Social Media As A Very Powerful Tool In Creating Positive Impact Upon Voting Behaviour Within The UK

Social media has propelled itself into the public eye in recent years. Multiple social media sites have a high rank of registered users, whom have the chance to follow, like and share their interests. Over the past few years, politicians and political parties have switched from using traditional media i.e. Newspapers, and instead are using social networking platforms to promote themselves and their party policies, on the run up to elections. This then produces the question; to what extent does social media have an impact on voting behaviour in the UK. Throughout my task I have investigated the comparison between social networking sites and traditional media, large political issues throughout the UK and how social networking sites may have affected the voting behaviour of all age groups within the United Kingdom.

Rational choice theory is a structure based on a belief that human-beings choose certain practices in alignment to their personal interests. Voters make decisions not based on age, ethnicity, class, gender or party identification but on who is most beneficial to them and their families. For example, the NHS is a strongly important issue if you have an elderly parent or offspring of a young age and immigration is an issue of high importance if you are affected by it positively or negatively. Rational choice theorists like Anthony Downs considers parties as vote-maximisers and voters and voters as interest maximisers. Instead of psychological factors or social alignments, individual interests become the emphasis of the theory. ‘New Labour’ fitted this theory as when Blair took over the reign of Labour he actively sought the votes of middle England, the traditional Conservative voter and many critics of modern-day politics point to the lack of real ideological differences between the main parties. While rational choice theory is easily understandable, it is repeatedly contradicted in the real world. For example, in June 2016, the political factions that favoured the Brexit vote used promotional campaigns that were based on emotion rather than rational analysis. These campaigns were what led to the unexpected result of the vote. The main weakness of rational choice theories is that they take the individual voter away from his or her social and cultural context. The theory presumed that his friends and family vote or any shared ideas or views are ignored. Similarly, traditional loyalties will not be considered.

Sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have a large-scale popularity amongst the younger generation in the UK (bk). Today, there are 38million, estimated, active social networking accounts. Politicians and party campaigners have been seen to take to these platforms in order to communicate and influence voters to vote for them. This could be viewed as targeting the younger generation, whom could be considered to be more susceptible than the older generation, as they tend to vote for the same party throughout their lifetime and could be considered sceptical to change. An example of the convert from traditional media to social media sites during the run up to an election was clearly visible before the Scottish Referendum vote In September 2014. Alex Salmond, First Minister at the time, took to networking sites such as Twitter, where he grew a substantial following of 95,000 accounts. During the Scottish Referendum, Facebook was also used successfully by the ‘Yes’ campaigners as the had a breakthrough of more than 320,000 likes on their page, where they shared their policies. This contradicts the ‘No’ campaigners as their Facebook page only had 218.000 likes. (Source 2). However, the final result was to stay within the UK. This showing, that social media can be

highly influential as the ‘yes’ campaign would not have gained as much support as it did without such media, although it is possibly not as influential as hoped for as it did not reflect in the end result. Throughout the Brexit debate, multiple hashtags were trending on social media and the topic became so hot that certain hashtags gained over 500,000 likes (bk). Arguably the liveliest debate was happening online, as the hashtag ‘StrongerIN’ gained a Twitter following of 52,869, whereas the hashtag ‘VoteLeave’ had a substantially larger amount of 73,331. #StrongerIN and #VoteLeave were neck and neck for the majority of the campaign process. This was reflected in the final result as 48.1% voted remain and 51.9% voted leave. (source 5). This showing that social networking could have been the tipping point for the win for #VoteLeave. However, source 5 further shows us that the largest % of voters were those 65+ with 83%, yet those voters will not use social media as much as the younger generation, who were amongst the lowest % with 36% voting. Twitter is one of the most powerful in targeting younger audiences as they have over 15million active users and more than 65% of these users are aged 34. However, this concludes that social media may have limited impact on voting behaviour as the most popular audience using the platform, are the smallest turnout in voting.

