



# How to attract the support of younger voters in a Campaign

By Robert Oliver

## **About the Author**

Robert is currently a local councillor in Sunderland and fought the seat of Sunderland South at the last general election as their PPC. He achieved a 4.2% swing from Labour to the Conservatives in a region where the majority of political swing went to the Lib Dems.

Robert currently teaches Politics to all secondary school pupils, including sixth-form students, at the highly respected Dame Allans Schools in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. In March 2005, he established the Sixth Form Politics Prize with Consult Chairman Matthew Page, which rewards students for the submission of the most interesting and innovative policy based proposals.

## **About Consult**

Consult encourages young people to think for and beyond the cause of the Conservative Party, and represents the growing niche of people who want to talk about policy away from the emphasis of politics.

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## **Engaging the Youth Vote**

### **Perspectives from a Parliamentary Candidate and Politics Teacher.**

The consistently low levels of electoral participation among young people presents the Conservative Party with as much of an opportunity as a challenge.

With the lowest levels of registration and turnout, 18-24 year-olds are staying at home on election day in greater numbers than any other age group. Even in a competitive election such as 1992 participation-at 68%- was considerably below average.

But the idea that young people are simply 'not interested' in politics is too shallow an explanation and is rarely borne out in the classroom or on the hustings.

Although many young people may have a dim view of politicians and the institutions they serve in, passions can be aroused when the focus passes to the issues.

Talk about the wrong issue and you can turn off a young audience at a stroke. So what are the issues young people find relevant?

Young people tend to be receptive to new ideas and more malleable in their attitudes. It may not be as true as we have thought that children take their political preferences from their parents.

Above all, it seems that there is a generosity in the views of young people that is not always appreciated by their elders. Third World Debt, Aid to disaster-struck communities and the Environment all seem to stimulate an appreciation which can be nurtured through enlightened policies.

In particular, the ways in which we can best aid developing countries seems to have engaged young people eager to look beyond the confines of their country and extend their interest to places much less fortunate.

I participated in a vibrant debate at an all-girls Catholic school in Sunderland where this issue was raised. It was clear that the matter of how best to ensure aid was sustainable could be endlessly debated but there was a feeling that the better off nations did have a moral obligation to develop prosperity elsewhere.

Likewise, I saw that on the issue of immigration any policies which could be perceived as serving a narrow interest would lose the support of young people. I faced tough questioning on the Conservative policy of withdrawing from the United Nations Convention on Refugees which allowed both the Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates to appear more tolerant.

As well as policies, the attitudes of the individual candidates can attract young people but it does not seem necessary to field candidates of the same age cohort in order to garner their support.

The ability to empathise is key and any attempt to use celebrity front men can backfire badly. This appears to have been the case in the USA where the deployment

of rap stars by the Democrats was considered little more than a last ditch attempt to hitch someone else's popularity onto a wooden candidate. One to avoid.

So where can we find socially engaged young people? It seems that youth engagement is not so much declining as changing. The rise of single-issue pressure groups, especially environmental, has presented an opportunity to become involved in issues that matter without the baggage of a whole manifesto. By tapping into favoured single issues broader support can be gained in the long term. This is very true on the environment which may have an importance for young people far beyond the concern shown by older voters.

Positive campaigning is the way to articulate chosen policies when looking for support from young voters. I found an irritation with 'Punch and Judy' politics and weariness with Prime Minister's Question Time point-scoring, both seen as a distraction from the more important purpose of developing ideas.

That is why the work of Consult is vital to enhancing the image of the party in the minds of our youngest target voters. Only by encouraging innovative and generous ideas to problems that affect the whole of society will we be able to bring onboard the next generation of tax payers.

Once people start to pay income tax their interest in affecting the profile of government rises sharply. It is our challenge to lock in their support beforehand.

Councillor Robert Oliver  
Conservative Group Education Spokesman  
City of Sunderland Council

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