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## Independence and the youth vote

Written by Nicholas Mairs on 20 August 2014



*Young contributor Nicholas Mairs tackles the engagement of the youth vote*

One of the landmark moments of the referendum has been the decision to give 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote.

The Government claimed it was simply doing what was right; that those legally able to start a family, leave school, pay taxes, get married or join this country's armed forces should have a say in our constitutional future.

To many supporters of a No vote however, it was a cynical exploitation of young idealism, based in the preconception that young people would vote Yes.

Before the campaigns had even started there was speculation that young people would blindly follow the side offering the most change, before either had really put out their stall.

Early twentieth century American writer Randolph Bourne famously said: "If you are not an idealist by the time you are twenty you have no heart, but if you are still an idealist by the time you are thirty, you don't have a head."

History shows us through the Europe-wide student riots of the late 1960s, and the later punk movement, that young people are by their nature not just idealistic, but ready to initiate that change.

Furthermore it probably is fair to say that the majority of young people can afford to prioritise idealism in this referendum, without concerns over childcare, a volatile housing market and pensions.

But the implication seemed to be that idealism meant young people do not understand politics, and that they were a simple and predictable group in their political behaviour.

While some have speculated that young people will follow the lead of their parents; others have argued they could alternatively rebel against them.

But according to one poll last year, 60 per cent of the 16-24 year old group were in favour of a No vote, indicating their views are in kilter with public opinion as a whole.

This is down to the fact that young people are engaging in the debate and making up their own minds. Like anyone of any age, some are inclined towards Yes, and some towards No.

Many of the main voices within the Yes and Better Together campaigns - both online and in activist groups - are students or young people. They are idealists in terms of what they want to achieve, but are not a unanimous entity.

16-24 year olds see the same stories from each campaign as everyone else and they are treating the referendum with the same maturity as anyone else. They are not a special case.

This age bracket have proven wrong the lazy stereotypes, not because they have polled in the majority as no voters, but because they have actively engaged in the discussion on social media, and been increasingly visible in campaigning.

Regardless of the referendum outcome, young people have demonstrated idealism by getting heavily involved in a debate that many seemed ready to leave them out of.

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Nicholas Mairs

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