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Can Volunteering on 'Real World' Issues Influence Political Engagement among Young People? A UK Case Study

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Political engagement among young people has been lower than other voting groups for several decades. In the United Kingdom, since 2010, the 18–24 age group has received considerable scrutiny in the wake of major political decisions and election outcomes. In light of low political engagement among young people, the government's Electoral Commission has encouraged universities to seek new ways to encourage more young people to vote. Volunteering, which is offered in some form by most UK universities, is recognized through various studies as a way of building social capital and creating civic engagement. This research presents a case study of whether a program of focused volunteering for university students can better enhance participants' political awareness by exposing them to people directly affected by political policies, in this case refugees and migrant communities.

KEYWORDS: Political Participation; Volunteering; Young People; Engagement; Voting.

Introduction

The issue of youth engagement in politics has come to the fore in recent years, notably with regard to levels of engagement in elections. In both the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), young people have been credited with sending President Barack Obama to power in 2009[1] and creating a youth quake that shook up British politics with the election in 2015 of the controversial left wing Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.[2] In both cases, despite the optimism that 18 to 24 year olds were finally getting involved in politics and taking their views to the ballot box, data indicates that the picture was not so clear cut. In the US, young voters only marginally avoided being the lowest turnout group, while Corbyn's much talked about 'youth quake' was far from youthful.[3] While in both cases the political discourse recognized the potential of engaging young people in democracy, research indicates that young people are increasingly less likely to engage in political affairs and vote in elections.[4]

Of the political science literature that has focused on civic and political engagement, a number of studies have analyzed the impact of voter education drives and student participation in political campaigns as methods of increasing voter turnout and political engagement among students. These studies tend, for the most part, to be based on the experience and initiatives of US-based

scholars where there is a longer tradition of teaching civic engagement, of which voter education and voter mobilization have received particular interest.[5] Although these studies tend to report on initiatives undertaken at a particular class level to bring the subject of political science to life by bridging theory and practice, a number have also reported on broader campus-wide and multi-campus initiatives.[6] These include celebratory events in the form of festivals that aim to increase political engagement and establish a stronger sense of identity and purpose on campus.[7] Yet, there is less of an established body of literature outside of the US relating to voter education drives on university campuses and the integration of such activities into the teaching classroom. The UK is no exception to this rule. The teaching of academic subjects in the UK follows general principles set in subject benchmark statements written by academic experts and published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education, whose role is to monitor standards and advise on the quality of UK higher education (HE). One impact of this is that UK degrees have less options outside of a specific academic discipline's requirements.[8] This background is important in the context of the wider issue of what should be in a university curriculum, as well as in the context of broader societal changes. The latter includes the move away from structured and often unionized employment, which by nature had a stronger focus on workers' education, to more irregular employment and an expansion in global HE.[9] In the UK there has been a significant expansion in HE in recent years, with undergraduate enrollments increasing from 518,090 in 2010–11 to 611,390 in 2019–20.[10] This expansion in student numbers has been influenced by government "widening participation" initiatives aimed at increasing participation from under-represented, disadvantaged students and removing barriers to accessing and succeeding at university. Since 2019–20, UK HE providers have also been required to publish access and participation plans which indicate how they will improve equality of access for underrepresented groups.[11] These under-represented groups are most likely to be young people from families of low incomes and minority ethnic groups and tend to represent sections of society least likely to vote.[12] The growth in students from under-represented backgrounds therefore presents new opportunities to revisit the public purpose of higher education, including growing politically engaged citizens and impacting areas of low democratic participation at a time when the relevance of higher education to society is frequently being questioned.[13]

Encouraging university students to participate in politics is itself not a novel concept; this has been a responsibility of universities almost since their inception. As far back as the 1820s, US President Thomas Jefferson advocated that a well-educated, informed electorate was essential to a healthy democracy and founded the University of Virginia on that principle. Jefferson's opinion is one that has been endorsed and developed by leading academics like Ernest Boyer and John Dewey, who have influenced teaching and learning methods for many decades. Dewey, like Jefferson, believed education should play a central role in building a strong democracy.[14] Boyer refers to the responsibility to democracy as higher education's "civic mandate."[15] Research also supports this position with findings from a number of studies showing that young people who become civically engaged during their time at university take that learned responsibility with them throughout their life and careers.[16] Universities are widely seen as institutions where students gain experiences and skills that lead to increased levels of political participation.[17] There is also often a societal expectation that the creation of politically engaged voters is expected as part of the core business of higher education, even if this expectation is not always acted upon.[18] Putnam has argued that education is the most powerful tool in growing political engagement.[19]

This chapter seeks to contribute to the literature on the teaching of civic engagement at a global level by reflecting on two projects which were independently undertaken to develop students' experiences of civic engagement at De Montfort University in the UK. De Montfort University is based in the City of Leicester, which at the time of the UK's last recorded census data in 2011 was one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK with a 49.5% non-white population.[20] The university's student population directly reflects the broad ethnic mix in the city of Leicester, with just over half of the student body coming from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups—who have been identified as less likely to vote. The first project was a political debating initiative that took place in the run-up to the 2017 General Election. This initiative had been designed in

response to a request by the Electoral Commission, the UK's independent body to promote public confidence in the democratic process.[21] The second project was a volunteering initiative where students took part in volunteering with refugees.[22] A comparison of the two projects through survey responses and focus group outcomes sheds light on the impact of the two approaches in developing students' understanding of and engagement in politics. In doing so, the chapter adds to the ongoing debate on how to engage young people in politics and the way in which a scaffolded volunteering project can lead to students being more politically engaged.

