

# The betrayal of young voters

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**F**ebruary 2015 was designated as a National Voter Registration month according to the independent Electoral Commission. Although most adults have registered to vote with their local councils, a huge number of our citizens haven't, including young people who have just turned 18. According to recent figures released by the Commission, there's been a dramatic rise in the number of youngsters not registered to vote. It's been estimated that, from March to May 2015, the number of 17 to 18 year-olds being placed on the official Electoral Register could be down by 100,000 in contrast to 2014.

In Newcastle, 18,000 people are missing from the register, who are legally entitled to vote in this year's general and local elections. In the 2010 general election only 44 per cent of young people aged 18 to 24 exercised their right to vote. Unless radical action is taken this figure could be much lower, which would be a recipe for disaster for our liberal democracy. Thousands of people across our region have simply vanished from the Electoral Register, partly due to hasty, ill-thought-out, costly government reforms making it mandatory for individuals to register. What's wrong with the old system we had, where

householders could register their partners and their teenage sons and daughters? In short, these reforms could have a big impact in cities and towns like Newcastle, Durham, Sunderland and Middlesbrough, which have high numbers of young people and students.

According to some experts, this year's general election could have a major influence on young people. The outcome could affect education and vocational training at schools, colleges and universities, as well as the contentious issue of tuition fees and bursaries, together with the lack of affordable homes and sky high rents. It could have a huge consequence on the number of jobs available in the light of soaring youth unemployment, especially up here in the North-East. Newcastle, for instance, has the highest number of people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) aged 16 to 24. A staggering 18 per cent are neither in work, education or training!

Although electoral registration officers in most local authorities are doing their best to get the missing thousands to register, much more needs to be done to preserve our democratic way of life. The following measures could be adopted to reverse this disturbing trend: a legal duty placed on school sixth forms and

further education colleges to give details of youngsters approaching 18 to electoral registration officials; encourage local politicians from all parties who are genuinely committed to democracy to address groups of post-16 learners about the value of voting; encourage universities and colleges to register blocks of students living in halls of residence; place Citizenship Studies at the heart of post-compulsory education; pilot election-day registrations.

And finally, let's broaden the franchise so that 16 to 18 year-olds in England and Wales can vote, like their peers who voted in last summer's referendum to decide whether Scotland should go it alone or not. Evidence suggests that many young people north of the border were not only registered to vote, but did cast their vote in the ballot box to determine Scotland's future.

Young people shouldn't be denied a say in all UK elections which will determine their futures. That's why local councils, schools, colleges, universities, youth clubs, politicians and campaign groups need to work together to register young people to vote, and make sure they don't lose their voice. To do otherwise would be a betrayal of the next generation.