Furthermore, I discovered that Twitter completed its own research data and results showed that “1 in 3 18-34-year-old users had changed their vote from one party to another” As well as, 43% reconsidering their views on specific issues based on what they have seen on Twitter. (source 7). Although these figures are not high, they still provide evidence that social media can actually impact upon voting behaviour by changing the minds of its users. Moreover, source 7 shows us that Douglas Alexander, Labour’s election strategist stated in 2013 that social media would be a “priceless” tool in the election campaign. A 2015 report by Reuters Institute states that “the GE in 2020 will look very different, it could be much more of a social media election.” This shows us that those in power also believe that this is just the beginning and that there are high hopes for the use of social media and its impact on voting behaviour in the near future. Social media is a very powerful tool that celebrities like to endorse their own power in, in order to encourage young people to vote. This has been done by several musicians, actors, athletes and more as they joined the political battle. (Source 1). In the run up to the 2017 Election, hashtags like #RegisterToVote took off. The hashtag alone gained over 29,870 public posts on Instagram, majority showing a large support for Labour. This information was collected and analysed as part of research at the Oxford Internet Institute. (Source 1). I could conclude that Labour had a substantial amount of support on this platform, as the younger generation favour the Labour party and their policies and use platforms like Instagram more than other age categories. The younger generation favoured Labour as their 2017 manifesto stated they would abolish tuition fees and offer votes to aged 16 - 17 year olds, which increased their popularity within this generation. In the 2017 General Election, 62% of those aged 20-24 voted for Corbyn’s party, whereas only 27% of those aged 60-69 voted Labour, thus showing the significant difference made by age and voting behaviour. Source 1 further shows that #VoteLabour took off with a substantial 83,094 posts and over 20,000 posts with #ForTheManyNotTheFew. This was reflected in the votes as the Labour increased their % of the vote from just over 30% in 2015 to 40.0% in 2017. (bk). Source 1 shows us that “other reports estimate that as many as 72% of eligible 18-to-24-year olds voted.” Moreover, famous people like the rapper Stormzy openly support Jeremy Corbyn on social media. Although the Conservatives won the election overall, it could be argued that Labours increase may well be down to the mass support on social media beforehand and the reasoning that the turnout of young voters significantly increased.

However, social media has only risen in the past few years, as traditional media was the main source of political information before then. Source 3 shows us that there was “60% saying that

they regularly get their political news from the BBC and 45% get their political news from a newspaper." It further states that "only 15% report that they regularly get their political news from Facebook, 8% get it from Twitter." Furthermore, "television (42%) and newspapers and magazines (32%) had more of an influence than social media (26%) over how they chose to vote at the recent election." The percentage decrease between traditional media and social networking sites would suggest that traditional media was still the more influential source of political information and would urge voters to vote a specific way. However, social media is considered the second most important in influencing younger people with 50%, and television with 54%. It is believed by 44% of the general population and 58% 18-24-year olds that the final result would have been very different if social media was not involved. (Source 3). This concludes that both aspects play a role in the final result as they can both affect different age groups vote. Source 6 states "people find talking in the pub more influential (32%) than social media (19%)." This shows that although social media is a great tool, its success in influencing voting behaviour does vary greatly. Voting applications went higher than 100,000 in six days before the 2017 election. 40% of this number have been aged under 25. (source 4). This could be in correlation with the large amount of social media use during the campaign influencing and urging those of the younger vote to register.

Source 4 states that 34% of those aged 18-24 said reading something on social media was likely to influence their vote. Moreover, it states that Ipsos Mori's results also show that 71% believe that social media provides a platform and voice to people who wouldn't normally take part in political debates. Additionally, source 4 tells us that social media has been seen to help break down the barriers between voters, and politicians and political parties. Figures fell from 50% to 28%. 60% of young people agree with the position, compared to 39% of those aged 55 and over. (bk) Therefore, this goes back to a well-recognised point that social media use and support is most frequent among the younger generation. Social media can be successful in increasing support, and transferring this into votes, if used correctly by political parties. However, not only social media impacts upon voting behaviour, as age is now viewed as a major factor as an evident linked has been identified between age and voting behaviour. Furthermore, the personality of leader can impact upon voting behaviour as the personality and charisma of a leader can be very decisive in an election and could help to improve the party support.

In conclusion, social media is a very powerful tool and can positively impact upon voting behaviour within the UK if political parties successfully campaign and use their position to promote the wants and needs of those whom use it most; the younger generation. Social media can further be used to emphasise the need to register to vote and have the voice of its users heard, which will then act as a domino effect and encourage those users to invest into a political party who they feel will represent them best in government. However, social media is yet to become to first source of political information, especially to those of the older generation, as traditional media is still ranking higher by just 4% (bk). I do believe that in upcoming years that the success of social media and its political impact on voting behaviour will only continue to rise as both political parties and leaders will use all forms of social media, and social media use is growing vastly throughout the UK. Furthermore, as the younger generation grows they will aspire to inspire those of whom are following in their footsteps, which I believe will lead to a rise in political and educational purposes of social media. Additionally, if celebrities and those in powerful positions continue to use their names to provide, educate and endorse in the politics of the country then it cannot be faulted. This will hopefully, in the not so distant future, result in an even closer correlation between social media and its impact on voting behaviour in the UK. It

can be said, however, that social media is not a defining factor as age, personality of leader and further factors impact upon voting behaviour, although some more than others.