In recent years there has been a general increase in the number of students participating in volunteering activities in the UK HE sector. This trend has benefited from a policy push with successive governments promoting the agenda through additional funding, accreditations and promotional campaigns.[23] Studies have pointed to the positive outcomes that volunteering brings to individuals and local communities.[24] This includes the positive benefits that volunteering brings to a student's personal development and future employment prospects.[25] But while volunteering can be viewed as having positive benefits for society and a student's education, research indicates that volunteering in and of itself does not lead to a stronger sense of civic purpose. As McCartney has noted, "volunteering can be a one-time event that does not necessarily connect to civic learning, require examining the ideas, structures or relationships that bring the volunteer to act, or include reflection."[26] Holdsworth and Quinn[27] point to concerns that have been raised in the US, that mandatory or pressurized involvement in volunteering activity has the potential to normalize students to social inequalities rather than stimulating political engagement.[28] Given the established viewpoints on the limitations attached to volunteering activity, is it then possible for volunteering to lead to students gaining a stronger understanding and awareness of their civic responsibility?

Universities, Civic Engagement, and Political Participation

Between 2011 and 2017, the UK electorate went to the polls at a national level on three occasions to vote in two general elections (2015 and 2017) and a referendum on membership of the European Union (2016). In each circumstance, the participation of young people aged 18–24 at the ballot box remained lower than that of other voting groups,[29] a situation that has been reflected in most elections in Europe and the US for several decades.[30] In an attempt to increase voter rates among young people, the UK Electoral Commission wrote to every UK university encouraging institutions to undertake initiatives to increase voter participation.[31] Back in 2002 the Electoral Commission identified that engagement among the young had to change, noting that "…unless this generation of young people becomes more civic-minded as they age, the nature of British democracy is likely to become increasingly passive."[32] Such a concern was similarly shared in the UK Government and Parliament, with an Advisory Group on Citizenship being established in 1997, "To provide advice on effective education for citizenship in schools—to include the nature and practices of participation in democracy; the duties, responsibilities and rights of individuals as citizens; and the value to individuals and society of community activity."[33] The final report that was published in September 1998 set out a framework for the introduction of citizenship education in schools.[34] This in turn led to the introduction of citizenship into the National Curriculum for England in September 2002. This meant that all school children aged between 11–16 in the state education sector in England had a statutory right to citizenship education. Yet, this attempt at developing democratic values has not proved to be as successful as was hoped for at the time. While research indicates that students who have taken citizenship education classes were more likely to vote in a previous general election than their counterparts, students who took these classes were also more skeptical with regard to the motivations of politicians.[35] This potentially highlights a lack of clarity with regard to the outcomes of the study, with the research also indicating that it was not possible to establish causality with regard to points such as the impact of teacher training.[36] This is, however, an issue that has been picked-up elsewhere with the House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement commenting in 2018 that the state of citizenship education was poor.[37] This is despite data indicating that "consistent exposure" to citizenship education

throughout secondary school can impact a young person's political knowledge and participation.[38] This is in keeping with other studies which emphasize that citizenship education can have positive lasting effects into adulthood.[39]

In writing to universities, the Electoral Commission was not prescriptive as to how they should increase engagement. It was also the case that this was not an entirely new endeavor for universities as many were already working on projects and campaigns to grow political engagement through the likes of registration drives, campus elections and debates.[40] However, the approach by the Electoral Commission was a public acknowledgment of the role that universities could play in grounding future graduates with the appropriate skills for civic life. By the end of the Electoral Commission's letter writing campaign to approximately 160 higher education providers, 76 universities responded with projects and voter drives to encourage the student cohort to register and cast their votes.

Such a public stance regarding the role of universities as civic educators is a more recent area of debate within the UK.[41] Indeed, of the political science literature focused on civic and political engagement, the majority of studies reporting on activities such as voter education drives and student participation in political campaigns, tend to be based on the experience and initiatives of scholars based in the US. While this might in part be a reflection of the fact that there is a longer tradition of teaching civic engagement in the US, it is also a broader reflection of the role that US universities and colleges have in being engaged with their local communities. One direct aspect of this is that there is a more established recognition in the US higher education system, from research-intensive universities to community colleges, of the importance of civic engagement activities structured around programs, civic engagement centers, or specific academic classes. And while there is far from a universal approach to these initiatives within the US, there is a general trend toward developing curricula that provide students with an understanding of, and engagement with, real-world issues through community engagement, including nonprofit organizations.

This contrasts significantly with the UK experience. This is in part influenced by the design of the UK HE system, whereby undergraduate students enroll in a degree program at the outset of their studies that tends to have little in the way of general education classes. The focus on studying a specific subject is reflected in the fact that the standard length for an undergraduate degree in England and Wales is three years, while in Scotland and Northern Ireland it is four years. This distinction is in part shaped by differences in the high school leaving age across the UK nations. The upshot of this is that there is less room for classes on electives like civic education because students tend to have less opportunities to choose classes outside of their own discipline. At a university level, it is also the case that university leaders, and the HE sector in general, have traditionally shown less interest in universities as both a voice for, and an actor engaged in, civic engagement. Where engagement with local communities has taken place, it tends to be typified by engaging with local community activities such as working with museums and galleries, engaging in discussions with local employers, and supporting access to higher education through widening participation initiatives. In this context, activities that increase political engagement or democratic behavior have not necessarily formed part of a university's core business. This is because challenges around improving teaching, student outcomes, and student satisfaction have typically been key areas of activity with university leaders focused on such factors to market themselves vis-à-vis their competitors.[42] In recent years, the most notable change in these discussions has been the intervention of the UPP Foundation, which is a private charity funded by the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) that is one of the UK's leading providers of student accommodation. In 2018-19 the UPP Foundation launched the Civic University Commission to gather evidence on what it means to be a civic university in the 21st century, which in turn led to the publication of a report in February 2019 that identified the need for universities to have a stronger civic focus by, among other factors, establishing a Civic University Agreement with other local civic partners. At the time of this writing, the outcome of these initiatives have still to materialize fully, with universities just starting to turn their attention to this issue after having dedicated the majority of their energies during 2020–21 responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

