’ (Key Informant J, male, aged 21) amongst fellow students. Activists also emphasized the confusion caused by the recent local government and London Assembly elections: students visiting the stall would ask ‘“How many times do you have to register? Do you register once and it applies for all? Can you register”, and so on’ (Key Informant P). The surprise (amongst many students) about how voter registration works indicated that #VB had at least raised awareness about the process of voting amongst those that only stopped for a leaflet or a quick chat.

The student interviewees claimed to be – relative to other young people and students – knowledgeable about the EU (see above). The campus survey also revealed that there was a very strong relationship between political knowledge and interest and group membership. Of the 25 percent who did not feel well informed about the EU, only a third were members of a political party or NGO supporting environmental, animal welfare, or human rights causes (half of the campus sample were members of one or more of these groups). Of the 10 percent who were not interested in the EU referendum, none were members of a political party or relevant NGO. The implications of this finding for the type of student that was engaged in the EU referendum are discussed below.

A big surprise for the activists and the researchers working on the project, was the amount of discussion and engagement that was prompted by participation in the questionnaire. As noted above, the #VB team offered incentives for participation in the survey – and many of the students ‘were brought in by the money’ (Key Informant F, female, aged 19). Nevertheless, the intensity and frequency of discussion and deliberation of issues surrounding the EU that sprang out of the interviews was quite unexpected. Activists reflected that the questionnaire was ‘very effective’ in engaging students in the initiative, and also that the questionnaire encouraged:

‘people to tell you what they think… they just really open up about it. And, after doing the questionnaire, they were more engaged in what the campaign was about, and why we were asking the questions.’ (Key Informant P, male, aged 18).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The #Votebecause initiative at Royal Holloway University marked an attempt to engage students in the European Union referendum. It also provided an excellent opportunity to study the mechanics of a bring-out-the vote initiative, and explore the motivations for youth engagement in the run up to the vote. **The findings identify promising pathways to participation that could be defined in more detail by further research studying the engagement of larger and more representative samples over time.**

One rather obvious conclusion was that the relative importance of the issue involved mattered. However, the referendum on British membership of the EU provided something of a paradox. On the one hand, young people in general – and university students in particular – favoured remaining in the Union. On the other hand, Europe was not viewed as a high priority issue. In this respect, the EU referendum suffered in comparison to the Scottish referendum two years earlier. Through the participant observations, focus groups and interviews, it became clear that the Europe was not seen as a controversial subject. Since nine out of ten student interviewees were in favour of the status quo, it was hard to generate the sense of urgency witnessed on the Leave side campaign. The lack of resonance of the issue, thus, raised the threshold for participation in the social media campaign.

The research found that the posting of political selfies is also highly dependent upon an individual’s sense of efficacy. Those who posted images of themselves supporting #VB felt themselves to be knowledgeable about and were interested in politics and the EU referendum. They also exhibited strong signs of external efficacy through their membership of political parties and key NGOs. But internal efficacy was equally important. An individual’s self-confidence in their ability to discuss political issues with others – underpinned by trust in their online communities – enabled them to introduce political themes into their social networks. Conversely, the world of social media is a daunting place for those who feel they lack the necessary political or social skills. According to Key Informant P (male, aged 18):

‘a lot of people feel that they cannot express their own political ideas, because they’re under-educated. The majority of my friends said, who don’t study politics, “Oh, I don’t feel qualified to say anything… if I do say something online all the people who know a little bit more than me will attack me in some way, and I won’t be able to make a good enough argument for them to understand my point of view”.’

The study, therefore, suggests that posting a political picture of oneself is an uncommon act, which is dependent upon the resonance of an issue, knowledge about that issue, and internal efficacy. It implies that this is a very high threshold form of political expression, since such actions put one’s head above the parapet in a very real sense – much more so than by joining an existing social movement, adopting an Avatar, or Liking or Retweeting in support of a particular cause. Lower threshold acts of self-expression (such as sharing and forwarding on messages) are clearly more achievable for bring-out-the-vote initiatives.

In communicating the #VB message, the activists (and a few of the participants drawn into the campaign) behaved as ‘social politics curators’, bringing politics into their social networks (Thorson 2014). It was much more challenging to engage with students beyond these social networks, as it required exceptional social skills – the ability to engage *passing strangers*, who might not be interested in ‘politics’ or the EU referendum. Nevertheless, the opportunities for engagement were greatly enhanced by the use of incentives (confectionary and retail vouchers) as well as by creating positive spaces for communication, where participants would feel at ease and willing to engage. Activists’ engagement with *settled friends* provided the optimum environment for discussion and deliberation about voting and issues surrounding the referendum.

The student interviews provided an important stimulus for engagement with friends and strangers alike. What was originally conceived as a research method, became an effective tool for student engagement. The interviews sparked interest in, and deliberation about, youth turnout and the EU referendum. Further analyses of bring-out-the-vote campaigns should consider how the introduction of such research-deliberative exercises might have an impact upon political participation.

Another interesting finding was that group membership (of political parties and key NGOs) was strongly related to knowledge about and interest in the EU and the referendum campaign, as well as engagement in the #VB social media initiative. One would expect that such group membership might give young people more confidence in their own ability to express their views on politics and democracy (online and offline) within and beyond their social networks.

The results of this study very much support the work of Beaumont (2011), which emphasizes the importance of ‘sociopolitical learning’ in higher education through first-hand experiences of ‘political action’ and ‘political discourse’ with a ‘political active community’. Future research might investigate these themes more closely by studying the longitudinal effects of group membership, discourse and deliberation on youth political voice.

Finally, one might speculate on the importance of these findings for theories of self-expression in political participation. Although self-expression may have become more common and more feasible in new forms of political action, it is very much rooted in a collective sense of trust – in one’s democratic skills and one’s online and offline social networks. **The existing literature would benefit greatly from more empirical research into how self-expression shapes political engagement, and the extent to which it is dependent upon an individual’s political and social skills.**

**Figures and Tables**

**Table 1: Youth and Student Attitudes Towards the 2016 EU Referendum**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Political Interest (in referendum campaign) | ‘Quite a Lot’/‘A Great Deal’ of Knowledge about EU (reported) | Certain to Vote (in EU referendum) | Europe on of the three ‘most important issues (facing UK) |
| 18-24 years old | 39 | 50 | 49 | 24 |
| Full-time students | 44 | 57 | 56 | 13 |

**Source: YouGov/ HopeNotHate and BtB Survey Results (fieldwork, 6-13 May 2016)**

**Figure 1: Activists’ Placards**



**Figure 2: Non-Activists’ Placards**



**Figure 3: Windsor Building and South Quad (left to right)** 

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1. The poll was designed by the author and commissioned by Hope Not Hate and Bite the Ballot from YouGov. It was fielded between 6 and 13 May 2016. The survey included representative samples with regard to gender, geographical location (excluding Northern Ireland), ethnicity and occupation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to Hix’s research (2015), 15 to 24 year olds in the UK were approximately half as likely (18 percent) to answer three questions correctly about the EU as those who were over 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The fifteen activists all volunteered to participate in the study and the mobilization initiative in response to a general email sent to all undergraduate students at the university. Nine of the fifteen were female. Unsurprisingly, 12 of the 15 activists were studying politics or history. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The confectionary incentives were suggested by the key informants, some of whom were experience in running stalls and campaigns on campus. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Not all of the reservations regarding personal appearance and concerns about employment prospects were recorded by the interviewers, as it was not one of the questions on the interview sheet. However, 19 instances of these reservations being expressed were recorded, and key informants raised it as a recurrent theme in the focus groups. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)