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Title Civic participation among UK university graduates: exploring the influences of class, gender and type of employment
Session From 'youthquakes' to 'university bribes': Understanding Higher Education as the locus for classed, gendered and national repertoires of young people's political agency (Finn)
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Civic participation among UK university graduates: exploring the influences of class, gender and type of employment

The ways in which young people in the UK participate in civic life is an important matter of concern, particularly in the context of the current political climate of austerity and instability and the, as yet, unknown terrain of post-Brexit Britain. Putnam (2000) has argued that younger generations have become substantially less involved in social and political life. However, the claim of a generational 'decline' in civic engagement has been repeatedly contested given that young people engage with politics in both conventional (e.g. voting) and unconventional (e.g. demonstrations, culture jamming, and civil disobedience) ways (Hustinx *et al.*, 2013; Stole *et al.*, 2005). During the UK General Election in 2017 the civic participation of young people came into sharp focus, as the media attributed a surge in Labour votes to a 'Youthquake'. Overall, the turnout for voters aged 18-24 rose from an estimated 43% in 2015 to 58% in 2017, with Labour garnering 63% of the vote from 18-29 year olds (YouGov, 2017). The traditional class dimension to voter behaviour was troubled with both a swing of the working-class vote to the Conservatives and the middle-class vote to Labour (both up by 12 points from the previous election) (Ipsos MORI, 2017). The overall turnout by gender was fairly evenly split but the highest percentage of the female vote shifted from Conservative to Labour. In terms of educational level, a higher percentage of voters with a degree voted for Labour rather than Conservative (Ipsos MORI, 2017), reversing the pattern from the 2015 General Election (YouGov 2015). These shifts in voting patterns are interesting as they indicate not only the increasing significance of youth civic participation but they also suggest that class and gender and educational level are impacting on political change, perhaps in reaction to the challenges faced by millennials as they transition into adulthood against the backdrop of austerity. However, little is known, qualitatively, about the ways in which young graduates from different class backgrounds develop political awareness and motivation for participation.

This paper examines the classed and gendered repertoires of participation and political preferences (national elections and EU referendum) of UK university graduates, drawing data from the Paired Peers research project, a longitudinal, qualitative study of a cohort of graduates (n=55) who attended Bristol's two universities. The interviews, spanning their lives during undergraduate study and the initial four years post-graduation, amass to seven years of extensive data collection.

Drawing on Hustinx et al's (2013) concept of the 'civic omnivore' we explore how these young people, as individuals and/or as part of collective action, negotiate with 'traditional' *and* 'non-traditional' routes of political discourse and action, expanding their civic repertoire by combining conventional and new forms in complex ways, including through social media. We complicate notions of civic participation by considering politically motivated lifestyle choices, such as 'ethical' consumption, and 'ethical' career choice, as part of the civic repertoire. In doing so, we challenge the idea that political engagement is necessarily only about familiarity with political terminology and entitlement to publicly voice opinions, a confidence that is more readily available to white, privileged men. Through this analysis we draw out the ways in which the effects of social class and gender interact with civic repertoires, and political alignment. For example, we consider the privilege associated with choice when it comes to consumerism and employment, as well as reasons for political affiliation to particular parties. In addition, we explore how post-graduation trajectories, within public and private sectors, affect the way in which political awareness and leanings evolve over time in response to social and political contexts such as the NHS funding crisis, educational cuts and Brexit. Finally, we examine the notion of young people's 'apathy' towards politics, a discourse that has been longstanding. Rather than perceiving their views on non-participation as apathetic we consider whether or not an individual's refusal to become involved is a resistance to the fabrication of a fake democracy- i.e. 'I'm not voting because it doesn't change anything' – or a defeatist pessimism due to continued subordination.

Overall, we show the complexities of civic (non)participation for graduate millennials of different class and gender backgrounds and consider their political awakenings in light of a social and policy context in which their transitions to adulthood have been mostly fraught with unexpected struggle.