To investigate these issues, we compare the views of a group of students who volunteered to help with a refugee project with those of a similarly sized group which took part in a series of political debates on campus. The research covered the experiences or impacts on #BeTheChange participants who took part in one or more of up to five events between Wednesday, May 3, 2017 and Friday, November 3, 2017. The refugee research covered the experiences or impacts on undergraduates who took part in volunteering with refugees at any time during their academic journey prior to April 2018. Students returning from a volunteering trip to Berlin in April 2018 also took part in a focus group to discuss their work, alongside German relief workers, with refugees, particularly from Syria, who were being resettled in the city. Both groups of students were self-selecting, and thereby not reflective of the whole of the university's student body. Similarly, a pre- and post-test survey was not undertaken to understand the overall change in students' views. While this inevitably attaches limitations to the implications of the findings, the participants were nonetheless asked to consider their views before and after the event, thereby providing some measure of change.

As far as the political debates were concerned, over a six-month period, starting in advance of the 2017 UK general election on Thursday, June 8th, a political engagement campaign called #BeTheChange was established. The title of the campaign was in reference to Mahatma Gandhi's famous quote: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." The concept of the project was simple; that students and staff could gather together, listen to and debate prominent political issues. As outlined in table 1, each event had its own theme. Timings of the events were not uniform. The launch event was a 24-hour continuous cycle of debate, with hourly themes drawn from the key issues that were likely to form major campaign talking points in the forthcoming election, including immigration, health care and taxation. At that event, students participated based on subjects that they were interested in based on a timetable of activities that were published on the university's website. Other events spanned daytime formats, where students could participate as appropriate. At these events, academics with expertise in specific fields were invited to form panels, typically of five members, including a chair.[43]

Table 1. #BeTheChange events					
Date	Length	Format	Location	Aims	Approximate attendees
Wednesday May 3 to Thursday May 4, 2017	24-hours	24-hour continuous activity to create a university manifesto.	Outdoors, central area of university campus.	Organic process of harnessing student voice to create a manifesto.	300
Friday May 26, 2017	11am to 3pm	3 x 1-hour debates of manifestos of the three main UK political parties.	Outdoors at Leicester Castle Business School.	To discuss critical issues in the run up to the general election.	50
Tuesday June 6, 2017	11am to 3pm	'The Final Countdown.' Two panel sessions, made up of five academics, and student audience.	Outdoors at Leicester Castle Business School.	To look closely at the final details of the three main political parties' manifesto proposals.	50

Table 1. #BeTheChange events					
Wednesday June 14, 2017	10:30am to 12:30pm	Panel of senior academics, British Embassy representatives and retired diplomats, student audience.	British Embassy, Berlin.	To discuss the impact of Brexit on Britain's future relationship with Europe.	250
Tuesday June 27, 2017	8am to 8pm	12 Hour Be The Change Research Festival on a variety of subjects and relationship with political policy.	Various locations across university campus.	To demonstrate how research relates to society, particularly in the context of political policy.	200
Friday November 3, 2017	12pm to 2pm	'Keep Universities for the Many' – A themed debate about how universities are funded. Panel of students and academics.	Courtroom, Leicester Castle Business School.	To gather opinion on how universities should be funded and gather ideas about how this might be best expressed to policy makers.	50

The selected panels had gender-balance and diversity representation. Students and staff were encouraged to participate via internal communications messages. The launch event promoted the idea that the university would create a manifesto of ideas that could be presented to the three main political parties in advance of the general election. It was felt this would empower students to feel they had a voice and were able to influence the political process. Staff from across all university departments were encouraged to promote the events to students, and also to participate in debates that were relevant to their chosen fields. Food and refreshments were served at regular intervals as another incentive to bring people together. The initial #BeTheChange events ran concurrently with voter registration drives on campus that had previously been launched via a central university communications campaign. Approximately 950 faculty, staff, and students attended the events, although the precise breakdown of attendees was not registered.

As far as the volunteering program was concerned, the university has a long-standing program for students that is widely promoted. The activities are open to everyone and students have the opportunity to choose the type of volunteering they wish to undertake and how long they spend on each project is at their discretion. Participants are encouraged to give a minimum of 12 hours to a project. They receive training, health and safety guidance and a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check to ensure they are safe to work with vulnerable people and children. A variety of opportunities offered to students are often linked to courses. Examples include working with the homeless, activities in local schools, food distribution to the poor, work with refugees and supporting youth clubs. Many of these opportunities are also offered in an overseas context through the university's international student mobility program. Participants in either context were eligible to take part in the research.

To gain insight on the impact of these activities, a quantitative questionnaire was sent to all

students who had registered participation in one or more #BeTheChange event and all those who had participated in refugee projects. The choice of using refugee volunteers as participants for the volunteering research was steered by the high-profile political nature of the subject: US President Donald Trump's "Build a Wall" rhetoric to keep out immigrants and the much debated immigration issue during the EU referendum, where the plight of refugees and responsibility to displaced people had received much media coverage in the UK. The data sought to provide a detailed picture of whether either project added any value to universities' initiatives to tackle the ongoing challenge of low voter turnout and which approach could be considered best. The qualitative survey was a key part of generating the data necessary to inform the main findings of this research.

The questionnaire was designed to capture how attitudes toward political engagement had changed by asking participants to reflect on their experiences (see appendix 1). The majority of questions were multiple-choice answers, where the participant was required to give an answer chosen from a sliding scale of their experience. Questions reflected the various issues being investigated in a simple and understandable way for the participant, being mindful that some students may have limited political awareness. The questionnaire was distributed via the university's data-gathering software called MyGateway, which is regularly used to track student feedback at the university, and as such students were familiar with the instrument. The data generated was fed into a spreadsheet database enabling the findings to be viewed with ease. Students were incentivized to participate through the chance to win a £50 voucher to spend at a local shopping center. This incentive is typical of such surveys conducted at the university through myGateway in order to increase response rates. A 10-day deadline was set to complete the questionnaire, with two reminder emails scheduled and sent at day five and day eight in order to pursue a maximum completion rate. Within the questionnaire there was an opportunity for further comments and an opportunity to volunteer for the focus groups.

Results

Be The Change Debate Survey Findings

Precisely 140 students responded to the #BeTheChange survey questionnaire, which was sent to approximately 3,000 students on the university's student volunteering database. Of the recipients, an estimated 400 students were eligible to participate in the survey, according to #BeTheChange attendance figures. The target cohort of 18–24 year-olds, which is widely recognized as the youth vote demographic, was applicable to 86% of responders. A further 10% were in the 25–35 bracket and the remaining 4% were over 35 years old. United Kingdom-based "home" students accounted for 86% of participants. The British Asian demographic formed the dominant group of participants at 78%, which was considerably higher than the proportion of British Asian students in the university in the 2016–17 academic year (23.7%).[44] The gender split was significantly uneven with 74% female compared to 26% male, whereas the gender split in the university was 52% female. Almost a third—29%—said that they had some sort of disability ranging from physical disability to learning difficulties like dyslexia, which was higher than the proportion of students with a declared disability at the time which was 17.4%.[45] While there was good representation from across all university divisions, there were three times as many students from Health and Life Sciences (61 = 43% of respondents) than Technology (18 = 13% of respondents). Elsewhere, 38 students were from Business and Law (27% of respondents) and 22 students from Arts, Design and Humanities (16% of respondents).

Of the participating students, the majority were not a member of a political party (103 = 74%), 62% (87 students) said they were a member of a club or society on or off campus, while 80% (112 students) said that they had previously signed a petition. The latter indicates a higher level of civic engagement than wider society, which was further confirmed by the fact that a majority of students (59%) indicated that they either always or almost always voted in elections, which is considerably higher than established voting patterns (figure 1).

Figure 1. How frequently have you voted in local and national elections since you were allowed to vote?
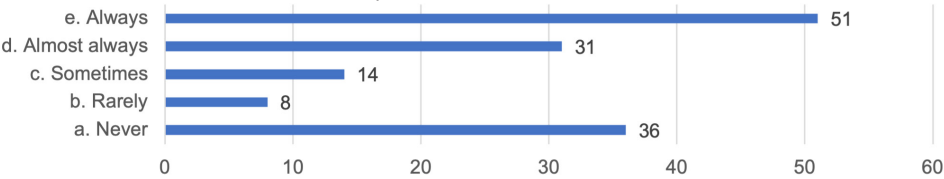
To gain an understanding of students' engagement with, and understanding of, contemporary events before and after the #BeTheChange events, participants were asked to comment on the extent to which they obtained information from social media, newspapers, radio and television news as research indicates that the changing habits of young people towards social media and away from more traditional sources such as newspapers is linked to a weakening in political participation.[46] Figures 2 and 3 provide students' responses about their engagement with media sources before and after the #BeTheChange events. Although social media remained the dominant

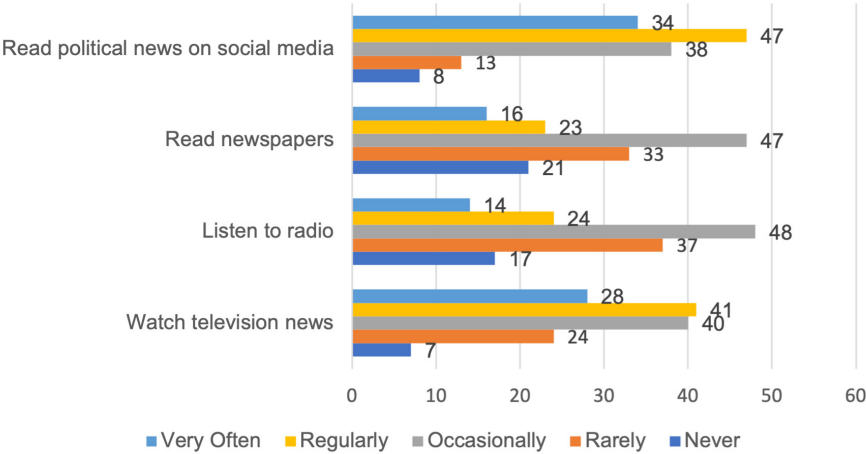**Figure 2. How often did you undertake the following activities before the Be the Change events?**
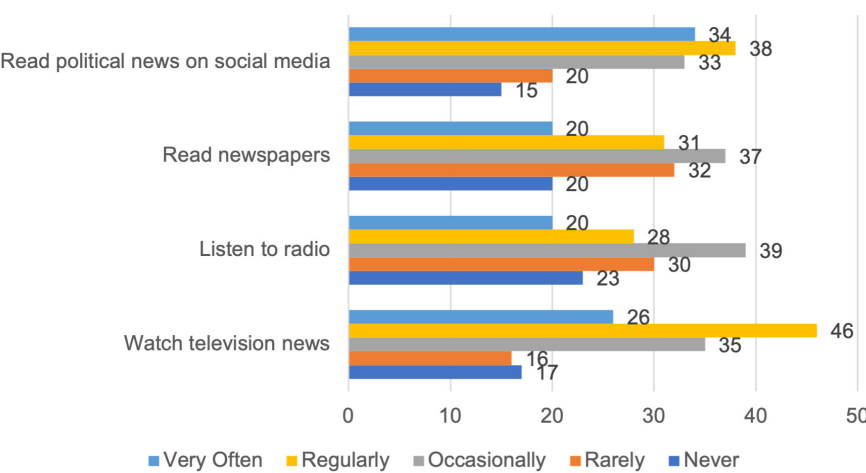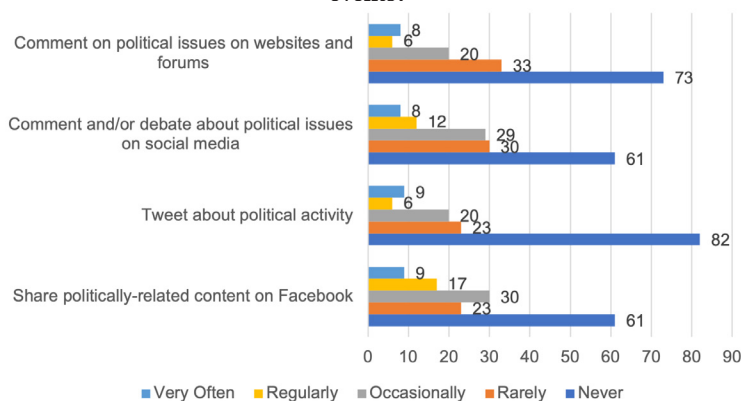

Figure 3. How often do you now undertake the following activities since the Be the Change events?

information channel where students got information (58% before and 51% after), there was a shift toward students gaining information from more traditional news channels. Students reported increased engagement with newspapers (28% before and 36% after), radio (27% before and 34% after) and television news (49% before and 51% after) with more students reporting that they very often or regularly accessed these sources after participating in #BeTheChange events. This trend reflects a self-reported shift toward information sources that are generally regarded as having a positive effect on political engagement.

To gain an understanding of students' active engagement in commenting on or sharing political content through online media, they were asked to indicate their levels of engagement over a number of social media platforms. Figures 4 and 5 highlight that while overall students rarely commented or shared political content on social media, there was nonetheless a positive shift towards more students engaging in an active way in political discussions. This was more marked with sharing political content on Facebook, where there was an increase from 19% of students sharing content before the #BeTheChange events to 24% after. While it is hard to draw firm conclusions from such data given the small sample size, the underlying trend was an increase in the number of students willing to comment on and share information related to political issues. A sense of political awakening was also reflected in focus group discussions, where comments included: "The seminars were very enlightening and I have paid attention because politics and finance play a crucial role in our daily lives. Politics plays a crucial role in our lives but most students trivialize the vital

Figure 4. How often did you undertake the following activities before the Be the Change events?

Figure 5. How often do you now undertake the following activities since the Be the Change events?
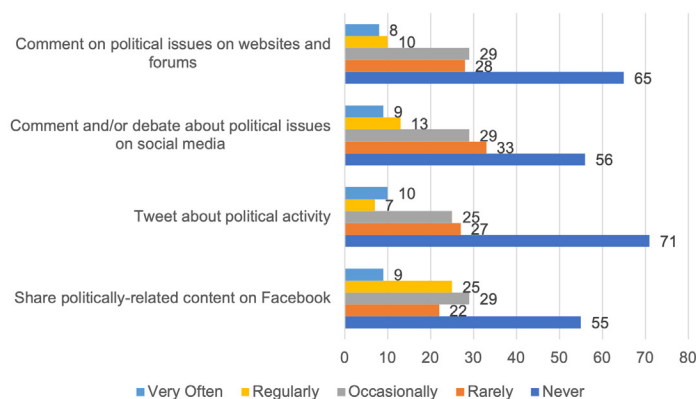
role of engaging in voting as if government policy or initiatives will not impact them in the future."

When asked, "How would you rate the impact of the Be the Change Events on your political participation?," more than a quarter of students regarded that #BeTheChange events were highly or extremely impactful on their political participation based on a Likert rating scale. This finding reflected the follow-up focus group discussions that were held with students, with comments such as, "I have realized to see things change for the better, I need to be a part of it and not just a passive observer. Times are changing and to make them change in a positive way, we need to step in and make a positive difference in some instances in our day to day lives." Finally, there was a 15% increase to 68% in the number of students volunteering on university outreach projects locally or overseas after #BeTheChange events. A potential conclusion from this, therefore, is to highlight that volunteering is not necessarily just a one off activity that students engage in, as is often depicted in the literature.

Refugee Project

From the pool of volunteers for the refugee project, 85 students responded to the survey questionnaire, which was sent to approximately 3,000 students on the university's student volunteering database, but specifically targeted those who had participated on the numerous strands of refugee volunteering opportunities offered by the university's public engagement team. Of the recipients, an estimated 200 students would be eligible to participate in the survey. The target cohort of 18–24 year-olds, which is widely recognized as the youth vote demographic, was applicable to 80% of responders, with the remainder aged 24 years or older. UK-based "'home'" students accounted for 64% of participants. BAME students formed 92% of the cohort. The gender split was again significantly uneven with 77% female versus 23% male. There was good representation from across all university divisions. Most came from Business and Law (41%), 31% from Health and Life Sciences, 16% from Technology, with Arts, Design and Humanities supplying the lowest number of respondents with 8%. Of the responding groups, 20% said they had never voted, while 37% said they always voted. Other responses were 22% almost always, 13% sometimes, 8% rarely. Almost a third of respondents (31%) said they were members of a political party, while 62% said they were members of a club or society.

Following participation, the refugee respondents said attention to political issues grew significantly with those regularly or always showing interest growing by 25%, the equivalent of 21 students in the group surveyed. The number of students discussing political issues with family and friends went up 8%, with the underlying trend being one of positive impact as highlighted in figure 6.

Figure 6. How much attention did (do) you pay to political issues before and after volunteering with refugees?
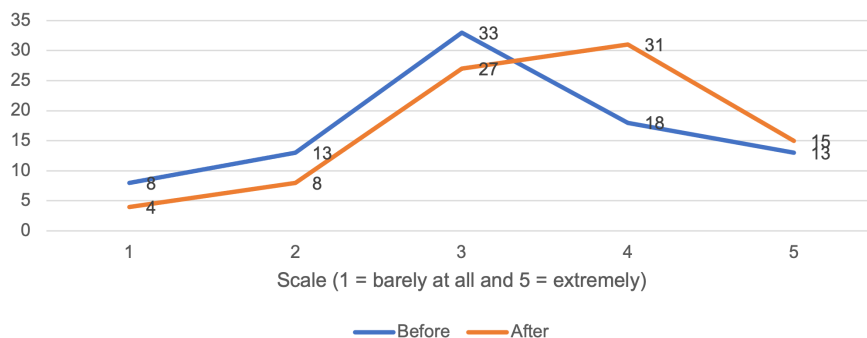

When asked to compare the impact of the volunteering activities with refugees on a range of activities, figures 7 and 8 highlight that there was a general trend towards students having a higher level of engagement in activities that are associated with having a positive impact on political

engagement after volunteering. In line with the #BeTheChange data, out of the 85 students who participated in the questionnaire, the number of students watching TV news regularly or very often increased from 52 to 53% (44 to 45 students). The number of students listening to radio news regularly or very often marginally fell from 34 to 33% (29 to 28 students). The number of students reading news via newspapers or newspaper websites regularly or very often increased from 31 to 34% (26 to 29 students). Use of social media to obtain political news increased from 61 to 65% (52 to 55 students) thereby maintaining its overall position as the most popular form of activity. Sharing of political content on Facebook grew from 20 to 22% (17 to 19 students). Tweeting about political activity also grew from 22 to 26% (19 to 22 students). Commenting or debating political issues on

Figure 7. How often did you undertake the following activities before volunteering with refugees?
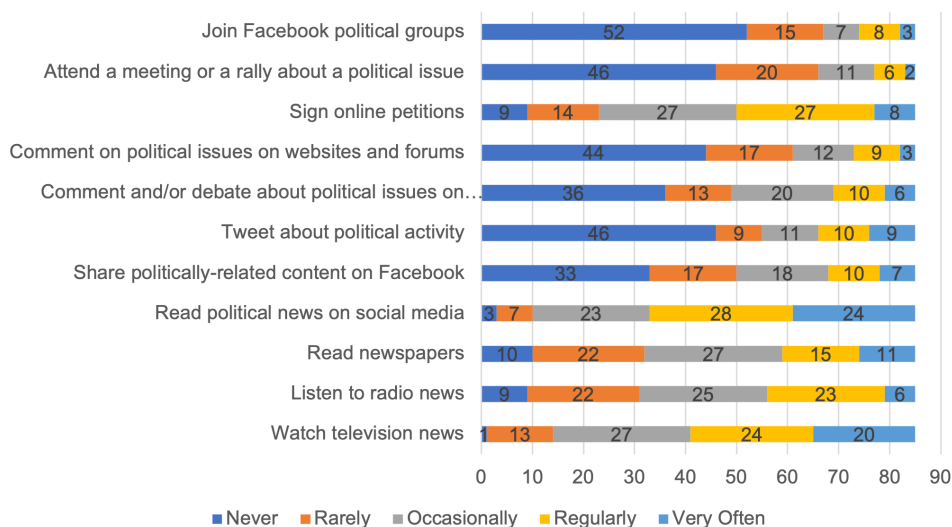
Figure 8. How often do you now undertake the following activities since volunteering with refugees?
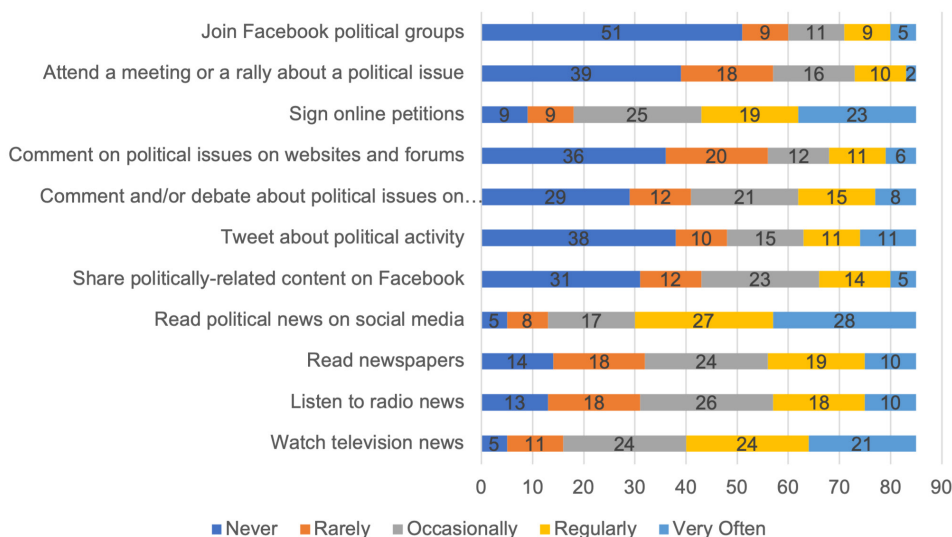
social media grew from 19 to 27% (16 to 23 students). Commenting or debating political issues on websites and forums grew from 14 to 20% (12 to 17 students), while signing online petitions increased from 41 to 49% (35 to 42 students). Attending a meeting or rally about a political issue went up from 9 to 14% (8 to 12 students). The number of students joining political groups on platforms such as Facebook grew from 13 to 16% (11 to 14 students). Those using Facebook as a platform for engaging in political content grew from 20 to 22% (17 to 19 students). Although these self-reported behavioral shifts are generally small, they point to increased engagement with political ideas and activities.

Elsewhere, figure 9 highlights that the students indicated a shift toward a more active level of discussion of political issues with their friends and family after volunteering. This data was supported by students' views in focus group discussions. One student commented, "The whole experience has broadened my view on refugees and migrants and gave me a much better understanding of asylum seekers and the difficult situations refugees and migrants face." A focus group made up of six third year BA students studying Business and Law subjects who had participated in a volunteering activity supporting Syrian refugees in Berlin, Germany, took part in a structured interview drawing on some of the outcomes of the surveys and reflecting on their experience. Comments included:

> **Student A**: "If they (other students) volunteered like we did, they would become more aware and actually want to have a say."
>
> **Student B**: "To those students not into politics, a vote is just a vote … I feel a lot more engaged in it (the refugee issue). I do want to know now about it and if there is any more for me to do to help."
>
> **Students C**: "I think the news only shows the first aid people provide to refugees. It never shows the extent to which integration is needed into society to have a normal life there. You won't see that on the news. Their social wellness, their mental health and all that care comes into consideration. For that to happen they need professional people as well as communities to help and that is not in the news. You only see the extreme and this (volunteering) has made me question things a lot more."

While it is hard to draw firm conclusions from a relatively small sample of respondents, the data nonetheless demonstrates a more active level of engagement after the students participated in the volunteering activity. These reflections are in line with the way in which students rated the impact of volunteering with refugees on their political participation. Moreover, figure 10 shows that almost a third (31%) of participants said volunteering with refugees was highly or extremely impactful on their political participation.

Figure 9. How often did (do) you discuss political issues with your family and friends before and after volunteering with refugees?
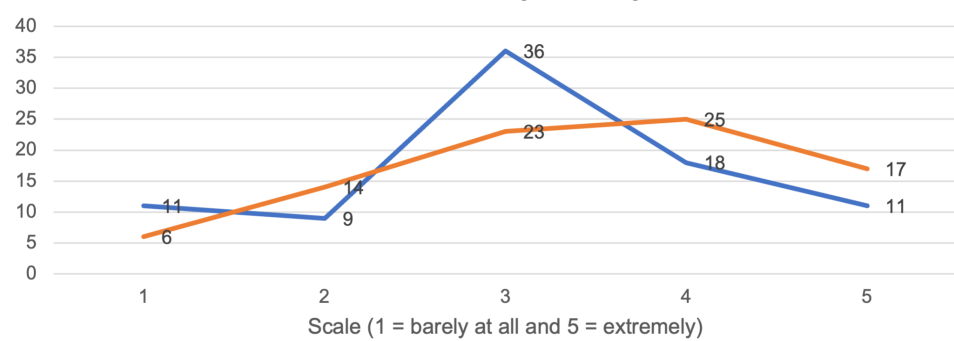
Figure 10. How would you rate the impact of volunteering with refugees on your political participation?

Scale (1 = barely at all and 5 = extremely)
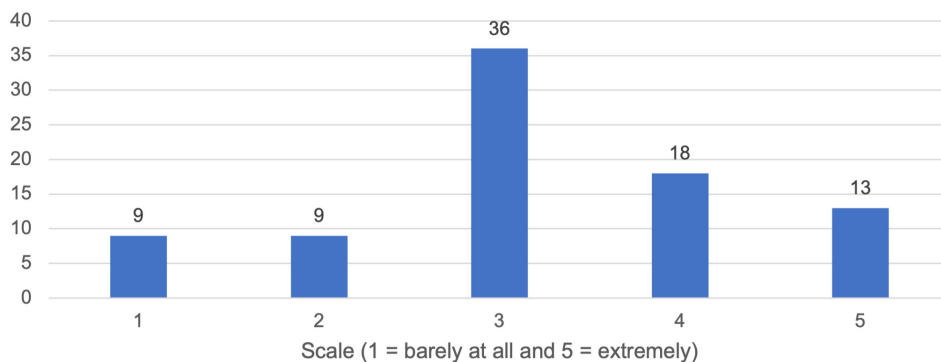
Discussion

This research gathered data from two sets of activities focused on two different types of broadly recognized modes of civic participation. Firstly, data was drawn from university activity designed to grow political participation through debating key issues and encouraging students to express their opinions or listen to the views of others in order to form their views and ultimately use this experience to participate in political activity, like voting. The second group took part in volunteering activities with refugees that included English classes and organizing sports sessions that assisted refugees settle into life in the city of Leicester. Such activities could be considered emotive, with students gaining an awareness of the challenges a marginalized group in society faces. This group's activity was designed to enrich their university experience, enhance their CV and give something back to society as part of a wider university volunteering program. This program included organizing community events that focused on arts and sports, as well as offering practical support to students volunteering with the Leicester Race Equality Centre to assist refugees learn employment skills, such as writing a CV, how to search for jobs through IT skills and to gain an understanding of what the job would involve. The latter is particularly important as a result of language and cultural difficulties, given that refugees often come from countries with different customs and practices relating to how a business is run.

In isolation, the results appear to support the premise that both methods of civic engagement have a positive role to play in growing political participation, with a quarter of all students who took part in either activity citing that the experience had significantly impacted their political participation. Elsewhere, there was a small, but nonetheless noticeable, impact in students very often or regularly either attending a meeting or rally about a political issue after participation. For #BeTheChange participants, there was an increase from 5 to 10% of students attending either a meeting or a rally about a political issue. For the volunteering project, there was a broadly similar increase from 9 to 14% of students either attending a meeting or a rally about a political issue. The outcome for #BeTheChange could be a result of experiencing the format of a political debate, which may have given these students confidence to attend other meetings. This is something that could be explored further.

The refugee project volunteers recorded significant outcomes in three areas. First, students paying strong attention to political issues grew by 25%. Second, there was a positive change in the way in which students found information about politics, with an increase in participation across all media outlets with the exception of radio news which only marginally declined by 1%. Third, there was an increase in the number of students recording that they signed online petitions in support of causes. Drawing out the themes of the changes, personal attention and interest were positive growth areas. Finding a voice—an issue explored in the small refugee project volunteers' focus group—grew. Particularly the idea that opinions on issues relating to the volunteering activ-

ity could be challenged or argued based on individual experiences. This was also reflected in social media use where material was being shared and commented on. In both cases, forms of expressing political participation grew, particularly through social media use and news consumption through various media. This was also reflected in the qualitative feedback from students. For example, in the #BeTheChange debates, comments from students included, "I have realized, to see things change for the better, I need to be a part of it and not just a passive observer," and "Politics plays a crucial role in our lives but most students trivialize the vital role of engaging in voting as if government policy or initiatives will not impact them in the future." Comments from students on the refugee volunteering project included, "The whole experience has broadened my view on refugees and migrants and gave me a much better understanding on asylum seekers and the difficult situations refugees and migrants face," and "If they (other students) volunteered like we did they would become more aware and actually want to have a say."

A notable outcome of the #BeTheChange political debate was that after the debates, the number of students volunteering for causes through the university's volunteer program went up by 15%. The motivation for this might link to students wanting to express political activism in their own way, which is consistent with earlier literature. The personal backgrounds of students are worthy of further exploration. Prior research documents lower voting rates among young people from Black, Asian, and Ethnic Minority backgrounds—which represent the majority of the university's students. People whose families are from poorer socio-economic groups also are recognized as having low-participation in elections. Future studies are needed to explore such patterns among university students.

Conclusion

The question posed by this chapter was, *Can volunteering on "real world" issues influence political engagement among young people?* From the data gathered in this study, there is evidence that shows a positive shift in attitudes toward politics and attention paid to political issues that seems to exceed more traditional attempts to engage young people in political participation. While the link between civic participation through volunteering or attending political meetings and debates like #BeTheChange and the growth of political participation is not a new idea, the role of how higher education helps to create a civically engaged electorate is under scrutiny. Some argue that this historic role has been eroded by the marketization of higher education and the focus of university leaders on enhancing student experiences and academic outcomes. This is a small-scale study of one university comparing two of its approaches to growing political engagement. Although the students who responded to the survey provide useful data for discussion, the outcomes should be understood in the context of the limitations of a single university case study. However, the data does provide interesting food for thought, particularly in the context of the wider UK HE sector where there has been an increase in the number of students from widening participation backgrounds—who are the least likely to vote—attending university. At the same time, attempts by the Electoral Commission in the UK have had limited success in growing voter engagement among young people through the use of marketing campaigns and voter registration drives. Students participating in both projects report growth of political awareness, voice, and activism. Whether this leads to the voting booth is unknown. In a university context, both projects were viewed by the participants, university staff and student representatives as an extremely positive opportunity to provide students with enhanced levels of civic competencies. Organizations external to the university also viewed the projects in a positive light, from the local council to local charities. At a global level, the university's work in this area also led to it being named by the UN in 2018 as the global hub for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 to promote peace, justice and strong institutions. Students who took part were self-selecting volunteers—encouraged only by internal promotion within the university—who sought a learning experience outside of the courses required to earn a degree. Attendance on neither project was incentivized with a reward nor contributed to their degree outcome. One immediate option for recognizing student contributions to civic

engagement activities would be development of a civic engagement digital badge that could be used as a form of recognition that might positively contribute to raising overall engagement with, and understanding of, the importance of civic engagement education.[47]

While this research does not study why many young people do not vote, it adds to the debate among those in higher education tasked with growing political participation. There is no single defined approach to how universities grow political participation through their teaching, learning, research and extra-curricular activities. Some institutions, by the nature of the young people they attract, may already see high-levels of political engagement, because well educated, middle class young people are more likely to be politically engaged.[48] Other universities, whose intake may typically be from areas reflecting social challenges of high-deprivation or other recognized "widening participation" backgrounds of first-generation undergraduates, Black, Asian, Ethnic Minority and other recognized characteristics may face greater challenges to create a political voice within the cohort. Moreover, broader economic, environmental and political pressures will, among others, likely impact on political engagement in relation to the way in which they consider themselves able to change the status quo. This is an important consideration given the pressures that the present generation of young people have had to face, from the challenges of austerity and war, through to the erosion of the natural environment and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.[49] These factors will influence the approach university leaders might need to take to deliver activities that give young people the ability to understand, and get involved in, politics. As universities are regularly asked to encourage young people to become more politically active, identifying the best possible approaches and demonstrating impacts to improve democracy could be a valuable tool in demonstrating the value of higher education in the UK at a time when their role in society is under renewed scrutiny.

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